Rural Nebraska Views
The Nebraska Rural Development Commission is proud to present the first edition of *Rural Nebraska Views* – a collection of views from invited authors and artists. Using words, brushes, inks, and camera lens, the entries highlight the unique attributes of the people and places found throughout the rural landscape of our wonderful state.
Harvest Festival, Brownville, Nebraska
Revitalizing Rural Nebraska Communities: The Choice is Ours

by Dr. Weldon Sleight

Rural Nebraska communities are dying and have been for several decades. While we are fortunate to have several agencies dedicated to rural economic development, the population loss continues. Today, 47% of Nebraska communities support a population of 300 or less. That equals 250 Nebraska towns. Most of these communities had their zenith in population growth between 1910 and 1950. These same communities produced great Nebraskans and national leaders. The hallmark of their development was the “rural ethic” that included hard work, responsibility, service to others, the importance of family and community, and a strong understanding of right and wrong. Perhaps the most important attribute was being thankful for everything they had. The only positive outcome of the rural communities losing population is that most of the residents have moved to larger Nebraska cities. Many of these former rural residents are now political and business leaders. But what about the rural communities that gave their life blood to make Nebraska stronger?

Forty years ago, I graduated from a rural high school and was so excited about going away to college that I enrolled for summer school. Though neither my parents nor the majority of my community attended college, it was a time when America had rededicated itself to making sure that everyone who wanted a college education could have one. Federal financial aid was enhanced and jobs were plentiful in rural communities. The recipe for going to college from my hometown was to obtain a financial aid package if possible and go home to work weekends and summers. This work and
federal aid made it possible to complete a degree with little debt. After completing my degree, I assumed that I would return home and live happily ever after. But, I didn’t return; after 40 years, I still haven’t returned home. It is the same for the vast majority of rural graduates that went away to college. **So, how did this all happen? Why was it so exciting and easy to leave but very, very difficult to return?**

The answer is simple. Our families, schools, churches, and rural communities want our children to prepare for productive lives and that means a college education. We preach to our children from a very young age that they must get a good education to become productive citizens and provide for their families. We tell them that it is important to experience the world and understand other cultures. We want them to experience all that we did not, but as time marches on and we become grandparents our perspective changes and we want our children and grandchildren to return home.

We all understand that being able to meet and have regular family activities is important to family unity, but what about rural community unity? Our communities need that same tender loving care. I am sorry to say that while my hometown is geographically in the same place the culture has changed dramatically. My “rural development experience” is no longer the same for children growing up there today. Ten years ago, I did an inventory of my hometown and found that in 30 years, 29 businesses and agencies had shut their doors. Today, the number is even greater. The sad thing is that while we can travel to surrounding cities for our business and agency needs, the loss of a large portion of our local tax base and population contributes to the loss of very important cultural landmarks. For example, my hometown
newspaper closed. This mechanism of community communication is no longer there to help community residents feel connected to each other and the events occurring around them. Now, the newspaper comes from another community and only has a “happenings column” for all the small rural communities in the county. The high school first became a county junior high school and then was torn down. There are no more athletic events, plays, or other school activities to bring residents together. Instead, the focus is on the events at the county high school. When the pharmacist retired, the drug store closed. With no pharmacy, the drug store soda fountain could not remain open. It had been a social gathering place for high school students. The community center and the theater are also gone. When the doctor who delivered me died, no one came to take his place. Perhaps most important to me is that our family feed and hardware store is only buildings and a memory of the time my dad and I spent with customers who were also our good friends.

The majority of Nebraska’s small rural communities have suffered a similar fate. So what is the answer? Should we only concentrate our economic development efforts on those cities that maintain a population of 5,000 or more, as some Nebraskans have discussed? Some would lead us to believe that only these cities can provide the necessary services and cultural activities important to viable communities. They say that the regional service center concept is with us, and we can do nothing to stop the trend. Incidentally, only 66 of Nebraska’s 93 counties include a city with a population of 5,000 or above. Should we tell our parents and grandparents that we will get home as often as possible but the problem of economic
development in their small communities is complex and there are no answers?

