

The Death of the Small Town

Whiskey & Gunpowder
By Linda Brady Traynham

The death of the small town has been widely exaggerated. On the contrary, small towns are thriving just as they have for decades, in perfect balance. Population is steady, infrastructure is sufficient, all goods and services required are available, and it is rarely more than 25 miles to the nearest Wally World — an outing everyone enjoys. There is very little unemployment; kids know that they will either take over the family farm or business or that they will have to seek their futures elsewhere, or some combination of working elsewhere until family concerns or opportunities call them back.

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This model has functioned beautifully since...well, since forever, in one form or another. The wealthy Roman's *latifundia* had workers who produced everything in what was virtually a small city needed from food to harnesses, from wine to clothing, or traded for what could not be grown or manufactured. The same was true on feudal estates during the Dark Ages; the serfs produced, using the local Baron's resources, what was needed to sustain life and such comforts as the period afforded.

Just as England was getting too crowded, the colonies provided room for the expanding population to move to an area that offered living room. Germany has been seeking "*lebensraum*," which means the same thing, for centuries. In general America was settled by westward expansion as each area reached sustainable population. When the land and population reached a good balance the more adventurous or those wanting more than was available moved on. The main thing wrong with earth is that interplanetary travel has not evolved! Malthus was right, although it is taking longer than he expected, and government

land grabs have tied up vast chunks suitable for establishing new self-sufficient social units.

It is only in the last hundred years that vast metroplexes have sprawled across America breeding crime and problems that never existed before. Instead of the increased population becoming self-sufficient in small cohesive groups, as had been the norm since colonial days, people now huddle in cities selling things to each other.

James Howard Kunstler proposed that the salvation of America was deactivating urban and suburban sprawl in a vast migration to the country. As much as one must admire Mr. Kunstler's analysis of the problem, that "solution" simply will not work: The housing is not there, the jobs are not there, the schools and water systems are not sufficient, and room for gentle growth is not there. If it were, the young would not go off to the big cities. Starting a small town from scratch isn't plausible, either.

The usual small town of about 2,500 has two grocery stores, two feed stores, a couple of veterinarians, a "good" restaurant, a burger joint and a Mexican restaurant, a beauty shop, a lawyer or three, an insurance agent, a hardware store, and a pharmacy. You might find a nail salon and a movie house that is open Friday and Saturday nights. It can't absorb many newcomers because everything is already in balance, sufficient for the needs of the area, but neither lacking nor needing to expand.

Has spreading the sprawl to the country on purpose been tried? Yes, it has. Consider Roundrock, a charming little Texas town until a very few years ago when Dell decided to locate there to build computers. It would be easy to get excited and think of a large corporation bringing new jobs, new commerce, and an increased tax base, envisioning a gentle absorption process whereby the Dell people became part of the community and the indigenous population benefited from increased trade opportunities.

WERE new jobs created? Yes, jobs were brought in but personnel were imported to fill them. Very few of the jobs were available to locals.

Well, there had to be an increase in commerce, didn't there? Absolutely. The new workers and management needed housing, groceries, gasoline, and some professional services such as a CPA or title company. However, this did not lead to expansion by established businesses in the area; like Ford deciding there was a 5% market niche for the Edsel, Chili's *et al.* decided Roundrock was now big enough (or was becoming big enough) to justify opening franchises. Local restaurants did not see a vast influx of customers. In very short order Roundrock has become indistinguishable from New Braunfels or San Marcos (absorbed as the 'burbs reach out from San Antonio towards Austin, and *vice versa*) or innumerable small towns in the DFW area that have been surrounded and overrun. Large chain grocers moved in, rather than the newcomers patronizing Godwin's and Brookshire Br others. An army of ants dumped "civilization" on a nice place to live in very short order,

and very soon afterwards it stopped being a nice place to live.

Housing? Oh, yes. The newcomers have their own — “ghetto” is too harsh — enclave where the sort of housing they are accustomed to is being built. There are now billboards advertising “homes from the 110’s to the 190’s!” in an area where the median house value was more on the order of \$50,000. The newcomers huddle together in their own separate area, doing their own separate things...and criticize how Roundrock is and most residents would much have preferred it to stay.

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“They said this was progress and to live with it,” a small business owner said in angry frustration. “I told them to progress elsewhere!”

