

*Bright* STARS





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THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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**STARS**

Charting the Impact of the Arts  
in Rural Minnesota

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Eight  
Broadway  
Art Gallery

A dark green rectangular sign with a black border, hanging from a brick building. The text is in a gold, gothic-style font. The sign is suspended by two chains from the top of the building.



LOCAL ART  
AND ARTISTS

A dark blue rectangular sign with a white border, hanging from a brick building. The text is in a white, sans-serif font. The sign is suspended by a chain from the top of the building.

















# FOREWORD



*By*

**NEAL CUTHBERT**

Arts Program Director, The McKnight Foundation



f all the changes our state has seen in the past 30 years, the reshaping of rural Minnesota may be the most dramatic—and devastating.

Historic economic shifts over the past three decades have forever altered life in Greater Minnesota, where a third of the state’s population lives and farms cover nearly half the land mass. From the decline of the family farm to the dampening effect of the 2001 recession, the sweeping transition from agriculture to manufacturing has been slow and painful. Some towns have adjusted to this change and flourished as regional centers, but others have withered, a result of depopulation and an aging citizen base.

What does this change mean for the people who still cherish living on farms and in small towns? For one thing, it means that their educational opportunities are shrinking. Rural school districts are suffering. In the 1990s, enrollment in rural schools dropped by 38 percent, while statewide enrollment grew by 22 percent. The smallest districts were the hardest hit.

It means that their access to quality health care is jeopardized. Fifty-one Minnesota counties were considered entirely or partially medically underserved in 2000. Thirty-one small rural hospitals have closed since 1983, and 19 others are in financial trouble.

It means that their standard of living is being eroded. According to the Center for Rural Affairs, rural Minnesotans are 30 percent more likely to live in poverty than their urban counterparts.

Finally, it means that the economic juice of their small rural “downtowns” is being drained by the consolidation of retail and service businesses in larger regional centers. Big-box retail stores in these thriving cities may have had a positive overall economic effect on the communities where they’re located, but they’ve also had a decidedly negative impact on the existing downtowns in those same communities as well as on the business districts in smaller towns nearby. Independent mom and pop stores are getting harder and harder to find.

We all need to pay closer attention to what's happening in our rural towns and cities. Those of us in urban areas are connected to Greater Minnesota by more than just roads. We all share in our state's history, culture, economic health, and future quality of life.

Right now, the statistics paint a bleak picture: More and more rural young people are migrating to urban areas in the booming growth corridor that stretches from Rochester through the Twin Cities and on to St. Cloud. They leave their roots in search of employment, higher wages, affordable housing, and social amenities. Already, 40 percent of the residents in our rural areas are 65 or older. In many parts of the state, such demographic shifts have helped put an end to rural traditions and cultural patterns put in place generations ago when our state was settled.



*Despite the economic and demographic changes that have swept across rural Minnesota, there are great things being accomplished in small towns and cities across the state.*

State policies are important catalysts for rural economic and community development, but it is difficult to promote local sustainability through broad statewide gestures. It's unrealistic to expect policy-

makers to find a one-size-fits-all solution for the whole state. The Lake District has different needs than the Iron Range, just as southwestern Minnesota has different needs than southeastern Minnesota. Each city and town has its own strengths and weaknesses, largely determined by what was originally grown, milled, mined, or manufactured when that community was founded. In the end, each region, city, and town must carve out its own future. While some rural towns have been able to survive and even thrive against all odds, success stories have been all too rare.

Yet the stories of those few “bright stars” hold remarkable insight and promise. Despite the economic and demographic changes that have swept across rural Minnesota, there are great things being accomplished in small towns and cities across the state.

Residents of many communities have found creative ways to bring new life to their towns. They’ve reinvented them less by luring new industrial employers than by attracting people who bring their own jobs with them—like artists, craftspeople, and other members of the so-called creative class.

In attracting such people, the communities have become more appealing, interesting places to live and have invited a new kind of leader into their midst. Civic leaders from the arts have helped develop new community visions and traditions that every citizen in town can get excited about. They have infused passion, hope, hard work, and new ideas that have led to astonishing stories of rural rebirth. They have opened the doors to new opportunities—and in small towns, opportunities mean everything.

One of the resounding themes of this report is the close connection between the arts—in a variety of forms—and community vitality. An increase in arts activity can draw new residents and businesses, boost civic participation, develop new social gathering places, and build bridges across ethnic and class divides—all of which strengthens communities. The arts can profoundly affect the ability of a town not only to survive over time but to thrive.

In the pages that follow you’ll read about how and why Bigfork, a community of 463 people located about 75 miles south of the Canadian border, is building the \$2 million Edge Center for the Arts. Unable to attract a town doctor because it lacked amenities, Bigfork organized townspeople, school districts, and local businesses to develop more local arts opportunities.

You'll also learn how a regional cultural center has brought recognition and new life to New York Mills. Peer into tourist destinations such as Grand Marais and Lanesboro, long recognized for their visual and performing arts, to understand the breadth and depth of the arts' economic impact in Greater Minnesota. And visit Montevideo, where the arts generate pride and help stabilize the region's economy.

What you won't see in any of these communities, however, is a silver bullet—arts as the sole solution to community and economic health. Instead, you'll see how the arts have become a dynamic asset that, coupled with citizen engagement, can reshape entire towns. Maybe *reshape* isn't a strong enough word—maybe I should say *refund*.

Let me share a personal story about the powerful impact the arts can have in restoring hope to a small Minnesota town. At the grand opening of the Regional Cultural Center in New York Mills a few years ago, it was clear that many of the town's 900 residents were in attendance, including a good contingent of seniors. It was a celebration to end all celebrations, and the civic pride was palpable. An older woman standing next to me turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, "It's like this town is being reborn."

It's that kind of optimism and belief in the future that all our communities were founded on—the hope that early settlements would survive, grow, and prosper to support the well-being of all residents. When a declining community can somehow reignite that hope, it is being refunded, being reborn.

Another important lesson jumps out of these pages. Time and time again, you will see the enormous impact that one or two individuals have had on a small community. While even the Herculean efforts of many people can be lost in teeming urban areas, in rural towns there's often a shorter (though not necessarily smoother) path between an individual's great idea and its realization. With smaller populations, it's not impossible to get "everyone" involved.

This collection of stories gives us all an opportunity to think seriously about the contributions that the arts can make to community vitality in rural Minnesota. It invites us to dream bigger and with more imagination. Building a \$2 million performing arts center in a town of 500? Creating a regional destination theater in a town of 800? On the surface, these kinds of efforts defy logic and conventional business models. But that's the great gift of creative people—they recognize possibilities, think outside the box, and believe in magic.

I'm sure you'll agree that there is much magic in the stories you're about to read. I hope they help us all look a bit differently at small-town life and those who enjoy it, with more understanding and appreciation, maybe even with envy. Ultimately, I hope these bright stars inspire us to preserve—in new and creative ways—the rural character that's helped define our state for more than a century.

The sky's the limit. ★

## AUTHORS' NOTE



This report summarizes The McKnight Foundation's exploration of the impact of the arts on eight Minnesota towns with populations from 500 to 13,000: Bemidji, Bigfork, Fergus Falls, Grand Marais, Harmony, Lanesboro, Montevideo, and New York Mills. While each has a unique story, they all demonstrate how big a factor the arts can be in a community's ability to survive challenging social and economic changes—and how they can even play a critical role in revitalizing communities already suffering from these changes.

Our research found that the arts in Greater Minnesota can achieve the following:

- Create important opportunities for engagement among citizens, visitors, neighbors, friends, and families
- Enhance the ways in which citizens collaborate and create community solutions through diverse leadership
- Help shape a community's identity
- Contribute to the development of a new rural economy

These interrelated effects illustrate how a process that begins with citizens as artists and audience members can end with towns whose unique identities make them interesting places to live, work, and play.

To choose the towns we'd examine, we began looking at those outside the Twin Cities' 11-county metro area that had a population less than 25,000, then narrowed our search to 31 communities. From there, and with an eye toward diversity, we compared each town's size, geography, and economic profile to select our final eight communities.

In each town, we conducted meetings and one-on-one interviews with artists, arts leaders, volunteers, audience members, high school students, business owners, library officials, city government officials, and state government representatives. We also left time for impromptu conversations with citizens in restaurants, coffee shops, artists' studios, and at community events.

The resulting narrative tells a series of stories that provide a deeper understanding of not only what art is but what art can achieve . . . for those who live on the prairie, in a mill town, or on the edge of the wilderness. ★

**Carlo M. Cuesta**

**Dana M. Gillespie**

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**CREATING  
OPPORTUNITIES**

*For*

**ENGAGEMENT**



## INTRODUCTION

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Minneapolis and St. Paul offer a vast number of ways for people to gather, meet, converse, share experiences, learn things, and discover new places. Everywhere you turn, you're met with some form of stimulation—something that sparks your interest. Media overflow with announcements about arts events, concerts, and sports matches. There are thousands of workplaces, hundreds of faith institutions, and scores of indoor and outdoor recreational pastimes—not to mention huge retail wonderlands—that bring people together . . . a nonfat decaf latte is never far away. In part because of all these opportunities to experience new and exciting things, the Twin Cities appear on many national top-10 lists of the best cities to live in. As a testament, another million people are expected to move to the metro area over the next two decades.

The story is different in Minnesota's smaller, rural communities. To sustain their economic vitality and taxpaying population bases, small towns need to make themselves appealing to their residents.

Everybody wants the basics: good employment opportunities, strong schools, access to health care. But the rural towns that thrive provide much more. They give their residents a variety of ways to interact so that they feel interested and invested in community life. They offer people the chance to congregare at worship services, enjoy the outdoors, and enrich themselves through the arts—as participants, spectators, and contributors.

This chapter focuses on how the arts and artists in Bigfork and Fergus Falls stimulate the emotions, intellect, and spirits of their citizens to keep them engaged with one another and with community life. Their stories illustrate the power of art to help people develop their talents while building relationships and community cohesion.

## DESTINATION: *Bigfork*

### ‘WE WANT TO HAVE AS MUCH AS WE CAN’

Bigfork resident Zona Kim explains Bigfork’s perspective on the arts this way: “Just because we live up here in the sticks doesn’t mean we’re not talented or gracious or appreciative of all the different kinds of art, performances, displays, and talents people have. We are very well-educated people, and we live here because we can,” she says. “In the Cities, you can drive a block and go to a museum or a dance, and everything is there. We’re never going to have all of that, but we want to have as much as we can.”

It’s exciting enough to come across this kind of vision in community leaders, but to see such values rooted deeply among ordinary citizens is awe inspiring. Bigfork residents are not looking for a way to entertain themselves for the afternoon. They want to enrich their lives, the life of the community, and the lives of future residents. It’s an ambitious goal, but one that they’re already achieving.

With a population under 500, this town is in the midst of constructing a \$2 million fine-arts and performance center. The entire community is involved in the project, which has taken 10 years to come to fruition. One might ask, Why



Bigfork is truly a town at the edge of the Minnesota wilderness. It lies on the Bigfork River where three wilderness areas intersect: Bigfork State Forest, the Chippewa National Forest, and Scenic State Park. And it’s one of five Itasca County communities known collectively as the Edge of the Wilderness—an umbrella under which these small city governments have come together to pool their resources and consolidate their efforts to serve the area’s 2,000 year-round residents.

does such a small town need an arts center? Tracing the progress of one of Bigfork's arts events—the production of Edward Albee's play *Three Tall Women*—may be the best way to answer that question . . . and to meet the community.