There are answers and rural residents have the capacity to heal their communities. But, we must rethink rural life which means retaining some parts of the old community heritage while moving forward. We must also understand that some parts will never be as they once were. For example, I fully expect that as much as I would like to have a medical doctor in Curtis, Nebraska, that will not happen because of specialized medicine. Today’s medical treatment seems to demand specialization and specialization requires a larger population base to support the system. A few days ago, a large life-flight helicopter landed on the NCTA football field to pick up an injured man who could not have been adequately cared for even if we had a doctor in town.

So, what is the recipe to change the future for our small Nebraska communities? How can community leaders motivate residents, and what methods can be used to bring rural Nebraska residents home?

Setting the Stage for Community Involvement

Over the past 50 years, we have become a much more affluent society even in rural communities. Most of us have as many TVs as we have family members, more than one car, bigger homes, more amenities, more services, and bigger and better “stuff.” The more stuff we have, the more time and resources it takes to care for it all. Our older residents remember when they had less and were probably as happy if not happier than we are today with everything that we think we need. They could show us how to organize ourselves to build something as magnificent as an agricultural
cooperative, city center, church or school. Those items took the support of the entire community, not just a handful of willing servants serving on the city council or county commission. But first, we must find the time to engage in community discussions and planning efforts. Where does that time come from? We are all extremely busy and there just isn’t time enough to do anything but the essentials, or is there? Recent studies have indicated that the average American watches four hours of TV a day. Yes, a day! After supper, we sit down to watch the news, then we are compelled to watch all the commentary because we seem to need political experts to explain to us what we have just seen and heard and how it affects our lives, then there is a movie that looks interesting, and before we know it, the 11:00 pm hour has arrived, and sure enough, we have watched four hours of TV. I know the news and some entertainment is important, but is it worth the cost of the well-being of our rural communities? Is the news and entertainment coming to us from the outside as important as the news and entertainment we could create from within? What would our communities be like if each of us gave up just four hours a week of external influence and devoted that time to community action committees and community activities? To accomplish this, residents need to first be invited to help with community development. This is best done by county and city governments appointing community action committees with responsibilities for everything from economic development to community activities. For example, during the month of June, three young mothers planned a 4th of July activity to be held at the Curtis City Park. The Rotary and other organizations were asked to help with the activities that included a patriotic service, farm games, lunch and a dunking machine for the mayor and other prominent citizens. The
Rotary Club planned on 150 people for lunch. At 1:00 pm, there wasn't a hamburger or hotdog that could be bought in town and almost 500 people had eaten a meal together, while socializing and paying a small fee to dunk those brave enough to sit on the dunking machine seat. Right away, the City of Curtis needs to appoint these three young mothers and a bunch of our senior citizens to an activities committee to see if we can't replicate the July 4th experience every month of the year. That day at the park, I didn't see one TV, laptop or iPod, yet everyone seemed to be enjoying the great activities and visiting. Other community action committees dealing with issues should take the same approach. It is important to the community's future growth and development.