The newcomers have banded together and are running their own candidates locally! An office seeker whose slogan is “efficient...sustainable...environmentally friendly” is not the descendant of those who have lived in Roundrock since 1843. (That phrase, with “green” for the last clause is to be found in the G-20 report, a classic of the C. North Parkinson school which was written before the meeting took place and is couched in such terms that the few who were responsible for content can claim it covers anything they want to do, and then claim success, in the unlikely event they have any.) **Roundrock was actually living that way and didn’t need outsiders clamoring for new services to solve problems expansion brought.**

Locals are bitter over losing a quarter-mile swath of prime farmland to build the large highway Dell requires to do business. The land is gone, fields are cut up badly, and all the long time residents get out of it is increased traffic (they had been blissfully ignorant of

rush hour traffic heretofore) from a lot of people they didn't want there in the first place.

For the most part there will be two Roundrocks from now on: The old guard, and the newcomers. They have almost nothing in common and little to cooperate on even if either side wanted to. The Dellians want to recreate the cities from which they came, and the Roundrockians for the most part want the good old days back. They can't have it.

"Increased tax base!" proponents might cry. "What about THAT? You can't deny that there is more tax money to do good." Ah...that's one of the major problems. The big city's idea of "good" isn't that of the local populace, and the problems the Dellians want to solve weren't problems until they got there. Worse, there are now or will be big, new bond issues to fund increased school facilities, a hospital, expansion of water lines (bear in mind that Roundrock is bordering on the Hill Country and water is in less supply than areas with more rainfall), and buses. There aren't in bus routes in small town America because they are neither needed nor wanted! Bureaucracy is on the rise, of course, which will necessitate more building and more taxes. A large sign urges donating because "There were 558 cases of child abuse here last year! Five children died." Old Roundrock didn't have child abuse.

Dell built an arena/stadium/gathering center...which the newcomers no doubt enjoy. Small town Roundrock was perfectly happy watching the kids play baseball, football, and soccer outdoors and basketball in the school gym. Watching the kids play is far more thrilling to small town dwellers than the Super Bowl is. Utter excitement is having the HS football team make it to the playoffs even if the division is AA.

A financial professional weighed in, "Yes, I have some new clients, but it isn't worth what it cost us having Dell here." It isn't, either. Dell won by getting cheaper land and a lower cost of living that their presence will raise, and it was downhill from there.

Those who work for Dell got a chance to see how the other half lives and didn't want any part of it. They want their strip malls, big movie theaters, and all the comforts of their former cities. They tend to be contemptuous of the locals and "life in the sticks." Perhaps that means they want a tattoo parlor and a porn bookstore, but it also conveys that they aren't comfortable with life in the slow lane. They don't understand an unhurried lifestyle and think Roundrockians need stirring up to become "useful members of society." The long-time residents still think low crime, low unemployment, traditional schools (ever harder to hold on to), helping their neighbors because they want to, and a stable, "efficient" and "sustainable" life are what America is all about. They already had those.

The locals lost most of all. Against their will, their traditional lifestyle is being destroyed. They have to fight traffic, hunt for parking places, stand in lines, hear what they were proud of denigrated, and attempt to battle the "progress" the invaders are determined to have. Chances are the kids are whining, "Jimmy has..." and "Susie's mom lets her..."

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They're back to the same old issue that has plagued mankind since the Saxons and the Normans: Those who are tied to the land and their communities, and those who believe in conquest and commerce. Big government vs. small, a leisurely life vs. the rat race, the "good" of anonymous, idle others vs. standing on our own two feet and offering a deserving neighbor an occasional steadying hand.

If you get a chance, visit Roundrock while the flavor is still there. The natives are friendly, sensible, and outgoing. If you are able, find a similar small town and move there yourself.

Just don't take a corporation with you.

Regards,
Linda Brady Traynham

Gary's Note: Linda Brady Traynham reveals that small towns have been the model of sustainability for as long as there's been people. Enjoy. And send your comments to gary@whiskeyandgunpowder.com.

Whiskey & Gunpowder
By Linda Brady Traynham
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Small Town, U.S.A.



A Parting Shot...

The small town really is a plausible answer to sustainable human living.

We won't go gently into that particular good night, however.

The megalopolises around the world are the very picture of overshoot. They can't be dismantled and their populations can't just be absorbed into more sustainable modes of town and country life.

No use crying about it now, though.

These are interesting time in which we live, no? Resource depletion, energy scarcity and the attendant collapse of debt and the unsustainable growth it promoted...what a stew!

Stay tuned as we try to navigate our way through, Shooters.

The weather seems finally to have turned pleasant in Baltimore. I plan to enjoy my weekend. You do the same.

Regards,
Gary Gibson,
Managing Editor, *Whiskey & Gunpowder*

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