## NOT TYPICAL FARE FOR A LOGGING COMMUNITY

*Three Tall Women* explores the long life and triumphs of an older woman as she reflects on love, estrangement, heartbreak, and a life lived in elegance. It also examines her sense of self by presenting her simultaneously at three stages of life, portrayed by three actresses. At each point in her life, the character sees who she was and will be, struggling to recognize how she will change and what aspects of herself she is not willing to look at.

Not typical fare for a logging community, but it's the perfect play for Bigfork, a community that values the insight and potential each generation has to offer. You'll find many examples of the stitching together of generations in Bigfork: Near the combined elementary, middle, and high school where the play was produced is a state-of-the-art facility for long-term care. It's common for town youth to participate in programs with the seniors who live there.

**WHERE:** Itasca County, 40 miles north of Grand Rapids and 225 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.

**POPULATION:** 463.

**ECONOMY:** Tourism, including fishing, hunting, and snowmobiling, plays a major role in the local economy. Other employers include the Rajala Lumber Mill and the Bergquist Company, a switch manufacturer.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** Bigfork is a center for rural health care, with the Northern Itasca Health Care Center providing a hospital, medical clinic, dental clinic, eye clinic, nursing home, and senior apartments.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** The largest population of bald eagles in the continental United States makes its home in the Chippewa National Forest. You're likely to see the eagles along the Edge of the Wilderness National Scenic Byway, a 47-mile drive that winds along the edge of the forest from the city of Grand Rapids, through Bigfork, and north to the town of Effie.

The play's director, Patricia Feld, did anticipate some objections to the play's selection. Many townspeople hadn't heard of it, and the mature themes and language in it were an issue. To help overcome these obstacles, Feld started a public dialogue about the play long before opening night. She made the script available for anyone to read. And she enlisted the help of the local paper, which ran a series of stories outlining the history of the play and its content. As a result, when opening night came, the town was informed and excited about the prospect of seeing *Three Tall Women*.

"People talked about that play for the next three months," says Bigfork resident Kathleen Munson. "You wouldn't find that in Minneapolis, because people don't have that level of common experience. A hundred people going to the same play? That's a quarter of our population! If you had a quarter of the

population in Minneapolis going to one play at the Guthrie, think about the kind of dialogue that city would be having."

The event was not without critics. If you're a major regional theater, it's one thing to hear criticism from subscribers about the work you choose, but in Patricia Feld's case, her subscribers are also her neighbors. What most excites her about producing challenging material

like *Three Tall Women* is that it promotes community interaction; those offended by a show can easily discuss their concerns with other residents. Feld believes that by initiating discussion, she's creating a stronger, more interesting and interested community.

Besides bringing challenging, provocative works to Minnesotans who are unable to travel regularly to bigger cities for doses of this kind of culture, what's the long-term value of art for a rural community? For one thing, it helps



*here are certain words in this play that this community hasn't heard in some time. But that's not the point. The point of Three Tall Women was watching three characters that were phenomenal, who each made you stop and think. It hit close to home."*

*—Community Volunteer  
Nanette Fisher, Bigfork*

draw new residents for whom art is an important consideration in quality of life. “A while back, we had a doctor who was applying to work at our hospital who turned down this community because we had nothing to offer in the arts,” says Kathleen Munson. “When you live in a small community and lose a doctor, let me tell you, it’s pretty critical. He chose Alaska, of all places, to live instead of here because we didn’t have a strong arts presence.”

Arrowhead Regional Arts Council director Robert DeArmond says that projects like *Three Tall Women* also help to build rural Minnesota’s future arts audiences. “We’re building arts audiences down the road—literally,” he says. “Not only future audiences in this town, but audiences in and for communities down the road from us. It’s because of people’s experience with art at a local level that they choose to go to art galleries when they visit bigger cities. It’s local experiences that lead them to think, ‘I should go see a Broadway show while I’m in New York.’ Initially, people experience art locally—they come to it in a place where they’re most comfortable.”

## AN IDEA GROWS FROM ART

The collective desire of Bigfork’s citizens for stimulating entertainment like *Three Tall Women* has fueled the intent to build the Edge Center for the Arts. Explains Jeff Fisher, the president of the local bank, “When someone puts together something of excellent quality like *Three Tall Women*, you want to give them a theater that can best showcase their talents and let the community see the potential of what’s there.”

“When I first met Patricia,” says Marg Nathe, a retired schoolteacher, “and I heard her excitement over this project, I said to myself, ‘You’ve got about as much chance of building a fine-arts center here as a snowball has in hell.’” A lot of other people felt the same way—but Zona Kim points out that one strength of this town is the willingness of many citizens to stay engaged. “If you really are passionate about something,” she says, “you will get it done. The people who are successful know it is going to be a 10-year process. It just needs to be a good idea with good, strong, persistent leadership.”

With Feld's leadership, more and more community members took up the idea of the arts center—and they encouraged others to do the same. As longtime resident Ron Bailey points out, “There is talent out there like you wouldn't believe. They don't necessarily go to meetings, but they're part of the community. . . . You have to get them to come out of the woodwork.”

“We want to be able to tap the quality of different people in the community to add to the project's longevity,” adds Kathleen Munson. “It takes all of us to get something done.”

Over the past 10 years, the community has raised \$2 million for the arts center from a variety of sources, including foundations, corporations, and 700 individuals. And the center's promoters have forged and strengthened connections among the townspeople, the school district, and other regional resources.

The town's residents share a vision for a successful arts center, but many of them see different prospective benefits for the community. Jeff Fisher envisions the center's tremendous potential for diversifying the economy by encouraging the growth of tourism and other businesses. Marg Nathe likes the idea that the center will serve not only Bigfork but also people passing through. “Any new thing available to people is going to draw in other people,” she says. “I think we are going to have a ripple effect: ‘Wow, they have an arts center! This town has something going for it.’ The center is a progressive element that will make Bigfork a more attractive place to visit.”

Bailey sees the center as a hub of connection: “The fine arts center is going to galvanize a whole bunch of people from around the community who don't quite connect yet,” he says, envisioning an expansion of Bigfork's already strong network of engaged citizens. And Munson explains that one of the goals of the center is to identify more artists by looking beyond the traditional definitions of performing, dance, visual, and musical arts. For instance, Bigfork is home to nationally recognized canoe makers, cobblers, and quilters. “Our woods are filled with people who don't consider themselves artists because they are crafters,” she says. “We want to bring people in from the woods and give them a chance to think of themselves as artists.”

## PROFILE: *Patricia Feld*, artist

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“If my husband and I ever write a book, we’ll call it *Making Choices, Taking Charge!*” says Patricia Feld with a laugh. Avid wilderness campers, the Felds had long dreamed of retiring to the 80 acres they purchased in Effie in 1975, about 10 miles from Bigfork. The advent of telecommuting allowed them to head north long before retirement. So in 1987, they moved.

In the Twin Cities, Feld worked as an assistant stage director for the Minnesota Opera and a public speaking coach. After the move, she joined the board of the Edge of the Wilderness Community Center in 1992. The organization, which has no physical facility, was formed with the assistance of the Blandin Foundation to bring about enhancements to the region that neither the school district nor the community could do on its own. “People on the community center board were interested in building a pool, library, and offering industrial education,” she recalls. “We went through many years of doing things other than the arts; we even ran a day care center.”

Through Feld’s persistence and the growing interest of other board members, the arts became more of a priority. (As Feld puts it, “The world belongs to the people who attend meetings.”) In 1996, Feld directed the center’s first production, *A Thurber Carnival*. By 2000, the center was producing and presenting nine arts events each year.

As Feld looks forward to the grand opening of the Edge Center for the Arts, she is already planning its first theater production: *The Music Man*. “There’s no better way to celebrate our opening,” she says, “than with a play about bringing art to a small town. Also, we can put every kid in town in it! There will be so many people in the show, we’ll have to import the audience.”

## ENTHUSIASM SPREADS

Just as the people of Bigfork are eager to involve a diverse group of artists in their arts community, they're excited about getting involved themselves. In truth, the residents of Bigfork seem to have a bit of a habit when it comes to lending support. As Ron Bailey puts it, "You don't have anything to do until someone has a problem. Then you get thinking about what you can do to help."

The community is eager to have an impact on the arts rather than wait for the converse to be true. Here's an example: when the center needed some visual interest around its entryway, Munson proposed creating a sculpture for the front of the center, to be made of different-sized cylinders decorated by local artists and arranged to make a musical sound in the wind.

Since Munson first presented the idea to the community, it has grown in both artistic scope and resident participation. The high school's industrial-arts teacher is going to teach a class in welding as a way to build the cylinders. Local artists have signed on to decorate them. A plea to the community for junk metal yielded the raw materials. And someone from City Hall has suggested extending the sculpture from the arts center down to Main Street.

"That's the kind of community it is," says Munson. "Someone has an idea, then someone adds to it. Now we're thinking of putting a solar panel on top of the sculpture so it will light up in addition to producing sound. Every time I present the idea to a group, it gets better and better."

In Bigfork, one leader's challenge is another's opportunity to help. This network of relationships among creative thinkers has already brought the town an arts center, five doctors, and a golf course built by selling shares of the course to town residents. It also persuaded a major employer to bring 200 jobs to the community. ★

# DESTINATION: *Fergus Falls*

## BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

“We don’t have a community center, a core,” says Rebecca Petersen, executive director of A Center for the Arts, located in a renovated movie theater on Fergus Falls’ main street. Although you’ll find a number of schools, churches, and workplaces in the community, each brings only a portion of the residents together. “All of these people stay in their little fragments of the community,” Petersen says. “I believe they’re all craving a neutral gathering place.”

With more than 25 times the population of Bigfork, Fergus Falls offered residents many ways to come together; they had not, however, focused resources on one or two activities that invited in the entire community. A Center for the Arts is on a mission to use the arts to break down barriers and bring a fragmented Fergus Falls together. “More and more members of our community are feeling welcomed by and invited into A Center for the Arts,” says Stephanie Hoff, local Chamber of Commerce director. “The center’s done a great job of offering diverse enough opportunities that people feel it’s open to anybody.”

A prime example of this was the center’s 2003 production of the musical *Songs from the Tall Grass*. “Some people in the community saw the show when they were in Washington, D.C., and then we contacted the playwright and asked him to bring it here,” says Jeffrey Zachmann, a local kinetic-sculpture artist and center board member. “There was a great deal of community involvement in putting this together.” Hoff adds, “It’s all about life on the prairie, and we in Fergus Falls are part of that. People wanted to hear that story.”

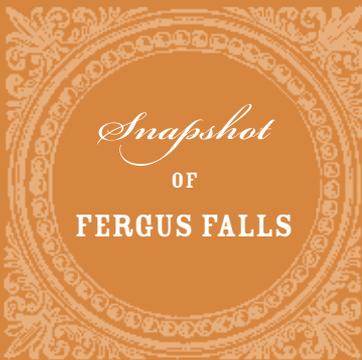
Over three weekends, 5,000 people—more than one-third of the town’s population—attended *Songs from the Tall Grass*. Though the box-office success of this project is stunning, the show’s prairie theme and relevance to people living in this region are only part of the story. *Songs from the Tall Grass* is a case study of community building through the arts, a process that brought together all parts of Fergus Falls.