Teaching Young People How to Come Home

For half a century, the nation has put huge resources into making higher education available to the masses and that has made America the great economic power it is. But higher education attainment requires our children to leave home, and they generally only return to visit. So, how do we have our rural cake and eat it too? We must spend as much time in our homes, public schools, and churches teaching our youth how to return home after completing college as we do showing them how to leave to go to college. Every rural high school has a career development program to show students the great opportunities available to them after college. But, how often do our teachers and counselors talk to our children about coming home to practice their professions in their rural hometown? We, as rural community citizens, must work hard to develop systems and businesses that will allow our children to come home. This means we need to take an annual inventory of our high school seniors’ career goals, college address, and the approximate
time they will take to complete their studies. This inventory needs to be used by the community job development committee, appointed by the city/county governments, to track the progress of our graduates. The committee needs to send the college students cards and make calls to keep them connected to the community, and let them know that they are missed and needed back home. This committee needs to hold seminars for these temporarily displaced residents to help them develop a plan that will eventually lead them back home. The former student inventory could be put to greater use if there was also a community inventory that listed the probable jobs that may become available during future years. For example, if the community job inventory showed a need for a chemistry teacher in a particular year and the student inventory showed a student with a goal of teaching in the physical sciences a “match” could be made. While this information could be put on an interactive website, it isn’t enough because computers can’t show the student the commitment and love the community has for former residents. And what happens if there isn’t a chemistry teacher opening the year the student graduates? The community can “loan” him/her to another school temporarily, but keep in touch so that when the position does open that individual is contacted and considered for the position. The community has invested a great deal in each public school graduate, and it needs to bring everyone possible home to recoup the investment.

**Developing Additional Economic Capacity**

Bringing former residents home after college to fill positions that have become available through natural attrition or retirement is only part of the answer. In fact, this strategy alone, if it worked perfectly, would only allow a community to remain at its current level. The community needs to
develop additional capacity to bring back many more former residents for new positions developed through economic development ventures guided by economic development agencies and strongly supported through citizen action committees. The key is to focus on the individual or the individual family. Again, we must develop an inventory of those who have left home but still have strong family and social ties to the community. Community action committees must contact these individuals and invite them home to discuss their future. Prior to the meeting, the individual being recruited would be asked to supply a resume that lists skills and experiences. Using the resume, the economic development agency would invite community leaders that control resources needed by the individual to the meeting as resource links. During the meeting, the individual would give the committee an in depth understanding of what his/her needs would be to re-establish in the community. The family and resource links would then bring all the community resources to the table to design a package that would work for the community and the individual. Of course, this wouldn't be done with a single meeting where the individual could move in “next week,” but if the community would spend the planning time necessary, the process could create new opportunity and capacity.

The community should also have a vision for the future and constantly be recruiting new businesses to the community. Occasionally, the community could also find a major company willing to relocate. These types of companies are often owned by former residents, who if encouraged, will consider relocation.
Agriculture’s Role in Rural Nebraska Community Economic Development

The increasing efficiency of agriculture is one of the major reasons rural communities are losing population, but it can also be one of the greatest forces for revitalizing rural communities. Many think that Nebraska has increased its agricultural production through more acres and more cows. That is not the case. Today, Nebraska has approximately 300,000 less beef cows than it did in 1974 and yet produces more pounds of beef. The same story follows with crop production levels; corn yields today are double and in some cases triple that of 50 years ago. The UNL agricultural scientists have not finished their work and are developing new systems that will allow further increases in production. For example, until minimum tillage processes were developed, there were no corn stocks for winter feed. Higher commodity prices will make some of the CRP ground profitable for agricultural production. Nebraska has 78,000 less dairy cattle today than in 1974 and yet 10 dairy processing plants have the capacity to process the milk of 75,000 more cows. The gross income from the milk produced by those 75,000 cows would be $300 million per year. The processed milk products receipts would be far greater. This is brought into greater focus when we consider the fact that Nebraska imports 20 million pounds of milk each month from Kansas.

Too often our answer to rural economic development is cottage industries. While these efforts need to continue and are very important, there are huge opportunities in production agriculture if we think differently about how to establish new production units. For example 100 beef cows will generate a gross income of $60,000 per year, 100 dairy cows will gross
$400,000 per year. If those dollars were to turn over a couple of times in a rural community before they left, they would generate more jobs and economic activity. The key is to form partnerships that will allow new beef, dairy, and agribusinesses to be developed or retained within each rural Nebraska community.

