

# IN RECENT YEARS, MORE RURAL COMMUNITIES AND SPARSELY POPULATED REGIONS ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE REALIZED THE BENEFITS OF RURAL TOURISM.

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**A**ccording to a 2001 study on rural tourism by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), 62 percent of all American adults traveled to a small town or village in the United States within the past three years. TIA's president and CEO states "small-town America appeals to many travelers because of its unique charm, in addition to the wide variety of activities and history. The quiet pace is an alternative to the hustle and bustle of larger cities." If you are thinking about developing a rural tourism program in your community, or if you would like to enhance an existing rural tourism program in your area, this publication is for you. Before you get started, however, there are several questions that you should ask of your community.

## **IS TOURISM RIGHT FOR YOUR RURAL COMMUNITY?**

Not every rural community can make tourism a major part of its local economy, and some communities may simply choose to not develop tourism opportunities at all. There are many issues to think about as you consider how to approach tourism. For example, how can you use your natural and historic resources without damaging them? How can you provide visitor services such as lodging

facilities, restaurants, and shops so that each person's stay is enjoyable and economically rewarding for the community? Keep in mind that for tourism to work, you need to have strong leadership as well as partners to provide the human and financial resources needed to launch and maintain your efforts. You also have to be willing to commit to the long term, as most successful tourism programs grow gradually over time.

A strong rural tourism program can provide many benefits. It can strengthen your local economy, bring new jobs, new businesses and increased tax revenues. Tourism can also help to diversify your local economy. A region that was once heavily dependent on agriculture, for instance, can use agritourism as a way to supplement incomes for local farmers and support local businesses, thus helping to preserve the rural lifestyle. Tourism programs that capitalize on the natural, historic and cultural resources of your community can also help to build community pride and improve the quality of life for residents. But you should be aware that tourism brings challenges as well. Depending on the number of visitors that you attract, tourism can place added demands on your infrastructure

(roads, water, public services, etc.). Think carefully about your carrying capacity for tourism. How many visitors can your community really accommodate? Consider how local residents feel about visitors coming to their community to be sure you can balance the needs of residents and visitors alike. Also, the tourism industry can be competitive and expensive. The cost of placing advertisements can be overwhelming for individual sites that lack marketing staff or budget, making partnerships a critical ingredient for success. Carefully weigh the pros and cons tourism offers as you decide what kind is right for your rural community.

## **WHY DO YOU WANT TOURISM?**

While tourism can be a powerful economic development tool, not all tourism programs are primarily designed to improve the local economy. Some tourism efforts, including a few profiled in this publication, are mainly intended to make communities better places to live. Well-managed rural tourism programs can increase community pride, create a "sense of place," and even help to protect valued natural, historic or cultural resources. If you want tourism to spur economic development, be sure

to design a program that will make cash registers ring in your community. Remember that there are two ways to increase the economic impact of tourism. One is to attract more visitors, and the other is to convince visitors to stay longer and spend more money.

#### WHAT KIND OF TOURISM IS RIGHT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?

This publication focuses primarily on resource-based tourism, or tourism that builds on the natural, historic and cultural resources your community has to offer. The stories here address different types of tourism such as agritourism, nature-based tourism, cultural heritage tourism, multi-cultural tourism, and regional tourism partnerships such as scenic byways and heritage areas. Tourism in rural areas can also include a broad range of outdoor sports such as hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, skiing, bicycling and hiking.

Different kinds of tourism programs will attract different kinds of visitors. For example, cultural and heritage visitors stay longer and spend more money than other kinds of visitors. (Source: Travel Industry Association of America).

Some communities choose to focus on event-based tourism. For small communities with limited resources, events can be

a great way to get started in tourism. Events offer the opportunity to provide experiences that communities can't offer 365 days a year. Because the majority of visitors come for the event, residents can have their community to themselves the rest of the time. The downside is that, in general, a single event will not support new year-round businesses such as restaurants, shops and lodging facilities.

Other rural regions combine their attractions into packages such as scenic byways, heritage areas, trails and corridors to create the critical mass that it takes to attract the individual traveler. Still others target the group tour market. While it takes an estimated three to four years to develop a new tour for the motorcoach market, it can be easier for small communities to provide a meaningful, high quality experience when they know that a group will arrive at a specific time on a specific day. For example:

➤ Jonesborough, Tennessee (population 4,200) started an annual storytelling festival in 1973 that attracted 60 people. In 2000, the National Storytelling Festival attracted 10,000 people to the weekend-long event which featured an extensive lineup of nationally known storytellers.