## ART CREATES A COMMON CAUSE

Many community groups sent representatives to the committee planning the play. “During the planning of this production, it wasn’t just A Center for the Arts,” says Petersen. “It was the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center, the historical society, the event center—the list goes on.” The cast was made up entirely of actors from the community, backed by professional musicians and co-directed by Petersen and the play’s author, Randy Hale. “The people of Fergus Falls were amazing,” recalls Petersen. “It had that local feel of community theater, but the impact was much bigger.”

Community groups came together not only to produce *Songs from the Tall Grass* but also to promote the play to their memberships. “Each group in the community has its own sphere of influence,” says Zachmann. “They told people that they should see this, and word of mouth took off. Everyone was working together for this one common cause.”

The show brought the community together to experience a convergence of art and history that was years in the making. Early in Petersen’s tenure, the arts center’s capital campaign stalled, and Petersen had wondered why. “I was talking with the head of the Chamber of Commerce at that time and said, ‘Steve, what’s the deal?’ He answered that people in Fergus Falls are not interested in the arts; they’re interested in hunting and fishing. I asked him if he was interested



In 1857, Little Falls land speculator James Fergus sent his employee Joe Whitford to locate a site for a new community. A Native American family pointed Whitford to an area of whitewater rapids 20 miles up the Otter Tail River. Whitford then staked out a town site there and named it Fergus Falls in honor of his employer. The river, which enabled the construction of sawmills, flour mills, and woolen mills, made Fergus Falls a bustling town and central trading location. Today, the river powers a major utility that supplies electricity to consumers in three states.

in the arts, and he replied, ‘Not really.’ Then I pointed out to him that he sang in the barbershop chorus and in his church choir.” For Petersen, this conversation confirmed what she knew deep down to be true: “People do support the arts . . . they just don’t know it.”

Through churches, the community college, the Norwegian-American fraternal organization Sons of Norway, and the public school system, artistic activity was part of life in Fergus Falls long before an arts center arrived on the scene. “I think a performing arts center only has the right to be here if all that other stuff has happened first,” says Petersen. “And it has, but there has been no public attention on it.” Petersen’s grassroots philosophy, which recognizes the importance of all the different sources of arts activity in Fergus Falls, has contributed to the arts center’s remarkable capacity to build strong community partnerships.

## DRAWING ARTISTS TO TOWN

The center also strengthens Fergus Falls by drawing people to its location downtown on Lincoln Avenue. Like main streets in many other rural communities, Lincoln Avenue started closing up 20 years ago as the economic center of the community moved to frontage roads along Interstate 94. In many ways, this loss of a downtown core and the gathering places it provided played a major role in fragmenting the community.

**WHERE:** Otter Tail County, 56 miles outside Fargo-Moorhead and 180 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.

**POPULATION:** 13,471.

**ECONOMY:** The town’s largest employers include Lake Region Hospital and other health care facilities, as well as the corporate headquarters of Otter Tail Power.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** Otter Tail County has more than a thousand lakes and more than a hundred resorts, which draw visitors year-round to enjoy activities ranging from fishing and hunting to biking, canoeing, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service operates its first residential environmental-education center in Fergus Falls. Volunteers and staff at the Prairie Wetlands Learning Center use the center’s 325 acres of native and restored prairie to educate children and adults about prairie and wetland ecosystems.

Across the street from Petersen’s office—and visible from her window—was the abandoned Kaddatz Hotel. Built in 1915, it flourished for many years with a restaurant on the first floor that later became a five-and-dime store. After the hotel closed in 1970, a group of preservationists worked to redevelop the property in the face of community opposition. While some citizens saw a piece of history to be preserved, others saw a drain on city resources and a great place for a parking lot.

Petersen knew the work of Minneapolis-based Artspace Projects, a nonprofit organization that has helped revitalize neighborhoods and towns by transforming derelict properties into housing for artists. She believed that the Kaddatz would be an ideal candidate for Artspace renovation, so she assembled artists, community leaders, and the city’s economic development officer to make a trip to the Twin Cities in March of 1999 to meet with Artspace staff about rehabilitating the hotel. Artspace said “yes” and worked with Fergus Falls to put together a financing package.



*citizenry engaged with the arts can create opportunities that foster a community-wide vision, attract a skilled workforce, and energize new business activity.*

Still, there was a \$350,000 financing gap—but Petersen worked with a respected community leader to raise the money. Realizing that the community had just completed a couple of major fundraising campaigns, they presented their compelling project to local business owners and quietly accomplished their task in a week’s time.

## **ONE BUILDING HELPS REBUILD DOWNTOWN**

The moment you enter the building, you get the sense that something important has been preserved. Exterior and common areas reflect the building’s early-20th-century roots, and the lofts provide workplaces for artists: hardwood floors, wide-open spaces, lots of natural light. The basement has been

converted into an art gallery with meeting rooms, and the main floor offers an ideal space for a retail establishment and a restaurant.

When you walk through the space with Petersen, you begin to understand the kind of long-term economic impact the Kaddatz can have on downtown Fergus Falls. The construction project alone has generated close to \$2 million in revenue for local businesses. The 10 artists who have moved into the building are all new to the community, and it's exciting to imagine what will happen once they get settled in and start connecting with local residents. What will result when word gets out that at the old Kaddatz Hotel in Fergus Falls, you can experience the work of an amazing glassblower, a painter, and a musician? People will be enticed to come downtown for a visit, view the art, have lunch, and spend some money.

It's all part of the ongoing revitalization of downtown Fergus Falls, where other storefronts are now under renovation as retailers and service businesses return. The arts center and Kaddatz Hotel projects have both played significant roles in this downtown renewal. Though it was never officially involved in the Kaddatz project, A Center for the Arts will sponsor exhibitions and activities in the art gallery and meeting spaces. The center will also continue to organize the Lincoln Avenue Fine Arts Festival, which takes place annually on the street between the arts center and the Kaddatz, attracting residents and visitors alike.

Like Bigfork's Edge Center for the Arts, A Center for the Arts has successfully invigorated a broad cross section of citizens through compelling programming and community-wide initiatives. *Songs from the Tall Grass* and the Kaddatz Hotel are wonderful examples of how the arts can both connect rural towns to their cultural past and engender new community vitality. One 20-something resident captured the essence of art's impact on the community when he said, "Without A Center for the Arts, it just wouldn't be my Fergus Falls." ★

**CHAPTER**

*Two*

**DEVELOPING  
LEADERS**

*For*

*the* **JOURNEY**



## INTRODUCTION

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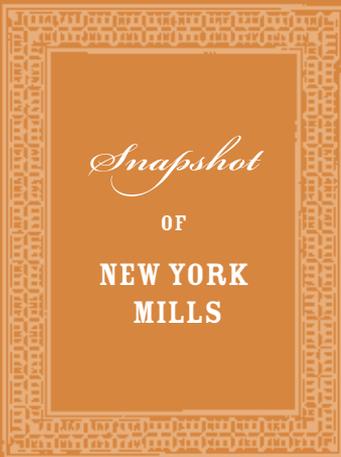
The responsibilities of arts leaders in rural communities encompass more than attracting followers for their institutions. Part of their task is also to broaden support for the arts in their communities by helping to develop citizens into civic leaders, a process that in turn creates and preserves a much-needed level of engagement and interest in the community. Those leaders—individuals as diverse as café owner Patrick Moore in Montevideo, artist/house painter/philosopher John Davis in New York Mills, and regional arts council directors—share a common goal: to keep their rural regions, cities, and towns healthy. They use a variety of techniques, combining the creative instincts of inspired artists with the consensus-building approach of seasoned community advocates. This chapter tries to capture their energy, their vision, and their influence.

# DESTINATION: *New York Mills*

## THE ART OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

When John Davis moved to New York Mills from Minneapolis in the late 1980s, he didn't set out to be a community leader. He wanted to live out in the country, away from crime and violence, and he wanted to make art. Davis says that before he moved, his art was all over the map. (He was a visual artist and a sculptor.) But when he became part of New York Mills, his art took shape in different formats: a think-off, a philosophy slam, and sculpture parks. In short, he began to practice the art of community development.

His expertise developed slowly. Davis had worked as a house painter for two years to save the \$10,000 he needed to buy an abandoned farm in New York Mills. While he renovated the farm, he welcomed friends from the Twin Cities, many of whom fell in love with New York Mills. Because he was still painting houses and had also begun doing volunteer work, Davis was getting to know the community well and vice versa. Soon, an idea began to take root.



The town of New York Mills is something of an art project unto itself—a unique collaboration among civic leaders, businesspeople, and artists. In the early 1980s, as the town neared its centennial, its prospects looked bleak. The local hospital, an auto and farm-implement dealer, and a snowmobile dealership all closed in a single year, putting more than 10 percent of the town's population out of work. But thanks to the efforts of a determined group of local residents, New York Mills has evolved over two decades into a thriving community with a growing population and a healthy tourist trade.

Over his first year and a half of living in New York Mills, the preconceptions Davis had held about rural America evaporated. Many farmers, he found, were highly educated—some with advanced degrees. The fact that the town had no outlets for participating in the arts didn't mean that people didn't want arts in their life. On the contrary: They wanted theater; they wanted dance; they wanted art galleries. "It's not here," thought Davis, "but it's just not here yet."

So Davis came up with the idea of a residency program that would bring to New York Mills artists from different parts of the country who wanted to experience rural America. Instead of a traditional artists' colony, he envisioned a residency program for one artist at a time who could spend time getting to know local residents. Each applicant would be required to submit a proposal for a creative project to benefit the community.

Davis approached several organizations for funding but got little encouragement. "Why would you do something like this in a rural place?" Davis recalls being asked over and over again. "There's no benefit to it. You're not going to get quality art—and besides, you only have 900 people in your town. It's not

**WHERE:** Otter Tail County, 75 miles east of Fargo-Moorhead and 170 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.

**POPULATION:** 1,175.

**ECONOMY:** Agriculture, especially corn and dairy farming, is important in the New York Mills area. Fitting for a community that's home to Minnesota's top three fishing lakes, the largest employer is the Lund Boat Company, where 575 employees build aluminum fishing boats. Fishing and other recreational activities make tourism an important local industry.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** New York Mills was named one of the nation's top five "culturally cool towns" by *USA Today Weekend* magazine and is featured as one of the top 50 "funky towns" in Mark Cramer's book *Funkytowns, USA*.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** Founded in the late 19th century by Finnish immigrants, New York Mills honors that heritage every March 16 with a celebration of St. Urho's Day, the feast day of the saint who (the story goes) saved Finland's vineyards from a plague of grasshoppers. Some say that the legend was started by Finnish loggers who wanted their own version of their Irish colleagues' St. Patrick's Day festivities.

going to matter.” Such comments just made him more determined to make it clear that people in rural communities appreciate art—and what’s more, that they deserve it.

Davis went ahead with his idea for the New York Mills Arts Retreat anyway. Artists applied from France and Poland and New York City, bringing their own cultural experiences to the town and teaching in the local schools during two- and four-week residencies. The program, which continues to this day, provides housing and the chance for emerging artists to focus on their art while they engage with community members in a mutually enriching process.