The University of Nebraska–Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture has now developed several new programs that allow graduates to return to rural communities as partners in major agricultural enterprises. This is a complex process, but one that holds great promise because it has brought together the resources of NCTA, USDA Farm Service Agency, Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Nebraska Cattlemen, and the Farm Bureau in a very unique partnership dedicated to revitalizing rural communities. NCTA has instituted instruction of entrepreneurship throughout its curriculum. This instruction, coupled with a low interest loan from Farm Service Agency, and other critical support from the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Nebraska Cattlemen, Farm Bureau, Nebraska Dairy Industry Association, and others will allow graduates to enter an established producer’s unit as a partner rather than as a hired hand. With this early start, these graduates will one day own major agricultural enterprises. The young producers will add to local economies as residents of communities while they establish families.

The bottom line is that we, as rural residents, must meet together often, use all of the resources available, and develop the capacity to heal our ailing communities. Please make the choice to save our small rural communities that many have sacrificed to bring into existence. Our hometowns are in our hands. The choice is truly ours!
The World’s Granary
Catlin’s North American Indian Portfolio
Buffalo Hunt, Chase - No.5
Winds of Change

by Elizabeth Barrett

“In all our deliberations we must be mindful of the impact of our decisions on the seven generations to follow ours.”
—From the Great Law of the six nation Iroquois Confederacy

On a windswept hill in the Boulder Valley of Montana, seven human silhouettes rise from the ground.

The steel sculpture, created by artist, writer and spiritualist Frederick Franck, was inspired by the great law of the Iroquois.

When I climbed the hill to see and touch the “Seven Generations,” sculpture, I was moved beyond words, especially when I read the Iroquois message inscribed on a plaque next to the sculpture.

Their message teaches us how vital it is to understand the ramifications of our decisions on generations to come.

As human beings on this planet and also as Nebraskans, it is our responsibility to “be mindful” of the decisions we make.

For most of my life, I have lived on the rural plains of Nebraska where the only constant is wind and change.

Our environment on the Great Plains has forced us for generations to gain strength from adversity and we have proven ourselves worthy of these challenges.

Now is not the time to let our fears keep us immobile because it is only in embracing change that we truly live.
In “Native Wisdom for White Minds,” psychotherapist and author Anne Wilson Schaef invites us to develop our spirituality, for only our spirituality gives us security in changing times.

We have only to look back a few generations to see how Native Americans were kept mindful by their spiritual beliefs and to see how faith kept our state’s pioneers pushing handcarts across hardened prairie.

All believed in something much greater than themselves.

“Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” —Saint Francis of Assisi

The wind is always blowing change through prairie grass on the plains.

These days the changes we are experiencing include sky-high gas and property taxes, an unsettled economy, a population shift to urban areas and instability in world politics.

I cannot solve these issues in an essay about government and decision making in rural Nebraska any more than I can predict the weather.

What I can offer is the idea that these challenges—especially for rural inhabitants—are not any worse than what previous generations faced.

And, as the Iroquois so eloquently stated, mindfulness about the decisions we make now can only have a positive effect on the next generations.

One example of this is the recent passage of the statewide smoking ban in indoor public places.
State legislators debated this issue at length and, in the end, decided that the health of our citizens now and in the future was worth the obstacles we will be forced to face in carrying out that ban.

Likewise, legislators are looking ahead at the even larger issue of how to insure the careful, cognizant and respectful use of water— one of Nebraska’s most precious resources.

Whether it’s lawmaking in the Legislature or in a county courthouse, each piece of legislation at every level affects us.

Our legislators hold in their hands the huge responsibility to be mindful of all the people of Nebraska who are as diverse as the colors of a Nebraska sunset.

Their challenge, and ours as citizens, is to honor our rootedness to the land and our connectedness to each other—whether we live in Omaha or Otoe County.

Nebraska author Willa Cather recognized that significance in “Oh Pioneers,” when she wrote:

“The land belongs to the future... We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand are the people who own it—for a little while.”

Nebraska will always be an agricultural state even though only 19% of rural Nebraskans currently own a farm or ranch.

Although we have diversified our industry base, much of it is directly or indirectly tied to the crops and livestock raised here.

