



Small Town Survival - Options: Courage and a Smile

Aug 18 // Bruce Sorte // Hermiston, Oregon

Driving into Opheim, Montana, the smallest town we visited along Hwy. 2 or the Highline a few miles from Canada, not a person could be seen. Luckily, there was a car and a pickup in front of the only business that looked like it had a chance of being open. We had diverted from our vacation route to Minnesota to visit some of the towns that I mentioned earlier from Marvin Gloege's book – *Survival or Gradual Extinction*. Were the options for those towns as limited as he suggested? Could I learn things that would be useful in Oregon by visiting with folks who had experienced earlier and more severe declines in population than those in Oregon?



Source: MT.Gov

Yes, the options were few and there was a lot to learn. The cook in the Opheim café was welcoming as we discussed the fine art of frosting the peanut butter pie that she was making. The other patrons and the cook's husband were also quite welcoming of two strangers that were obviously from far away. She sold us coffee and wanted to let the pie cool before selling us any – we had to move on before the pie was ready. The five people in Opheim were the most friendly and perkier of any of the small communities we visited. It was the only community about which I seriously explored ways to live or at least visit for an extended period of time. ***Strangers are more likely to be an opportunity than a problem. Be friendly and welcoming – visitors can see through surface smiles or locals that are just tolerant of strangers so they can get their money.***

We moved on to the next town, one I had visited before. People were cordial and we spent the night. Yet, no one introduced themselves to me even when I introduced myself to them. Not much had changed since my last wander that way – they were still producing commodities that would be shipped out to have most of the value added elsewhere. A number of businesses had closed and their economy depended on the price of wheat and Social Security checks. There were lots of bored seniors sitting or walking around the town.

Rural communities have seniors who are very experienced at production processes and still want to contribute just maybe not full-time. ***Allocate grants received from the outside or local economic development dollars only to projects that produce goods or services which will be sold for retail prices and include experienced seniors who have successful track records in business.***

On we drove the next morning moving into the new oil boom areas of Eastern Montana and Western North Dakota. The communities are more prosperous for the time being. They are working round the clock to capture as many dollars as possible. As soon as the price of oil drops or the wells are drilled and connected to pipelines, the communities will be back to tough times. As Kristian Foden-Vencil's report – [*Rural Business Owners Share Common Philosophies*](#) indicates, successful businesses avoid debt and plan ahead by saving in the good times.



Source: Wikipedia

Communities can do the same however it takes thoughtful and courageous policies and those are few and far between. What if the permits issued to the oil companies on the Great Plains or the wind energy companies in the Columbia River Gorge required even a small percentage of that energy to be used in the counties where the energy is harvested? The economic impacts would be at least two or three times as much as just extracting the rural assets, making some lease and tax payments and shipping off the oil, natural gas or electricity to a larger city or another state.

Demand that policy makers hold corporations' feet to the fire to use natural resources locally.

Across Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota, I never saw one new home under construction in a small rural town. People, including some academics, who played on the fear that rural communities would become Aspens or Bends showed how easy it is to imagine the worst and find enemies. It was bunk for most communities and many of those places would be pleased to have a wealthy person show-up to build a second home or start a business today. After all, Pierre Wibaux who started one of Marvin's study towns, Wibaux, came from the outside, was well educated and eventually built a herd of 65,000 cattle.

Pete French was no pauper when he showed-up in Oregon or Sam Hill and on and on. ***Spend more time finding friends across economic and political divides than imagining enemies.***

Two thousand miles later, we arrived and paddled into the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota. Other than needing to make a birch limb/duct tape repair for the leg brace on which I rely to walk and so portage, it was a great trip. Our last night we stayed in a developed

campground at the takeout point and the next morning decided to have breakfast at a café and tackle shop. As we waited for the café to open, a daughter and mother were waiting to buy tackle and get some fishing advice. They were determined to learn how to fish so they could eventually teach their daughter/granddaughter. They had earlier bought a reel with line and a pole. Years ago, maybe the proprietor would have enjoyed taking the time necessary to get them on the water. That still happens in expensive fly shops. Not that time in that place with a spinning rig. We had 500 miles to drive that day back towards Oregon, yet I wanted rural America to work for those two women and I love fishing. A colorful guy with a bum leg showed them how to operate their reel, tie on a lure, cast, and if necessary remove a hook from a finger. They will return to that rural place at the end of the Gunflint Trail and I will return to Opheim for that piece of pie.

Take care,

Bruce Sorte

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