### **MORE THAN A WAY STATION**

Having one artist in town at a time was great for the community, but it wasn’t enough to build an arts culture. Davis believed that New York Mills could use an arts center, so he started fundraising to convert an abandoned building on Main Street into the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center. Because he had become a well-known and respected member of the community, Davis had the credibility to approach bankers and service organizations for donations. At first, he positioned the center as an economic-development project, keeping the arts focus secondary. “Artists often try to sell arts for art’s sake, losing sight of its tremendous economic value,” he says. “Minnesota has a huge economic engine in the arts. I say toot your own horn—the Twins and the Vikings certainly do!”

Davis tells a story about the early days of the revitalization of New York Mills: At the town’s weekly Chamber of Commerce meeting, he was part of a community discussion about the desirability of having a chain fast-food restaurant in town and about where it might locate. The town’s economic development director had an idea: The restaurant could build outside the town, right near the

highway and the gas station. Then people could get gas, get their food, and be quickly on their way.

“Wait, wait,” Davis chimed in. “What about this: Imagine that someone is driving along the highway, looks out the window, and sees this amazing sculpture park. They’ll think, ‘Hey, this looks like an interesting town—why don’t I pull off the road here?’ At the sculpture park, they see a sign pointing them to

the arts center. There, they discover that the town has a bed-and-breakfast and a café. So, as opposed to getting gas and being on their way, they come to downtown and spend some money. Which scenario would you rather see?”

eadership is key, but  
back-and-forth communication  
is critical.

Davis, who left New York Mills to move to Lanesboro in 2000, likes to get people thinking 10, 20, or 30 years into the future instead of focusing on what’s going to happen next year. “Okay, the town needs a new bridge,” he says by way of illustration. “Does it make sense that it be merely functional, or should it represent the entryway to the town?” Leadership is key, he says, but back-and-forth communication is critical. “You can’t try to move too fast, or try to be too smart, or try to tell other people how to do something,” he points out. “It’s important to listen, to talk to people who have been there, to look for the town historians—people who know the town intimately because they have lived here.”

## GROWING ACCEPTANCE FOR THE ARTS

John Davis went from painting houses to creating a national model for innovative rural economic development. The first time the city polled the community about building the arts center, more than 60 percent of the residents said that it would not be an asset to the community. A year after the center was built, more than 70 percent said that it was good for the town, a percentage that has gone up every year since. In addition to the arts center, New York Mills still has its artists' residency program, has built a sculpture park, and regularly makes national lists of America's top small towns for art. And in the clearest sign of the value the community now places on the arts, the town's water tower has the arts center's logo painted on its east side, with a silhouette of a Lund fishing boat on its west side. ★

# DESTINATION: *Montevideo*

## STOPPING THE DRAIN

When you pull in to Montevideo, you're greeted by a typical highway view of small-town life: a Wal-Mart, a Comfort Inn, gas stations, and a McDonald's. Everything you need on your travels to get your rest, load up on supplies, fill your belly and your gas tank, and get out of town. Trouble is, Montevideo's residents want people to stick around—not only as visitors but as residents. Montevideo's population has shrunk over the past two decades, in large part because young people who grew up in the area have left to go to college and never returned.

Getting adults to move to town is also difficult. A recent survey of Montevideo's largest manufacturers revealed employers' concerns about recruiting new employees. A September 17, 2004, article in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* noted strong growth in per capita personal income in Minnesota as a whole over the past 10 years, but detailed how Greater Minnesota missed out on much of this growth. The story featured a young woman who was leaving Montevideo for a job with greater earning potential in the Twin Cities. "A lot of new employment here today is food processing," said Paul Michaelson, the director of the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission, "and if you're creating jobs like that, who's going to stay?"

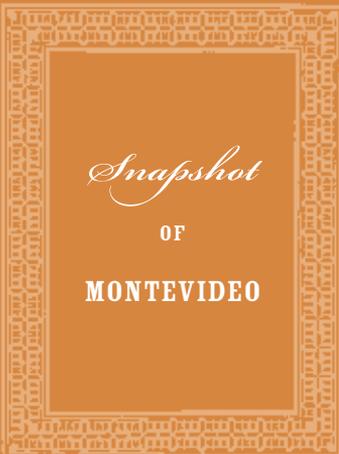
The vision of creating a community that's more attractive to visitors and residents has brought together citizens from a 40-mile radius around Montevideo, including a group of artists, a retired bank president, and the city's economic development officer. Their most frequent meeting place is the Java River Café in downtown Montevideo, a space where owner Patrick Moore integrates the arts and business . . . and envisions a cultural revolution that will help jump-start the town's economy. The group's task: identify opportunities and assets around the region that will encourage people and businesses from other parts of the state to visit or even relocate. The members all share Moore's belief that art is a tool that can connect residents, generate civic pride, and help establish economic stability.

## THE PERSONAL AND THE LOCAL

Patrick Moore grew up in the Twin Cities and went to the University of Minnesota at Morris, a town he describes as “a culture very much unto itself.” Deemed one of America’s best public liberal arts colleges by *U.S. News and World Report* and lauded by the Princeton Review as one of the best colleges in the Midwest, the University of Minnesota at Morris exposes its students to popular culture and artists from every medium. It hosts performances by artists ranging from the South African a cappella group Ladysmith Black Mambazo to the nation’s most prestigious touring classical theater troupe, the Acting Company. Still, Moore feels that he never got to know western Minnesota or the true impact of art until he moved to Milan.

A town of about 400 people, Milan is 15 miles north of Montevideo and the home of the Milan Village Arts School. It was there, following his graduation, that Moore met the artists who would have the greatest impact on his future. “Franz Richter, Alan Kittelson, and Karen Jensen . . . these people impressed on me how to look at things differently,” he says. In fact, Moore started looking at everyone in western Minnesota as a potential artist. “As it turns out, there are a hell of a lot of them,” says Moore.

After moving to Milan, Moore and his wife, Mary, bought and renovated the Java River Café, located in an 1890 building. It’s much more than a coffee



Part of the six-county Western Minnesota Prairie Waters region that surrounds the northern Minnesota River Valley, Montevideo was founded in 1870 and absorbed the nearby settlement of Chippewa City. The town is rich in history, including many Norwegian heritage sites, Minnesota’s first state park, and the Camp Release Monument, which commemorates the area’s role in the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862. It also offers outdoor enthusiasts some of the state’s best canoeing, thanks to the gently flowing Minnesota and Chippewa rivers.

shop and Internet café. Moore calls the café a unique cultural center with a dual mission: first, to become one of the most welcoming places in the Prairie Waters region; second, to build community and foster creative expression through food, drink, conversation, and art.

The dining at the Java River Café is not the standard fare. The Bungalow Burger is a work of art in itself: an amazing loose-meat sandwich of organic beef seasoned to perfection and served on a handmade plate. Surrounding diners is a gallery of local art and scattered, gently read books, magazines, and newspapers. Java River's motto is "The small, the personal, the handmade, and the local."

## CREATING COLLABORATION

The café has become a gathering place for a diverse community of artists, business professionals, farmers, and teachers not just from Montevideo but from around the region, including Milan, Dawson, Odessa, and neighboring South Dakota. They're coming for more than coffee and sandwiches; they're here to discuss how to leverage their unique talents to strengthen the region. These citizens know that Montevideo and western Minnesota need help—and they believe that local artists and the art they create can help shape a distinctive identity for the area.

**WHERE:** Chippewa County, 130 miles west of the Twin Cities and 100 miles south of St. Cloud.

**POPULATION:** 5,448.

**ECONOMY:** A poultry-processing plant, a motor and generator manufacturer, and a mobile-home manufacturer employ many Montevideo residents.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** Montevideo is called the City of Parks, with 12 parks that cover more than 115 acres. Just outside the town, Lac Qui Parle State Park and the Lac Qui Parle Wildlife Management Area draw thousands of visitors each year.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** A glimpse of the past is on view May through September at Historic Chippewa City, a 23-building turn-of-the-century village that includes a millinery shop, a law office, a schoolhouse, and log cabins.

They also believe that no town in the region can go it alone. “We’re not going to survive if we stay separate—‘This is Odessa; this is Montevideo,’” says one Montevideo artist. “Driving an hour for coffee is not a big deal here, because that’s what you have to do. You might have to go to one town for something, another town for something else, yet another for something else. It’s not that different from living in a big city and having to drive from one side of the city to the other.”



*These citizens know that Montevideo and western Minnesota need help—and they believe that local artists and the art they create can help shape a distinctive identity for the area.*

Patrick Moore also realizes that he cannot go it alone. Among the people at the table at a recent Java River Café meeting was potter Lucy Tokheim, who brought a long history of using her art to create a life for herself in the area. Tokheim owns Tokheim Stoneware Gallery in Dawson with her husband, Gene, who’s also a potter.

The road between Montevideo and the gallery is dotted with small businesses, a park full of gnome sculptures, lots of prairie, and a road sign pointing in the direction of Tokheim Stoneware. Lucy and Gene Tokheim’s work is stunning, as are their house and the parcel of land they own. Everything is designed with special attention to detail, from the Nordic calendar etched onto the couple’s annual Christmas platter to the paint job adorning the outhouse. Each room in the house is a work of art; Lucy is proud to point out the works by

other local artists that hang on the walls. In the garage is a Viking boat she learned to build at North House Folk School in Grand Marais last year.

Lucy and Gene have been in the pottery business for more than 30 years, of which the past 10 have been prosperous. Now that their art is recognized outside the boundaries of Montevideo—in exhibitions and festivals in the rest of Minnesota, in New York City, in Norway—they are doing more than surviving. In fact, they are thriving. They are businesspeople who have built a career, a living, and a life literally out of lumps of clay. And they are looked to as leaders by Moore and everyone else around the Java River Café table.

### **MEANDER 2004 HELPS CREATE A MARKET**

At the time of their recent conversation, these community leaders were working to bring together area artists, arts organizations, and businesses for a regional arts crawl designed to draw both locals and visitors. The hope was that such an event would spark those who visited to learn more about what the area had to offer.

“We need a market—and the market isn’t here yet,” says Lucy Tokheim, who explains the group’s belief that the region’s unique resources can overcome this barrier. “We don’t have an amusement park like Valleyfair,” she says. “We don’t have a Mall of America. But if we tie together the Milan Village Arts School and Chippewa City and Lac Qui Parle Lake and the Bigstone National Refuge, suddenly we have a whole bunch of attractions. When you count all those things together, we can have critical mass, and there’s a kind of diverse niche. It becomes a very interesting package.”

The result of the group’s work was Meander 2004: Upper Minnesota River Arts Crawl—a three-day festival throughout the region in October 2004, incorporating art, business, and the natural beauty of the Minnesota River. The event, marketed heavily to Twin Cities residents, was a terrific success, drawing visitors from more than 100 cities and 13 states.

It took a diverse group of community leaders coming together at a coffee shop to successfully create a tool like the Meander that celebrates the riches of their region. Moore recognizes, he says, that arts and business leaders “must build this road by walking”—which means one step at a time. “We’re a good place to pilot something because it is such a small community. You can measure success very easily,” says Moore. “The community of artists has helped everyone. We can say to the rest of the world—to the Twin Cities, to Sioux Falls, to Fargo—‘Come and see the Upper Minnesota Valley region. Come see the open spaces, these quaint towns, and these people who know which way the wind’s blowing . . . and see what they’re creating.’” ★

## PROFILE:

*Robert DeArmond & Greta Murray,*

arts council directors

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“Every town in my district gets funding,” says Robert DeArmond, director of the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council. In part, that’s because he spreads the message that arts organizations produce economic activity. “The \$100,000 budget of a nonprofit organization goes directly into that community,” he explains. “Costumes, sets, everything needed to create the art—and salaries, too—go to local stores, doctors, and rent. Arts businesses are as important as local stores or restaurants.”