For example, package food giant ConAgra relies on products grown in Nebraska.
And companies like Union Pacific, the largest railroad in North America, transport our agricultural products across the nation.

As important as the growth of information technology is in our state, we cannot forget that our farmers and ranchers feed the world.

Consequently, it’s absolutely vital that urban legislators, and our children, not lose touch with what drives our economy.

Even as fewer and fewer children live on farms or ranches, we must remember to teach them why these ways of life are so important.

Tours of farms and ranches, interactive activities with agricultural producers and letting youths know what jobs are available in the agricultural sector, and how it works, are just a few ways to share that knowledge.

We need to understand how life and business in rural Nebraska is so intricately woven with life and business all across Nebraska.

“The rhythm of the land and the rhythm of his blood had been one and the same. And he had begun the planting and both blood and land had gradually become calm.”
—Witi Ihimaera, a Maori writer

All of us share a heritage in this state which is still untamed in many ways.

We are resilient and self sufficient but we must not forget to connect when deciding what is best for us and our children.

Because of how we’re intertwined, we should not try to separate rural from urban on any level—spiritually, generationally or economically.

To not only survive, but thrive, we need to pay attention to all areas of our state. For if one part of our state is neglected, the whole will surely suffer.
Lessons can be learned about governmental affairs by looking at personal relationships.

Instead of relying on the Internet to communicate or staying hidden in our houses, we must make efforts to stay physically connected to friends and neighbors.

We can encourage Town Hall meetings where issues can be discussed face to face.

Perhaps senators from Lincoln and Omaha could board a bus each year to participate in a cattle roundup near Valentine. Or take the time to visit a rural school in the Sandhills or travel to a farm nestled in the patchwork of rural Nebraska.

When you drive down our river-road
spare us your talk about backwardness,
or how mile after unrelieved mile dispirits you,
or how there is nothing, simply nothing to see.
Go back to your homes and work on your eyes,
bring back a sight which can co-create meaning.
Then notice how our river is on fire,
A long burning vowel running westward.
—Nebraska poet Don Welch

Our legislative efforts must be mindful of the role our young people play in our state’s future.

Most of our young folks have grown up with Midwestern values and a work ethic envied by the rest of the nation.

Instead of lamenting about “brain drain” as our youth leave the state for higher-paying jobs, we need to figure out how to keep them here or how to lure them back.
For the past two years, Dawson County has been using an exemplary program, named ABLE (Advocating for Business Labor Education), to introduce its high school students to the jobs and careers available in their own backyards.

The next step is finding out what’s important to them and capitalizing on those things.

I live in Gothenburg, where a number of residents in their 20s, 30s and 40s, have returned to work and to raise their children.

They don’t seem to suffer from an inferiority complex, as some of us do, that tells them life is better elsewhere.

These parents liked growing up in this vibrant, rural community and want their children to have the same experience of walking downtown or riding bikes to school, the library and swimming pool.

Young parents say they returned or never left Gothenburg because it’s a safe community where most people feel connected to and care about each other. Our community helps raise our children with values that most of us feel are important.

In addition, young and older leaders in our town are slowly recruiting the type of businesses and industries that offer well-paying jobs—Monsanto, Frito Lay and Baldwin Filters to name a few—which is essential for young folks to want to return.

Once they are here, they share new ideas and serve on city councils, school and economic development boards where they make decisions for their children and grandchildren. They also create new opportunities for
their children by starting new programs such as swimming clubs and dance classes.

The cycle continues in hopes that rural Nebraska, and what it offers, becomes part of their being.

It becomes us so,
this mauve sky.
It kisses the corners
of our mauve and grey
mouths. I at least
can not go away again,
not the way my flesh tones
take on the color of prairie.
I think now in wheat gold
and corn gold and brown sand
and grass. And counting
the words to describe me,
I come back to these colors
and this strong blue wind
around my hair.
—Nebraska poet Susan Strayer Deal

The fact our young folks are returning, like the Sandhill cranes in the spring, speaks volumes about roots, values and what rural towns like ours can offer—good jobs, safety and a sense of connectedness.