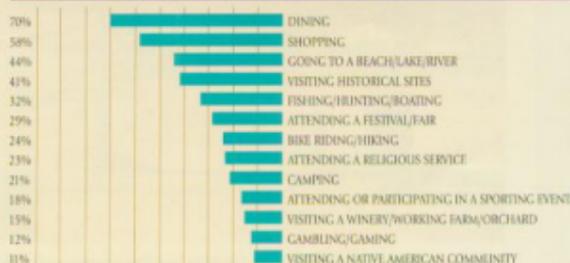
➤ The National Black Tourism Network has developed a number of motorcoach tours highlighting the African American heritage of rural communities in Missouri and Ohio. One of their tours, "Forgotten Missouri: What the Books Don't Tell" takes visitors to Boonville, Missouri (population 8,200) where volunteers from the African American Senior Citizen Center prepare an old-fashioned black kettle fish fry and lead a "sing-song," or traditional spiritual sing along.

➤ Communities across the country are thinking more creatively about the kinds of heritage resources that they have and can share with visitors. You can see how Winnebagos are put together in Forest City, Iowa (population 4,400), learn how pickles are made at Sechler's Fine Pickles in St. Joe, Indiana (population 500), or watch crayons being made at the Crayola Factory in Easton, Pennsylvania (population 26,300).

The stories in this publication are intended to provide ideas and inspiration. Whether your rural community has a tourism program in place or whether you are just getting started, the stories featured here offer tried and true strategies to make rural tourism work for you. Contact information has been included with the stories so that you can follow up to learn more, and a list of additional resources is included at the end to help you find other publications, web sites, and agencies that can provide additional assistance as you move forward.

Good luck!

#### WHAT DO RURAL TRAVELERS LIKE TO DO?



Source: 2008 Rural Tourism Travel Plan by the Travel Industry Association of America

# KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE: SWEET HOME FOLKLIFE DAYS

## THE PARTNERS

- City Council, Mayor and citizens of Kentwood, LA
- Highway 51 Corridor Task Force  
[www.ushighway51.com](http://www.ushighway51.com)
- Kentwood Cultural and Heritage Center  
Kentwood, LA
- Louisiana Division of the Arts  
Baton Rouge, LA  
[www.crt.state.la.us/art](http://www.crt.state.la.us/art)  
A grant-making agency in the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism
- Louisiana Office of Tourism, Heritage Tourism Development Program  
Baton Rouge, LA  
[www.crt.state.la.us/crt/tourism.htm](http://www.crt.state.la.us/crt/tourism.htm)
- National Park Service, Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance  
Baton Rouge, LA  
<http://www.nrcr.nps.gov/rtca/>
- Southeastern Louisiana University  
Hammond, LA  
[www.selu.edu/farfare](http://www.selu.edu/farfare)  
The university sponsors an annual month-long celebration of the arts, humanities, and sciences called *Farfare*.
- Sweet Home Baptist Missionary Church  
Museum  
Kentwood, LA
- Tangipahoa Parish Tourism Commission  
Hammond, LA  
[www.tangiparish.org](http://www.tangiparish.org)

*"This process appreciates the past—but not through a nostalgic lens—it makes it relevant to people, places and life today by showcasing living cultures."*

— Sharon Calvete, Louisiana Office of Tourism



*Finding the right liaison between the Highway 51 Task Force and the Sweet Home community proved essential to the project's success. Ms. Fochia Wilson bridged the chasm and opened the doors of communication, making it possible to share age-old folkways.*

## The Setting

SOMETIMES HISTORIANS AND CULTURAL CONSERVATORS EMPLOYED BY FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL ENTITIES ARE SO ENMESHED IN GATHERING, INTERPRETING, AND SHARING INFORMATION, THEY CAN EASILY

LOSE SIGHT OF THE REAL PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES BEHIND THE STORIES. WHAT DO LOCAL RESIDENTS SEE AS IMPORTANT PARTS OF THEIR HERITAGE? WHAT DO THEY WANT TO SHARE WITH OTHERS AND WHAT ARE THEIR CONCERNS ABOUT SHARING? A GROUP OF COMMUNITY AND STATE REPRESENTATIVES IN LOUISIANA DISCOVERED THAT BY WORKING FROM THE BOTTOM UP TO DOCUMENT TRADITIONS, THEY GOT TO THE TRUE ROOTS OF THE CULTURE AND LEARNED HOW TO BEST SHARE IT.