The Arrowhead Regional Arts Council is one of 11 regional arts councils in Minnesota. These councils encourage local development of the arts by regranteeing funds allocated by the state, and by providing technical assistance for artists and leaders who want to cultivate the arts in their communities. Each council receives funds based on the population of the geographic area it serves. “I tell legislators that whatever district they’re from, they can say that they gave funds to arts organizations in their community,” says DeArmond, adding that legislators he talks to clearly value the ways the arts improve their constituents’ quality of life.

As the director of the Southwest Minnesota Arts and Humanities Council, Greta Murray serves 18 counties. Her biggest challenge: maintaining constant contact with people in such a widespread region. “I spend a lot of hours in my car,” Murray says, laughing. Council directors have close relationships with arts leaders in their region; in every community, the directors know whom to talk to, the best way to contact them, and their histories.

Because of their intimate knowledge of their communities, council directors like DeArmond and Murray are able to recognize leaders and institutions that are helping to improve their communities’ economic strength and quality of life through the arts. Their personal connection to their communities is a critical factor in the scores of success stories in their regions.



**CHAPTER**

*Three*



**SHAPING  
COMMUNITY  
IDENTITY**



## INTRODUCTION

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Over the past 30 years, many communities in rural Minnesota have evolved to the point where they need to reframe their identities. Cities and towns once defined by their natural resources—land, forests, minerals—are now struggling to expand their own and others’ notions of who they are. Rural residents involved in the arts are both willing and able to help reshape their town’s identity by developing a thriving cultural community.

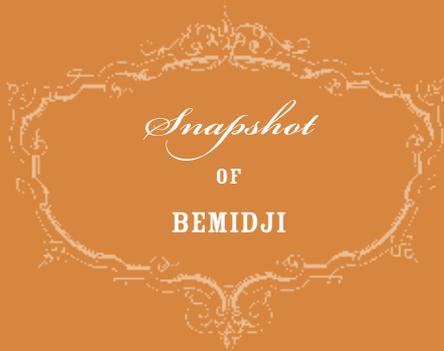
In the early development of rural arts communities, local arts leaders act as change agents who build broad coalitions. This typically involves cultivating relationships and illustrating the value that the leaders’ activities and institutions create. In communities where this work has taken hold, the challenge becomes more about keeping the coalition together as the identity of a community shifts. Cities such as Bemidji and Grand Marais are clear examples of how much value the arts can create for rural communities and how art can enhance a town’s overall character. This chapter also illustrates how mature rural arts communities struggle with maintaining their identities in a way that serves them well over the long term.

# DESTINATION: *Bemidji*

## PRESERVING—AND EXPANDING—IDENTITY

“Oh, *hockey town*,” said a New York City cabbie when Sandy Kaul told him she was from Bemidji, Minnesota. Kaul felt great pride that a man who claimed never to have been off New York pavement knew of Bemidji’s collegiate dominance in the sport of the North. “We were Division II for decades and won national championships. We just became Division I recently,” she says. These days, the hockey team doesn’t draw as well as it used to. The leap to Division I meant more challenging competition, making it more difficult to have a winning team every year. Yet there is faith that Bemidji State University will be able to recruit great talent and return to its winning ways, bringing back former fans.

Bemidji also faces new challenges in other traditionally strong anchor institutions that have long been centers for community activity and connection. For example, Bemidji’s public school system is being tested by charter schools that offer families a new approach to education. “Town-gown” conflict has the leadership and student body of Bemidji State University and the citizens of Bemidji trying their best to relate to one another amicably. Bemidji is a good example of a large rural town/regional center that’s struggling to remain engaged with the community touchstones that play a large role in its identity.



Bemidji, the “First City on the Mississippi,” takes its name from the Ojibwe word *bay-may-ji-ga-maug*, meaning “a lake with crossing waters.” Bemidji, which lies just a few miles from the headwaters of the Mississippi River, was settled in the late 1800s and had become an important commercial center by the turn of the 20th century. With more than 400 lakes within a 25-mile radius of it, the city draws vacationers from all over the Midwest . . . and it’s at the center of the legend of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.

## THE RHYTHMS OF THE LANDSCAPE

Sandy Kaul’s husband, Marley Kaul, a painter, understands from a very personal perspective the importance of staying in close touch with his roots even as he takes his work around the country. “There is a hum in New York City,” he says. “You can feel it—there is an energy. But there is an energy in Bemidji, too. It took me a while to feel it, but it’s here.

“I recall going out to my garden this spring, and there was a wolf at the edge of the woods. We stared at each other for about three seconds. That stare, that confrontation, between me and this wild creature—with all this legend attached to it—affected me and got into my work. Not that I went out and painted a wolf staring, but it got in my work. I let those natural rhythms affect my work.

“I fought it for a while—because you read *Artforum* and all these serious art magazines, and you want to be on the cover. And then I let it happen, and it changed everything. My language changed, my visual language, what I was looking at and what I was thinking about.” Kaul welcomes the perspective he can find only in Bemidji.

**WHERE:** Beltrami County, 240 miles northwest of the Twin Cities, 135 miles east of Grand Forks.

**POPULATION:** 12,758.

**ECONOMY:** Major employers include the tourism industry, Bemidji State University, medical providers such as North Country Health Services, and lumber companies.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** Former *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter Norm Crampton has named Bemidji one of “America’s Best Small Towns” three times in his books that showcase great places to live.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** Bemidji is cited as the birthplace of legendary lumberjack Paul Bunyan, who’s commemorated with an 18-foot-high, two-and-a-half-ton statue on the shore of Lake Bemidji . . . and is accompanied by a five-ton statue of his best friend, Babe the Blue Ox.

## RESCUING A TREASURED PLAYHOUSE

While a wolf at the edge of the woods connected Marley Kaul to the unique “hum” of his own community, it was a wolf at the door that reconnected many Bemidji residents with a threatened historical landmark.

In 2002, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse was about to go out of business. Founded more than 50 years ago to keep theater alive in the community during the summer months when the university wasn’t in session, the playhouse provided excellent opportunities to see professionals from the Twin Cities practice their craft. But when the playhouse became a year-round operation and moved downtown from its location at one of the area’s resorts, unexpected problems arose.

“The biggest challenge the playhouse had upon moving downtown was the change from being a ‘pet’ theater that was operating only four to six months every year to a full-fledged business . . . operating 12 months of the year,” says current board member Mike Tangen. The playhouse lost half its board members in that transition and faced a lot of marketing work. In the original setting, 150 people looked like a full house. But the new facility would have to attract many new audience members.

Within a couple of years of the move, the playhouse was in financial trouble—a situation the town was well aware of, because a large part of the playhouse’s debt was owed directly to local businesses. Ron Cuperus, a contractor who helped the theater relocate, was a community member who spotted the trouble early on. When he met with Tangen to discuss solutions, the playhouse was nearly \$200,000 in debt. Nevertheless, Cuperus and Tangen felt that not only could the theater be saved, but it needed to be saved for the sake of their community.

## A COMMUNITY ANSWERS THE CALL

Cuperus approached other community leaders with a simple message: “If we lose the Paul Bunyan Playhouse, it’s gone forever. But that’s not all. If we lose it to bankruptcy, local businesses will suffer and probably never invest in a playhouse again. People who enjoy the arts, experience the arts, or involve their children in the arts will be forced to go somewhere else to do that. And it will be the community’s loss. After being here for half a century, the playhouse will be gone if we don’t step up to the plate.”

Five community members did step up, each contributing \$10,000. This group of donors, known as the Guardians, stipulated that its donations remain anonymous and that the playhouse’s board of directors resign. Community support for the playhouse grew with a radiothon fundraiser, during which people of all ages called in from around the region. Nearly all expressed their concern about losing the Bemidji institution; many shared their stories about performing at the playhouse or seeing a show there. Over 12 hours, more than \$120,000 poured in. More important, those who called educated other listeners about why the playhouse was a significant part of Bemidji’s identity. In the end, Cuperus and his team raised more than \$200,000 to save the playhouse.

“I’ve got to compliment the community for its support,” says Cuperus. “The hardest thing to raise money for is bad debt. A lot of people out there are like me; I happen to be the president of the playhouse now, but I’m not a big arts guy. As we got into the year a little further, we sent a pair of tickets or a season pass to all the people who donated to us, and we found that they weren’t necessarily interested in going to the plays. They just wanted to make sure the playhouse stayed in Bemidji.”

## PROFILE: *Ron Cuperus*, arts supporter

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Ron Cuperus came to the Bemidji area for the same reason many other people do: he loved the beautiful surroundings. “I came here for school because I liked the trees,” he says. “I stayed here for a couple of years, then went into the service. When I came back, originally I registered for school in Mankato. Then I got to thinking—I really like Bemidji. So I drove past Mankato and registered for classes up here.

“After I graduated, I got started in the construction business, got married, and raised a family. This is home. To me, Bemidji embodies an ideal home environment—a small town that includes the availability of things like the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. It’s at a unique location. You drive a hundred miles west and you’re in farming country. You drive an hour north, you’re in a Canadian field. You drive to the east and you’re in the Great Lakes area, and you drive south and you’re in the metro area. It’s a great place.”

During his first 33 years in Bemidji, Cuperus never went to a play at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. He volunteered his expertise as a contractor when the playhouse moved; after that, he figured he had made his contribution. But in 2002, when he and fellow Bemidjians realized that the playhouse was in severe trouble and got together to help, he went to business leaders, who like him were not necessarily arts patrons. When they asked why they should get involved, he told them, “It’s just the right thing to do.”

Mike Tangen recognizes the playhouse's newest challenge. "The next step is to put people in the seats to see the plays," he says. Cuperus agrees: "We got rid of our debt, so our biggest challenge now is to sustain this thing. No one wants to see this happen again in 10 years, where it falls into the same trap and the community doesn't step in and save it. There's a very good possibility that could happen. I'm going back to the people who lent their financial support and say, 'You have to stay actively involved to help sustain this place.'"

Many of Bemidji's citizens have recognized that to preserve a part of their community's identity, they must get personally involved. And this time, they succeeded in doing just that. In 2003, one year after nearly going out of business, the playhouse completed its season in the black, breaking its own box-office and attendance records. Because attendance declined in 2004, the board is redoubling its efforts to build participation for 2005. ★

# DESTINATION: *Grand Marais*

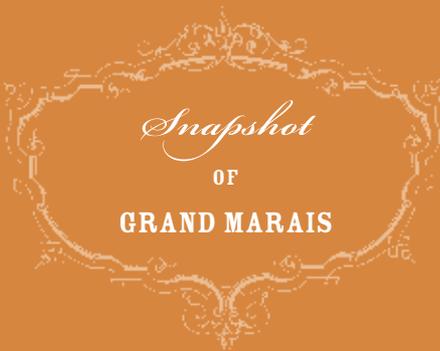
## GROWTH ENGENDERS CONFLICT

While other rural communities struggle to find their identity, Grand Marais is wrestling with an identity that, though once clear, is changing rapidly. Over the decades, the area's natural beauty and vibrant arts scene have attracted increasing numbers of tourists, summer-home buyers, and retirees. As a result, Grand Marais bucks the trend of rural depopulation: At the height of the summer tourist season, the town's population swells from 1,400 to more than 4,000. "People come here for the lake, the woods, and the art," says printmaker Kelly Dupre.