And, as we survey the small towns of our state, it is clear not all will be able to maintain their viability and vitality.

When the winds of change blow through our state, we may have to give up those that can't survive, knowing that there are still many rural towns that will be able to adapt and succeed.

There are hard challenges ahead for rural Nebraska, especially as urban senators—who are now in the majority—try to make decisions for the entire state.
Leaving ego at the door and coming to the bargaining table with humility, honest and clarity will help bring positive and long-lasting results.

Decisions made from the heart and soul, as well as the head, will be the ones that carry rural and all of Nebraska through the next generations and into the next century.

Remember our rootedness and the need to embrace change, not try to control it. Adversity can be overcome by connecting with each other and developing our own spirituality.

We are strong and so are our children—**the future of Nebraska**.

Be mindful in each and every decision.

“Look behind you. See your sons and daughters. They are your future. Look farther and see your sons’ and daughters’ children and their children’s children even unto the seventh generation. That’s the way we were taught.”

*Think about it—you yourself are a seventh generation.*
—Leon Shenandoah, an Onondagan elder
Roberts and Uncle Pete
A Crash Course in Infrastructure Expensive but Essential Components for Rural (and Urban) Nebraska’s Future

by Sandy Scofield

“Ironically rural America has become viewed by a growing number of Americans as having a higher quality of life not because of what it has, but rather because of what it does not have.” This quote from an unknown author focuses on a point we often forget.

No doubt you can name many things we are happy not to have in rural Nebraska: smog, traffic jams, urban canyons, lack of green or open spaces, the list goes on. Many of these “deficiencies” amount to assets that rural areas may be able to turn into future opportunities. For example Dr. Larry Swanson, a rural sociologist, originally from Nebraska and now at the University of Montana, made the point that young people, like his twenty-something sons, are going to be looking for places to move that have amenities because “they can’t afford to buy a house in western Montana.” Rural Nebraska offers many of the amenities his sons and others like them are seeking. We rank 10th in stream miles nationally, we have pine forests in the West and beautiful broadleaf trees in the Northeast and Southeast, expansive prairies- with the Sandhills being the largest, and abundant wildlife. At least some of these enterprising young people might consider Nebraska as they search for new roots and the more entrepreneurial will bring their own jobs with them or create them when they settle down. Retirees are another group who look for affordable places with amenities that offer an enjoyable lifestyle. To appeal to these potential future Nebraskans, we must insure the infrastructure that underlies any successful community is built and maintained.
Infrastructure is defined by Webster’s as “the basic installations and facilities on which the continuance and growth of a community, state, etc. depend, as roads, schools, power plants, transportation, and communications systems etc.” Infrastructure is easy to ignore and put off at budget time. It is largely taken for granted by many until it starts wearing out. Yet, without sufficient communications, transportation, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure essentials our natural amenities will not be enough to retain and attract a critical mass of citizens to build our future.

Here is one example of how important communications infrastructure is to attracting and keeping young people. I was speaking to a University of Nebraska-Lincoln journalism class on rural issues and asked how many would be willing to live in a community where internet service wasn’t fast and affordable enough that they could download the latest games and movies. No one raised a hand and there was a look of incredulity on their faces that made me feel silly for even asking the question. It is true that Universities have especially fast internet services, and these graduates are leaving with expectations that they will have a similar level of service available at an affordable cost wherever they live. They are not going to be willing to accept less.

We have places in Nebraska where access to internet and cell phone service would not meet the standards of these college students today. Those places are getting fewer and prices are getting better, but the trouble with technology is, it keeps changing. Upgrades are a constant need if we are to compete with urban areas. Rural residents who are concerned about their future attractiveness to young people and the business competitiveness of their communities need to pay close attention to these issues and
communicate with the providers of services and elected officials at both the federal and state level to insure our rural internet highways get better and cheaper instead of slower and less accessible.