Although situated along an Interstate highway, Kentwood (pop. 2,600) continues its small-town ways through such events as the Sweet Home Holiday Festival.

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In 1996, the Louisiana Office of Tourism established a Heritage Tourism Development Program that had, as one of its aims, identification and documentation of the diversity of cultures in the state. Upon the request of the Tangipahoa Parish Tourism Commission, the tourism office teamed with the Louisiana Field Office of the National Park Service (NPS) through its Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program to establish the Highway 51 Corridor Task Force. The Task Force, consisting of representatives from communities along the corridor, conducted inventories and assessments along the 51-mile route from the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain (New Orleans) to the Mississippi border, planning to use the information gathered to develop a tourism strategy for the region. But traditional assessment methods stalled progress. Sharon Calcote of the Office of Tourism and Robert Vernon of RTCA felt that the Task Force wasn't getting at the cultural and historical heart of the corridor. In other words, the true heritage and cultural identity of the area was still a well-kept secret among the local residents.

To tackle the problem, the Task Force brought in folklorist Laura Westbrook. Westbrook's task was to interview and identify residents who maintain aspects of traditional life and customs that are passed on within families and communities. These are living, ongoing traditions in music, crafts, cuisine, and lore that persist as subcultures to the broader, more recognized ways of American life.

Based on Westbrook's surveys, the Task Force selected Kentwood along Highway 51 for further work with residents to identify and document their traditions. African American residents in Kentwood had already created their own memorial to their past in the Sweet Home Baptist Missionary Church Museum. Westbrook helped this segment of the small Tangipahoa Parish town recognize that they considered their traditions as things of the past, things that used to be done. And, although many of these folkways were still practiced by the older residents, they weren't being passed on. Through the interview and discovery process, the people realized they wanted to not only preserve their traditional ways but to perpetuate them by sharing them with others.

"We were told we were unique. We didn't know we were unique," explains Ms. Fochia Yamado Wilson, a former school principal who is the Sweet Home Museum curator and a respected community matriarch. "We were ashamed that we were brought up the way we were. We were embarrassed because we were poor. Then we learned that these things—the things we know—and the things we do—are special. And we want to pass them on to our younger generations so they don't die out with us."

The seed was sown. The Sweet Home community asked the Highway 51 Task Force leaders to help them document their heritage to prevent its loss as older generations passed away. But asking and receiving are two different things. Small communities aren't always receptive to outsiders and new ways of thinking. And local politics and jealousies can be as cumbersome to overcome as distrust and fear. There was a lot more work to be done than just documenting dying folk traditions.

*"In my own field work, I incorporate the ambiance of the community by working closely with the people who live there. Talking to local people I learn a different perspective and I find that in many cases the locals know much more about what the community wants than the traditional civic and public leaders. Someone just needs to ask and listen."*

— Sharon Calcutt, Louisiana Office of Tourism

#### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

As the partners in the Highway 51 Task Force can now tell you, you don't just walk into a small, close-knit community rife with racial and political tensions and expect to unlock its secrets. Folks aren't going to open up and tell all about their customs and traditions just because you think it's a noble cause to record them. Questioning from outsiders often breeds suspicion and distrust. As Calcutt remembers, the attitude among the people at Sweet Home was, "So who are you and what do you want?" Only through gradual acceptance were the outsiders let in, not just physically, but emotionally. It began with finding the right contact, the one person who commands respect from all segments of the Kentwood community. She was found in the person of Ms. Fochia Wilson.

"The key to the African American community was placing the project leadership in the hands of Ms. Fochia. When she is in charge, the information floodgates open. Through both earned trust and gained respect, the African American community of Sweet Home cracked the window and let us in," explains Calcutt.