But the area's popularity is making it hard for the people who have lived in Grand Marais for generations to continue living there. Land is at a premium, with 90 percent of the land surrounding the town federally controlled and the remaining 10 percent very highly valued. Real estate prices have skyrocketed, and property taxes are rising as infrastructure needs increase. Recently, the main road leading into Grand Marais was torn up and widened to accommodate ever-increasing traffic.

These changes have given rise to disagreements among locals who are not involved in tourism, locals and business owners who make their living in

The Grand Marais Area Tourism Association slogan reflects the area's combination of natural and artistic resources: "Grand Marais, Minnesota: A North Shore Work of Art." Grand Marais was an Ojibwe village when John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company established a trading post there in 1823; at various times, French, British, and American flags have flown over the town.



tourism, and artists who are both inspired by the landscape and supported in part by tourists who purchase their work. And the positions aren't always black-and-white. Life in this small town is so interconnected that you can at once be a local, an artist, and a business owner who is benefiting from and yet paying the cost of the town's growth. The arts run deep in this community, and they'll continue to play an influential role in shaping Grand Marais's identity—but the change will also have to be shaped through deep and thoughtful community discussions.

### A LEGACY OF ART ENGAGED WITH NATURE

"You know, if you throw a rock in downtown, you're sure to hit an artist," says one Grand Marais resident. Creating art isn't just a hobby here; it's the vocation of many of the town's citizens. "Art is strongly associated with the geography of this area," notes local artist and community leader Betsy Bowen. "A lot of the creative work here is referenced by the landscape, and at the same time, people are informing their experience of that landscape through their art."

It's remarkably easy to trace this integration of art and nature back to its source: Birney Quick, the founder of what is now the Grand Marais Art Colony. "Birney was a rugged, jolly guy," Bowen says. "His passion besides art—which was his day job—was fishing."

**WHERE:** Cook County, 275 miles north of the Twin Cities and 110 miles north of Duluth.

**POPULATION:** 1,416.

**ECONOMY:** Many of the townspeople of Grand Marais work in the tourism and hospitality industries. Other major employers include the local hospital and a lumber company.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** The population of Grand Marais nearly triples during the summer, thanks to its breathtaking natural setting. The town is surrounded by two adjacent bays on Lake Superior, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Superior National Forest, and the Sawtooth Mountains.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** The Gunflint Trail—a 57-mile paved road that winds its way into Superior National Forest—starts near Grand Marais. The trail was originally an Ojibwe footpath from inland lakes to Lake Superior, and many of the lakes along its route lie partly in the United States and partly in Canada.

For Quick, Grand Marais provided a chance to do both. In 1947, when he started the Grand Marais Outdoor School of Painting, he saw the opportunity for artists to come into close contact with nature—to use the rugged coastline, rivers, and forests of the North Shore as a classroom where they could replenish their reserves of creativity. The locals accepted Quick, who had grown up in Duluth. “He would sit in the coffee shop and draw pictures on napkins of the townspeople he was yakking with,” Bowen remembers. “In church, he would draw

sketches on the church programs; people in town would collect these. I even have a couple.”



*reating art isn't just a hobby here; it's the vocation of many of the town's citizens.*

Decades later, part of the legacy left by Quick, who died in 1981, is the flurry of artistic activity

that engages the citizens of Grand Marais economically, politically, and socially. “The creative process is supported by the public school, by individuals, and by many different groups,” says Dupre. “Here, if you want to do something creative, there’s a very good chance it’s going to get done.”

Thanks in part to Quick’s efforts, the arts are a crucial component of public education in Grand Marais. Grand Marais Playhouse director Sue Hennessey points to the artwork on the walls of the Arrowhead Center for the Arts, which is connected to the local school, and praises the talent she sees in the town’s next generations. “There’s an emphasis at all levels on a well-rounded education that includes the arts,” she says, “not just among the people who have been transplanted here but among people who are raising their kids here.”

Arts education isn’t limited to the youth of Grand Marais. As the town grapples with the opportunities and challenges created by its commitment to the arts, a new arts organization has emerged as a unifying factor. The North House Folk School’s mission is to enrich the community through the teaching of northern crafts, in classes on topics that range from fiber arts and boat-building to making your own coffin. The school’s board members and its executive director, Greg Wright, see themselves as building coalitions with business owners, area

## PROFILE: *Betsy Bowen*, artist

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In an interview with the *Duluth News Tribune*, artist Betsy Bowen shared a quote by Leo Tolstoy that she declared to be her personal mission statement: “The aim of an artist is to make people love life in all its countless inexhaustible manifestations. If I were to be told that what I should write would be read in 20 years’ time by those who are now children, and that they would laugh and cry over it and love life, I would devote all my own life and all my energies to it.”

Bowen’s people-focused mission may seem to contradict the solitary nature of her profession as a woodcut printmaker, but that’s an illusion. Her studio, housed in the basement of the old Grand Marais Playhouse, is a hive of activity that doubles as a gallery for her own work and work by other artists. She is a musician and puppeteer, she serves as board president for the North House Folk School, and she is considered a mentor by many artists in the community. Once, she even ran for Grand Marais City Council. Bowen’s art is exhibited in galleries across the country; her books, including *Antler, Bear, Canoe: A Northwoods Alphabet Year* and *Gathering: A Northwoods Counting Book*, are published by Houghton Mifflin and are in wide circulation.

When Bowen talks about Grand Marais, you quickly discover that she’s someone who actively pulls up a chair to the decision-making table. She’s always ready to engage in discussions about the future of the town from the perspective of an artist, business owner, and community activist.

artists, and local leaders to ensure that everyone benefits from and recognizes the public value the school creates for Grand Marais. Through a partnership with Betsy Bowen and her theater troupe, the Good Harbor Hill Players, the school is helping to create new arts traditions in Grand Marais.

## A COMMUNITY RITUAL

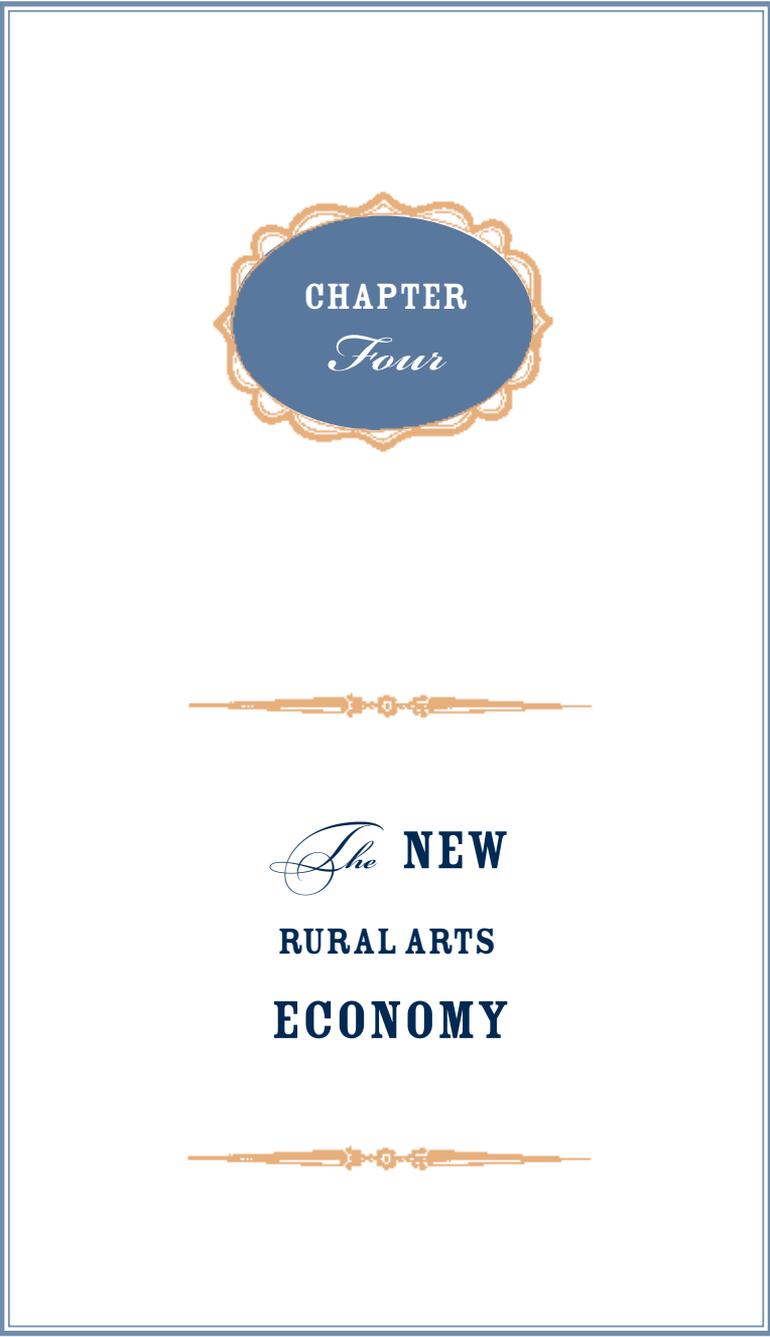
While visiting a museum in Santa Fe, Bowen was struck by a photography exhibit of that city's fiestas. In one photo, she caught a glimpse of *Zozobra*, or "Old Man Gloom," a 40-foot-tall puppet with a grotesque face that represented the sorrows of the community. At the start of each fiesta, participants stuffed the puppet with divorce decrees, foreclosures, and mortgages; set it on fire; and watched as "all the cares of humankind went up in smoke," says Bowen.

The memory of the ritual came back to Bowen years ago as she was planning to host a bonfire on her farm just outside Grand Marais. "I used to have potlucks at my farmstead that were associated with Thanksgiving or the winter solstice," she says. "A little bonfire as an excuse for people to get together. So we made an Old Man Gloom one day, and we threw him in the fire. Next year a lot of people brought stuff—some of their own personal gloom—to throw in." A businessman who had recently quit his job brought his old business cards, and different artists brought some of their work to throw into the fire. It became a yearly ritual, a communal spiritual cleansing. "As the years went on, these potlucks became more ceremonial, and we began to write stories to go with them," she says.

In partnership with the North House Folk School, Bowen's informal get-togethers eventually became a community-wide event to celebrate the summer solstice. Inspired by the work of Minneapolis's In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre, Bowen invited Jim Ouray, a professional puppeteer, to help shape the celebration. "Jim is a wonderful teacher and great at including people," says Bowen. "Someone would barely have their car door shut, and he would bring them over to the story board and ask them which part they wanted to do. Next thing you know, they would be stapling teeth onto a puppet."

Now, more than 600 people—mostly local residents—gather annually at the edge of Lake Superior for this late-June celebration. The audience enjoys the spectacle of larger-than-life puppets, music, and performers who are family and friends. But the Summer Solstice Celebration has another, less obvious purpose. It creates a nondenominational point of spiritual engagement that welcomes the whole community. Framed by the natural beauty of Lake Superior and the North Woods, it's a wonderful example of the creative vitality of a community collaborating.

