

The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
November 30, 2022

Recently, I received the privilege of being on a panel discussing rural development during the Rural Prosperity Summit in Wichita. The event was organized by the Kansas Department of Commerce's Office of Rural Prosperity and featured myself and leaders from Courtland and Humboldt, KS and Hermann, MO and a keynote from Jeff Siegler, founder of "Revitalize, or Die" which bills itself as a "civic pride consulting firm." Siegler's organization deserves a column of its own sometime. I highly recommend you check out his website (revitalizeordie.org) and read what he has to say about the connection between creating vibrant downtowns people want to spend time in and the overall health of a community.

A recurring theme that emerged during our panel discussion was that "good enough is not good enough." For too many years in rural America we have settled for less. We've settled for getting by. We shipped our kids off to schools in bigger cities and told them they shouldn't come back if they want to be considered successful. We convinced ourselves that nobody would want to live or work here, let alone visit. Much of that self-loathing was borne out of a feeling that the rest of the country was more than glad to take our resources but that they could care less about the people actually living here. And as people still living out here witness the effects of depopulation, school consolidation, loss of industry and manufacturing, and distribution networks that seem too often to pass us by it can be easy to get discouraged. Losing people and wealth means lower quality public services in a variety of sectors, including schools and health care, and it also means government isn't as keen to invest in infrastructure. It means low quality housing stock. For years then, we've had to be satisfied with what we could get.

Thankfully, in recent years the tide seems to have turned. According to surveys, most Nebraska kids want to figure out a way to keep living here. Government is investing more, and people are realizing that small towns offer a quality of life and a low cost of living that is increasingly unattainable in larger cities. In rural America, you can actually afford to be an entrepreneur without being independently wealthy. You can be someone instead of just another face in the crowd.

Over the past two years, I've been blessed to be the Chair of the Red Cloud Community Fund (RCCF). RCCF believes that "good enough is not good enough." We believe that Red Cloud deserves the best, whether that be high quality childcare, great places to shop and eat, exceptional places to stay the night, or fun things to see and do. We believe that visitors to the community should have an exceptional experience. We believe that Red Cloud is a destination community. We believe that everyone who lives here deserves a high quality of life.

We also believe that Heritage Tourism Development has been the catalyst behind much of the progress in the community. That's why in this season of giving, we humbly ask that you consider making a donation to RCCF's Heritage Tourism account. The bulk of the funding for Heritage Tourism comes from RCCF and that funding needs to be replenished if we're going to

continue. We believe that Heritage Tourism = Economic Development. Without Heritage Tourism, it's hard to imagine where the vision to pursue the Hotel Garber project or downtown revitalization would have come from. Without Heritage Tourism, it's hard to imagine that local entrepreneurs and building owners would have the confidence to commit to Red Cloud. Without Heritage Tourism, it's hard to imagine RCCF initiating projects like the Recreation Trail, the Youth FAC group, or our successful September Month of Giving campaign that has raised \$65K for local causes since 2020. Heritage Tourism efforts have resulted in \$11.5 million in revenue for community projects since 2015. It's hard to imagine how that will be replaced if Heritage Tourism goes away.

The communities from Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska on the panel I mentioned earlier were chosen because we all believe that we should make our communities the best that they can be—that we should make them special places that attract more people. What we're doing is working and it is the envy of many other communities in the region. The week of the Rural Prosperity Summit, I was also blessed to attend the Kansas Travel Conference. Tourism development has helped revitalize the community of Abilene and leaders there shared the following wisdom (paraphrased here): If you build a place people want to visit, people will want to live there. If people want to live there, they will want to work there. If people want to work there, businesses will want to be there. If businesses want to be there, then people will have to visit.

We believe that Heritage Tourism is critical to the success of that economic development life cycle in Red Cloud. Please talk to any RCCF member to learn more or give online at <https://www.nebcommfound.org/give/red-cloud-community-fund/>. Your gift will help us make big things happen in our small town.