Although the process took time, far more information than had been hoped for was eventually shared and gathered. The Task Force originally conceived of this project as a way to capture dying folk traditions

in cooking and home remedies. But the program took on a life of its own through the exchange of ideas and the residents' shared stories about everything from toy-making and music, to woodworking and sewing. The Sweet Home ladies, as the Task Force came to know them, took this project completely to heart and began unearthing traditions and stories long buried as unworthy or shameful, dusting them off, and not only holding them up for personal review, but seeing them in the light of new eyes on a distant past. The Sweet Home ladies decided to develop demonstrations and workshops to showcase their culture to their children and to visitors.



*The Highway 51 Task Force helped the Sweet Home ladies understand that the simple things they know and do as a matter of course are special and should be preserved and shared.*

In early 1998, with help from Calcutt and Betty Stewart, executive director of the Tangipahoa Parish Tourism Commission, the African American community in Kentwood applied for a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts to organize the first Sweet Home Folklife Days.

Because the Sweet Home ladies were unaccustomed to public speaking or demonstrations, they decided to hold a dress rehearsal in May that, while open to the public, was promoted in only a limited fashion. The participants were able to practice storytelling, cooking or explaining their crafts to the public, and the organizers were able to work out kinks in logistics.



*Making burlap sack aprons and home-brewed cooler are some of the things the elders of the Sweet Home community want to pass on to younger generations so that the unique folkways of previous eras won't die out.*

October 16 and 17, 1998 marked the first Sweet Home Folklife Days. Kentwood's African American community opened its doors to its own and to anyone else who wanted to see demonstrations in everything from broom making and quilting to cooking and baking. Traditional cooking was explored and samples offered of such Sweet Home staples as sweet potato tarts, syrup bread, and chicken pie. Discussion panels explored time-honored traditions in daily life, storytellers passed down family folklore, and gospel performers from eight local churches filled the air with soul-stirring music. Approximately 1,000 people attended



the event—an event celebrating traditions once considered embarrassing and of no value.

Folklife Days proved so popular and such a strong community pride-builder that the Sweet Home ladies took complete ownership of the project from that moment on, producing another two annual programs, a turn of events that has created pride in their sponsors, as well. "So often you help

build a project then turn it over to the local organizers and just hope they won't let it go," says Betty Stewart. "But the Sweet Home folks have embraced the entire project and made it their own. They require less and less help from our office each year, turning to us now mostly for our marketing assistance."

A self-sustaining event, Sweet Home Folklife Days continues to reach out to local African American churches to involve

those congregations and keep the work-load manageable. In 1998 the program was a satellite venue for Southeastern Louisiana University's annual month-long celebration of the arts known as Fanfare. The importance of this designation cannot be stressed enough, explains Stewart, who says that "to be considered for Fanfare's calendar you have to be a significant cultural event."

*Grant from NPS Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative to hire folklorist to conduct an inventory of cultural resources (e.g. musicians, storytellers, arts organizations, museums, etc.)*

*Fieldwork reveals interest by Kentwood's African American community to preserve and pass on its history and culture*

*Second Sweet Home Folklife Days includes more diverse and enhanced presentations*

*Plans for next Folklife Days include presenting food in a new venue—at a pot-luck meal, served family-style around large tables.*



## MAKING THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES

**Collaborate:** Racial and political tensions are still a reality for many communities, and Kentwood is no exception. To combat this, Task Force leaders held meetings that involved all the people—Sweet Home members as well as town leaders—to distribute duties equitably. Since the event showcased African American folklife, the black community concentrated on their presentations, panel discussions, show-and-tell, and selling folklife items at the event. White community members supported the folklife festival by taking care of logistics including parking, security, insurance and traffic control.

**Find the Fit between the Community and Tourism:** In this process of going directly to the community and finding out what matters to them, tourism developers are producing a product created by the locals for the locals, says Calcate. "It was not something developed to merely attract visitors, but something of real importance to the community itself." The conversations with locals allowed Task Force members to better understand the community's sense of values and allowed the community to decide what part and how much of itself it wanted to share with outsiders.



The hand-drawn interpretive sign in the Sweet Home Mixture jar is a reminder of the museum's beginnings.

**Make Sites and Programs Come Alive:** It doesn't get much more alive than this. Gospel singing, home cooking, doll-making, apron-sewing, woodworking, broom making and storytelling activities fill all the senses during the two days that Sweet Home presents its Folklife Days. Participants and visitors interact on a personal basis and traditions and legends are passed directly from one person to another.