Bowen brought a Santa Fe tradition home, but over the years the citizens of Grand Marais have made it very much their own. Like the New Mexico fiesta, the Summer Solstice Celebration is a shared ritual that provides citizens the opportunity to let go—in this case, to let go of a long winter. Since it happens right before the crush of tourists hits Grand Marais, the celebration also reminds locals that they share something: their relationship to their community and to one another. For close to 60 years, the city of Grand Marais has been shaped by the visions of those who have engaged and interpreted the natural beauty of the area through their art, the impact of which is expressed by a sign that hangs in the high school: “Art in education not only changes one student, it changes the ecology of a culture.” ★



CHAPTER

*Four*



*The* **NEW**

**RURAL ARTS**

**ECONOMY**



## INTRODUCTION

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The arts in Greater Minnesota enrich residents' lives by presenting new perspectives on the world and providing opportunities to develop talent; they enrich communities by contributing to economic development. Money comes into communities through the arts in a variety of ways: visitors purchasing art in a gallery or artist's studio; people having dinner downtown before a show and spending the night at a hotel afterward; tourists exploring downtown areas revitalized by galleries and craft stores; new residents being drawn to live in the area; construction projects that infuse new capital.

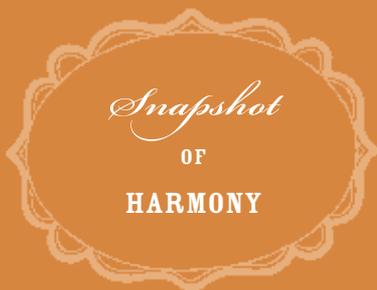
Most of the towns studied for this report showed evidence of the ability of artists and arts organizations to stimulate their community's economy. Even though many of the communities pursue similar strategies, each has unique resources and must customize its approach. As a result, there is little homogeneity in the ways towns use the arts to spur their economy. Some towns, like Grand Marais and New York Mills, have become cultural tourism destinations. Others, like Fergus Falls and Bemidji, have chosen to focus on arts development as a way of laying groundwork for long-term economic growth rather than as a spur for tourism. And many towns, like those you'll read about in this chapter, have expanded their definitions of art to include food, crafts, nature, and more.

# DESTINATION: *Harmony*

## BRINGING A TOWN BACK TO LIFE

In 1983, when an article in the local paper proclaimed that the town of Harmony was dead, the people of Harmony collectively said “No.” In meetings and gatherings, over homemade cookies and freshly brewed coffee, they looked for ways to redefine their community’s identity through tourism. Paula Michel and her husband, Vern, saw big opportunities in nearby Niagara Cave and in the state’s funding for a bike path, and they brought together fellow members of the community to think about other opportunities for visitor engagement.

As they looked for ways out of the economic crisis of 1983, the people of Harmony recognized that their primary artistry was their way of life. Residents became innovative; for example, some developed and promoted “farm vacations,” during which visitors spend a weekend living and working on a local farm. Others approached their Amish neighbors about creating businesses to sell Amish crafts and offer tours of their community. Today, Harmony welcomes visitors who want to enjoy the area’s arts and crafts, explore the natural features, and learn about the local way of life.



According to local legend, the town of Harmony got its name during a heated discussion about what the newly formed community should be called. One observer, frustrated by the meeting’s contentious tone, stood up and shouted, “Let us have harmony here!” The bickering town leaders paused, thought a moment, and decided that Harmony was an appropriate name.

## A SUMMER DAY IN THE NEW HARMONY

One recent Fourth of July provides a perfect snapshot of what a summer day in Harmony might hold. As always during the summer months, many families came to town to visit Niagara Cave, now one of Harmony's most popular attractions. The cave is an amazing example of nature's artwork, with a 60-foot waterfall, stalactites and stalagmites, and ancient fossils. After enjoying the cave, the visitors discovered that there was still much more to see in Harmony. The Chamber of Commerce has created a brochure with a map that highlights 71 attractions, recreation sites, and shopping opportunities and destinations, each of which has its own natural home-grown appeal.

On this particular holiday weekend at Slim's Woodshed, artist Stan Maroushek had gathered some of the top woodcarvers from all across the country. Austin's Angora Goats and Mohair Gift Shop displayed the work of local artists who were stay-at-home moms (their offerings included brightly dyed yarns and hand-carved Santas); the Clover Gallery featured the natural textures of potters Kelly Jean Ohl and Robbie Brokken. And an Amish farmer and his son had set up

**WHERE:** Fillmore County, 125 miles south of the Twin Cities and 25 miles south of Rochester.

**POPULATION:** 1,133.

**ECONOMY:** Tourism is an important part of Harmony's economy; other major employers include the machine shop Harmony Enterprises, the road-construction company Minnowa Construction, and the Harmony/Gundersen Lutheran Health Care Facility.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** The 60-mile Harmony-Preston Valley State Trail attracts bicyclists, skiers, hikers, and in-line skaters, while numerous trout streams and wilderness areas draw those interested in fishing and hunting.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** Minnesota's largest Amish community is located in and around Harmony. About 100 Old Order Amish families made their way to the area's rich farmland in the mid-1970s; while they are typically private people, some open their homes to tours given by Harmony-based companies.



*he Chamber of*

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home-grown appeal.*

a roadside collection of handmade quilts and baskets.

Once they'd seen all this, some visitors continued on to the Twin Cities, Rochester, or Lanesboro. But many more grabbed a bite to eat (making sure to save room for pie) and stayed awhile, waiting for the town to gather for its fireworks display at dusk.

Building connections between the area's beautiful natural landscape and the lifestyles it supports has jump-started tourism. And that new visitor traffic has

attracted art galleries and antiques stores to downtown, which in turn has spurred the creation of seasonal cultural events. Today, the city government is working with the Michels and other committed volunteers to build an arts council that will promote local events and activities. ★

## **D**ESTINATION: *Lanesboro*

### A UNIQUE BRAND OF HOSPITALITY

Marketing a product—whether it’s laundry soap or a community—is all a matter of building a brand. A brand is a set of associations people have when they think about a product: the things they remember about it, the emotions they feel about it, how it’s relevant to them, how it’s different from similar products. In the case of Lanesboro, “The town is the brand,” says artist Frank Wright, standing in his downtown storefront/studio among his unique wooden-spoon sculptures.

Lanesboro’s collection of small art-focused businesses is fostered by a coalition of townspeople who have worked to reflect the community’s self-image and to appeal to visitors—in short, to create the town’s brand. Lanesboro’s brand relies on a consistently delivered enjoyable experience that reinforces the community’s unique personality.

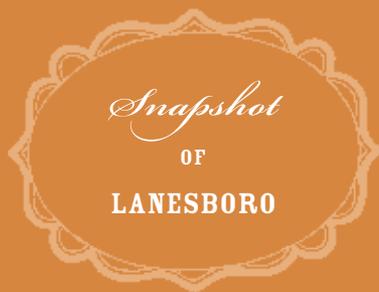
Community lore has it that Lanesboro was founded on the old Southern Minnesota Railroad in 1868 as “a destination for people from New York City to escape the big city and enjoy the small-town life,” according to Holly McDonough, former executive director of the Cornucopia Art Center. But as tourists stopped coming to Lanesboro in the 1920s and ’30s, agriculture became its only source of economic growth. And when family farming began to wither in the 1970s, so did the community. Hal Cropp, executive director of Lanesboro’s Commonweal Theatre Company, says, “When the first wave of real farm crisis hit, the town’s economy sank. There just wasn’t enough critical mass in the town to do anything. So it basically sat empty.” The last train stopped in town in 1979—the beginning of the end for the old Lanesboro.

## A TRAIL LEADS TO REVITALIZATION

“Lanesboro is a naturally beautiful place,” says John Davis, who moved from New York Mills to Lanesboro in 2000 to head up the Cornucopia Art Center. “But it had to be discovered. It was necessary to create a reason to go there.”

That reason was born when Elton Redalen, then Minnesota commissioner of agriculture and a visionary in his own right, worked to turn the town’s abandoned railroad line into a recreational trail. The new bike trail again made Lanesboro a destination for city people in search of the joys of small-town life. In 1985, the same year the trail opened, Nancy Bratwood opened Mrs. B’s Bed and Breakfast, which boasted a chef who’d worked at a five-star restaurant. Soon after, a retired cruise chef, Jean Claude, bought the Victorian House, which serves classic French cuisine. The culinary arts were among the early reasons visitors stopped in Lanesboro.

In 1986, the Lanesboro Arts Council invited former area resident Eric Bunge back to start the Commonweal Theatre Company. “A renaissance started



The August 2004 issue of *Outside* magazine named Lanesboro one of “America’s Top Dream Towns” for its picturesque setting and outdoor recreation opportunities. The story cited the area’s “deep river gorges, limestone bluffs crowned with hardwoods, tumbling trout streams, caves, and sinkholes” but reserved its highest praise for the 42-mile Root River State Trail, which, since 1985, has been a magnet for cyclists, paddlers, tubers, and cross-country skiers.

happening when people recognized that it was a beautiful town,” says Davis. “Lanesboro was so depressed for a time that people didn’t have the money to gut the storefronts and do all the stuff that wrecks the charm of a small town. Now, because all of that has been preserved,” he says, “visitors can appreciate its character, historic nature, and natural splendor—and the fact that a bike path flows right through the middle of the town. You can sleep and eat here, and there is something to do here at night.”

Holly McDonough, executive director of the Cornucopia Art Center, stresses that the process of re-creating Lanesboro, while successful, was not easy. “People were afraid this would ruin their town,” she says. “They liked the flavor of the small town. They liked the comfort of knowing everyone. It was a really difficult time, because everyone was sad that the community was dying, and it was going to have to change. It was at this time that the original vision of the town resurfaced.”

**WHERE:** Fillmore County, 120 miles southeast of the Twin Cities and 40 miles southeast of Rochester.

**POPULATION:** 776.

**ECONOMY:** About 1,500 families make their living by farming in Fillmore County (Minnesota’s No. 1 beef-producing county), so agriculture and related businesses are significant to the local economy along with tourism.

**WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO TOWN:** The Root River State Trail draws thousands of visitors each year, many of whom are delighted to discover Lanesboro’s downtown. Most of downtown has been designated a National Historic District, which includes shops, bed-and-breakfasts, and restored Victorian houses.

**WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE:** At the Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center, K–12 students from three states visit year-round for hands-on programs that teach environmental stewardship. The center has also become a popular spot for organizational retreats, team-building events, and even weddings.

## THE ARTS AS AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION

Davis believes that diversity is key to revitalizing a town. “To make any progress, revitalization ideas can’t just originate with or benefit artists,” he says. “You need a cross section of the community committed to efforts like this.” Nothing causes residents to see the value of arts to their communities as clearly as economic results. “They recognize that artistic activity equals money,” Davis says, “and visitors saying good things about our town to other potential visitors. That means jobs. They get behind it.” And Lanesboro has gotten behind it 100 percent.



*The Commonwealth Theatre Company has been successful at promoting art not only as a quality of life issue but as an economic advantage.*

The Commonwealth Theatre Company has been successful at promoting art not only as a quality of life issue but as an economic advantage. The Commonwealth founded and ran Lanesboro’s first office of tourism in the early 1990s; the company is also the second-largest employer in town. (The largest is the school district.) In the past few years, the company has purchased and renovated a residence that allows 20 undergraduate theater majors from regional colleges and universities to come to Lanesboro for a semester of hands-on learning. The Commonwealth has also undertaken a \$3.5 million capital/endowment campaign to build a new theater facility, which it estimates will bring 5,000 more people to Lanesboro every year. The theater can present a compelling case for its importance to the town of Lanesboro, having conducted a survey proving that for every dollar spent at the Commonwealth, theatergoers spend six more dollars at local businesses.