**Focus on Quality and Authenticity:** Louisiana's new tourism development model, fashioned directly from experiences gained through the Sweet Home Folklife Days, is more effective than traditional methods because it takes an anthropological approach, says Calcate. It is a cultural tourism method based on the real lives of real people. "The strength of this process," explains Calcate, "is that communities, regardless of racial, ethnic, social or economic factors, can develop a tourism product in its natural setting. Culture does not need to be borrowed or built." The real life experiences provide the authenticity for heritage tourism.

**Preserve and Protect Resources:** Preserving and protecting the endangered folkways, or folk traditions, of the Sweet Home congregation was the foundation of the entire tourism effort that succeeded it. Through the program, the Sweet Home congregation is not only preserving its folkways, but is teaching indigenous crafts, life skills, music, and cooking traditions to new generations.

## RESULTS

>Of real significance is the improved relationship between the black and white communities in Kentwood. Tangible evidence of this bridged gap came in the form of funds granted by the Tangipahoa Parish Tourism Commission to the Sweet Home Museum for physical restoration of the aging building.



The roots of the annual festival are buried deep in the Sweet Home Baptist Missionary Church. Members of the Sweet Home Ladies established the festival out of a personal desire to record and remember where they came from.

>Recognition and appreciation of the African American community have increased; demonstrations and educational workshops are expanding into the schools and into other Highway 51 Corridor museums.

>While modest, there has been some economic benefit to Kentwood through expenditures at local businesses by both festival planners and attendees.

>The Sweet Home Gospel Choir has been invited to sing in France as part of a sister city effort.

>Another project along the Highway 51 Corridor has been completed. Based on the principles used by Sweet Home, it documents and records the Italian-American tradition of the St. Joseph Altar in Independence, Louisiana.

>Since Sweet Home's success, the major daily newspaper for the Highway 51 corridor in Louisiana is taking up the cause of finding and celebrating local heritage by printing a weekly page called "Route 51," which highlights activities and businesses along the route. A new museum has opened in Amite that uses revolving exhibits to depict historical and cultural aspects of the parish. New businesses are opening along Highway 51 and the route is being landscaped and beautified in various communities through which it passes.

### **ATTRACTING FAMILY REUNIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA**

The Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) in Greenville, North Carolina (pop. 60,000), has found a specific market niche in the black family reunion business, which attracts the bulk of the town's visitors. According to Debbie Vargas, executive director of the Greenville CVB, "working with the family reunion market requires providing more extensive assistance because we are working with people who aren't professional meeting planners." Vargas adds,

"We help reunion planners find sites for special events, help with mailings to get people to come to the reunion, help with on-site registration and even provide printed name tags." The Greenville CVB has even offered reunion-planning workshops where veteran reunion planners share tips with newcomers. Since 1987 this office has provided unique services to African Americans who return year after year, sometimes bringing 250 family members to town at one time.

Contact the Greenville Convention and Visitor's Bureau at (800) 537-5564.



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### **THE DELTA BLUES MUSEUM IN MISSISSIPPI**

Clarksdale, Mississippi (pop. 21,000) is capitalizing on its heritage as "the birthplace of the blues" by making that a central theme for tourism promotion. Local artists such as Muddy Waters and W.C. Handy, who was born in Alabama but lived in both Clarksdale and Memphis, helped popularize this uniquely American style of music. In 1979, the Delta Blues Museum was established



*The influence of such musical legends as Muddy Waters and W.C. Handy is seen in the expansion of the Delta Blues Museum, which relocated from a local library to this historic freight depot.*

in Clarksdale's public library. Twenty-one years later, the museum has moved into a newly restored historic freight depot, and attendance has grown to almost 23,000 visitors a year. A "Blues Alley" historic district was established in Clarksdale, with the Delta Blues Museum in the restored depot as the cornerstone of the project. Through an innovative after-school blues instruction program, the museum is encouraging local youth to become budding blues musicians. Contact the Delta Blues Museum at (662) 627-6820 or check out [www.deltabluesmuseum.org](http://www.deltabluesmuseum.org).



*The museum encourages the perpetuation of blues music through its after-school instructional efforts, which give students opportunities to perform, sometimes for dignitaries such as former Secretary of Education Richard Riley.*



Muddy Waters



W.C. Handy