Other local arts organizations are eager to prove their catalytic role in the town’s economic transformation. At the Cornucopia Art Center, all students who participate in adult classes or workshops get an evaluation sheet to assess the class and to reveal what else they experienced while they were in Lanesboro.

Where did they stay? Did they stay at a B&B? Did they shop? Did they eat at a local restaurant? Which restaurant? Did they golf? Rent bicycles? Canoe?

With that information, McDonough explains, “Cornucopia can then report back to the community that we brought in x number of people who spent x number of nights and x number of dollars. Likewise, Commonweal can say to townspeople: ‘We’ve brought in x number of people—our acting company and employees—who have become permanent residents to the town. The theater employs more people than the local car dealership! Our organizations pay salaries, and that money gets spent in the community.’”

Other factors have contributed to the town’s turnaround. Says the Commonweal’s Hal Cropp, “Lanesboro’s tax base is not large, and the town is landlocked. When you look to traditional solutions for a relatively poor civic financial situation, you look to industry. That’s not a ready solution for Lanesboro because of the factors that work against it. But that’s another reason the arts have been able to flourish here, because competition for space isn’t high.”

Lanesboro also has a rich tradition of welcoming visitors. “Hospitality has been part of what’s gone on for a long time in Lanesboro,” says Frank Wright. “It precedes the bike trail and the B&Bs. Those have helped, but that mentality seems to have always been part of the town.” The current leadership of Lanesboro knows the value in a visitor’s experience of the town, adds Cropp. “The town recognizes that the strongest marketing tool by far is word of mouth. So there’s a real effort to make sure that people have a good time, and have as few obstacles in getting back as possible.” Modeling that philosophy in all the town’s activities is how leaders and residents continuously add to the value of the Lanesboro brand. ★

## PROFILE: *Hal Cropp*, artist

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Nestled in the bluffs of southern Minnesota, Lanesboro could be described—and dismissed—as quaint. The local theater could suffer from the same perception if not for the rigorous professional leadership guiding it.

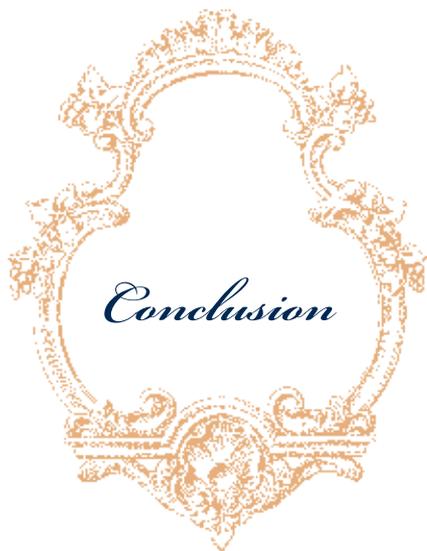
“A big part of our success is quality,” says Hal Cropp, the Commonweal Theatre Company’s executive director. “Eight, 10, 12 times a year a person coming here for the first time will say to me, ‘This is as good as a performance at the Guthrie.’”

People passing through Lanesboro aren’t usually trying to get somewhere else, Cropp says. “They want to come here. Last year, our subscriber base was at 550. Today, it’s 800.” The Commonweal’s audience is about one-third local, one-third from within a 60-mile radius, and one-third tourists. It’s the second third the theater spends most of its effort cultivating.

In contrast to the Commonweal’s current success, Cropp’s early fundraising outside the county was frustrating. “We’d go to communities like Rochester, asking for money and being asked, ‘Where are you from?’ We’d say Lanesboro, and then hear, ‘Oh, you’re a community theater.’ And every time we’d say, ‘No, we’re a professional theater.’”

Cropp recognized, for fundraising, that the theater needed to demonstrate its sustainability over the long term, so he and his staff created a giving program called the Million Dollar Club. Members commit a minimum of \$250 a year for 10 years. As of 2004, five years into the program, Cropp’s team had successfully put the first million dollars in pledges in place, and had begun building their second million dollars’ worth of pledges. Each year, Million Dollar Club members cover close to 25 percent of the organization’s operating budget.

Now, Cropp says, when someone who doesn’t know the theater asks, “Who are you?” he can reply proudly: “This is what we’ve done. This is who we are.”



*Conclusion*

*A*

**ROAD MAP**

*For*

*the* **ARTS**



The arts leaders featured in this report hold a common desire to build a deep connection with fellow civic leaders. They recognize that the main-street business owner, banker, economic development officer, and elected city official play a key role in increasing the impact the arts can have on their community. In collaboration, these leaders believe that they are using the arts to leverage more for their community than a better quality of life; they are ultimately investing in its preservation, growth, and prosperity.

These stories trace the beginnings of a road map showing how public and private support for artists and arts organizations can focus on activities that further citizen engagement, create community solutions through diverse leadership, shape a community's identity, and as a result, contribute to rural vitality throughout the state:

### **To engage citizens, visitors, neighbors, and friends . . .**

Foster the creation of artistic works that inspire citizens to talk to one another. In Bigfork, one-third of its population turned out to see *Three Tall Women*, a production that fueled a continued dialogue among residents and helped strengthen the community's desire to build an arts center.

Build broad community partnerships around arts activities to ensure that a diverse cross section of citizens will come together. In Fergus Falls, the ability of A Center for the Arts to reach out to many different groups has laid the foundation for the center to play a major role in the revitalization of downtown as a community-wide gathering place.

### **To enhance citizen collaboration and create community solutions through diverse leadership . . .**

Invite artists and arts leaders to the table. In New York Mills, John Davis's unique point of view helped city leaders shape a future direction.

Establish artistic collaborations that encourage citizens to reach beyond traditional roles to share resources. To promote the region, Montevideo area artists, business owners, and city officials worked together to present *Meander* 2004.

### To shape community identity . . .

Recognize and preserve the contribution the arts already make. In the effort to save the Paul Bunyan Playhouse, the citizens of Bemidji realized what an important role this arts institution played in the history of their community.

Identify ways the arts strengthen the values citizens hold in common. The people of Grand Marais have made a long and deep commitment to the arts; they struggle with its impact on their identity, but they also celebrate it.

### To develop new economic opportunities . . .

Create and package a community-specific definition for art. Harmony's definition of an arts experience includes opportunities to visit a woodcarver, an art gallery, an antiques store, and a gift shop featuring crafts created by the area's Amish families, as well as Niagara Cave.

Establish an arts brand identity for the community. Artists, arts organizations, restaurants, and lodging establishments work together in Lanesboro to communicate a consistent message that attracts tourists to the community and deepens their experience once they are there.

Recognize that cultural tourism is not the only way the arts contribute to a rural community. The Commonweal Theatre Company is Lanesboro's largest private employer. Its employees live in the community and contribute to its development by being involved in the school, volunteering on various boards, and even serving on the City Council. Also, the renovation and redevelopment of the Kaddatz Hotel into artist housing brought a major construction project to downtown Fergus Falls, creating opportunities for other service businesses in the area, as well as paving the way for 10 new artist-residents to contribute their unique perspective to further the vitality of the city.

Rural cities and towns considering how to develop the arts as a community asset should note that all the activities mentioned in this report were locally grown grassroots efforts that drew on the unique resources, heritage, and personality of each community. Every contribution the arts make to a rural community must above all be personal and meaningful to its citizenry. ★

## **MCKNIGHT IN GREATER MINNESOTA**

In addition to its statewide grantmaking and fellowship programs in the arts, The McKnight Foundation helps fund Minnesota's 11 regional arts councils, which were established by the State Legislature in 1977 to encourage local art and cultural activity throughout the state. Since 1981, McKnight has given funds to these councils for regranteeing to small community-based arts organizations and individual artists within their region. Their impact has been dramatic and historic. Greater Minnesota is indeed greater because of their efforts.

The Minnesota Initiative Foundations—-independent, nonprofit, philanthropic organizations created by The McKnight Foundation in 1986—also work to make the six Greater Minnesota regions stronger and more prosperous. Each foundation's work can best be described as catalytic. Their respective priorities are decided within their own regions, with grants and loans supporting economic development; leadership development; community building; and families, youth, and seniors. To date, The McKnight Foundation has invested over \$210 million in these foundations.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Carlo Cuesta, Dana Gillespie, and Padraic Lillis are the principal partners of Creation In Common. As the lead trainers on the Minnesota State Arts Board Statewide Audience Development Initiative (SADI), they designed and implemented training for more than 300 arts leaders and provided one-on-one technical assistance for over 100 arts organizations across the state on how to establish and promote effective techniques for building arts participation. Since then, Creation In Common has brought its unique and creative strategic services to myriad organizations including the Jerome Foundation, The Saint Paul Foundation, Minnesota Community Foundation, Sidney Health Center, Minnesota Citizens for the Arts, Care Providers of Minnesota, Cottonwood County Historical Society, Dallas Business Committee for the Arts, and the National Council on Family Relations.

Creation In Common's mission is to strengthen communities through shared creativity. The authors may be contacted at:

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The McKnight Foundation's mission is to improve the quality of life for present and future generations and to seek paths to a more humane and secure world. We support efforts to strengthen communities, families, and individuals, particularly those in need. We contribute to the arts, encourage preservation of our natural environment, and promote research in selected fields. We continually explore innovative ideas to advance our goals in partnership with those we serve.

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## CREDITS

**DESIGN** HartungKemp, Inc., Minneapolis

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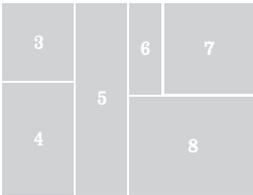
## PHOTO CREDITS

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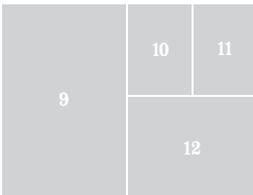
1. Eight Broadway Gallery, Grand Marais. (Carlo Cuesta)
2. Gene and Lucy Tokheim's Tokheim Stoneware, Dawson. (Dana Gillespie)

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3. Clay pots by unidentified artist, Grand Marais. (Carlo Cuesta)
4. Tom Christiansen's *Sit Here*, Lutsen. (Tom Christiansen)
5. North House Folk School, Grand Marais. (Carlo Cuesta)
6. Erik Pearson's *The Bracelet* and *Deux Gendarmes*, top to bottom, at Cornucopia Art Gallery, Lanesboro. (Dana Gillespie)
7. Betsy Bowen Studio, Grand Marais. (Carlo Cuesta)
8. A Center for the Arts, Fergus Falls. (Carlo Cuesta)

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9. Local muralist, Grand Marais. (Carlo Cuesta)
10. Sandra Fjerkenstad-Budel's *Har Mar Superstar – Love* at Java River Café, Montevideo. (Dana Gillespie)
11. Artist Jeffrey Zachmann at work, Fergus Falls. (Jeffrey Zachmann)
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13. The Kaddatz, Fergus Falls. (Carlo Cuesta)
14. Betsy Bowen Studio, Grand Marais. (Carlo Cuesta)
15. Design for the Edge Center for the Arts, Bigfork. (Carlo Cuesta)
16. Frank Wright's *Spoons*, Lanesboro. (Dana Gillespie)