As with all physical structures, maintenance of our state and local infrastructure is ongoing and expensive. For example, the cost of building roads has skyrocketed due to inflation in the cost of materials and the cost of energy to complete construction and maintenance projects. Today a four lane interstate highway costs about six million per mile to build, and a two lane highway about $1.5 million per mile. Some communities now find themselves with aging infrastructure that they have put off upgrading because of the cost. *It’s a big problem.* Unfortunately we’ve underfunded infrastructure at the state and federal level too.

Funding for roads in Nebraska has traditionally come from the Nebraska gas tax and motor vehicle taxes supplemented by federal funds. It’s about a 50-50 mix. The use of funds from the Cash Reserve Fund in this year’s legislative session is the first time we’ve allocated general funds (money from sales and income taxes) to roads. This is because we and all other states are concerned about changes in federal highway funds. The state highway construction program was $390 million in FY 2006, $350 million in FY 2007, and $341 in FY 2008. The FY 2009 program is published at $317 million. Also, high priced gasoline has reduced the amount of driving we are all doing and results in a drop in revenue both to the federal Highway Trust Fund as well as our own state roads coffers.

Our legislators are to be commended for stepping up in the 2008 session and addressing this issue. They know there is more to be done
because the costs of transportation infrastructure are so expensive they cannot be maintained without adequate federal funds. Dipping into state general funds competes with other demands such as Medicaid. Medicaid pays for healthcare for the poor, who are primarily children and low income elderly-- most of whom are in nursing homes. K-20 education, prisons, law enforcement, and justice systems are a few other essential but expensive state responsibilities that consume a limited budget. We're going to need to find new solutions unless the federal government further increases funding for highways. That may be a possibility given the concerns about the bridge collapse in Minnesota and the fact that some people campaigning for office at the national level are talking about the importance of infrastructure, but rural areas need to make themselves heard in these debates to insure we aren't forgotten in the rush to address urban needs.

The roads funding formula Nebraska uses benefits the whole state. State funding generated by the gas tax and motor vehicle sales taxes not only goes for highways but also for the construction and maintenance of city and county streets and roads. In general 50.3% of these revenues go for state highways and 46.66% are sent back to cities and counties. Another advantage of Nebraska's road planning and construction is the fact the process is governed by an appointed Commission representative of all regions across the state. This buffers the funds from being distributed politically.

While our state bridges are in reasonably good condition some county bridges are showing problems and are being shut down or having weight limits placed on them. The federal government has increased requirements on local governments to inspect bridges which, while not a bad idea, puts
already squeezed budgets under more pressure. This is not just a rural issue. Urban residents probably don’t think about the need to maintain farm to market roads and bridges, but they relate directly to food and fiber supply as well as alternative energy transportation.

Alex Marshall, writing in the August 2008 edition of Governing magazine, observed, “The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power to ‘establish Post Offices and post Roads,’ which shows that federal involvement with communication and transportation is as old as the country itself. —Despite this legacy, federal involvement in transportation has been on-again, off-again over the centuries…. In recent decades, federal involvement has consisted more and more of the infamous ‘earmarks,’ where grants for say, bridges, are given on the basis of the sway of individual legislators.” Marshall predicts more federal involvement in “the care and feeding of infrastructure” including more than roads and bridges but also water and sewer systems, electrical grids and transit systems. Yet it seems to me it is possible that rural America could be left behind the door unless we band together as rural states and speak clearly with one voice to our elected representatives about our needs. It is more important we address the shortfall facing the federal Highway Trust Fund than bog down in a debate about earmarks. In fact in Nebraska, earmarks have allowed for critical infrastructure to be built that would not otherwise have received federal funds.

Next year a new Transportation Bill will come up for debate in Congress. In 2005 this bill provided $21.6 billion for highways, bridges, rail and bus facilities, bike paths, and recreational trails. Rural advocates would be wise to pay as much attention to this bill as they do to the farm bill. The
most recent proposal sent to Congress that will form the starting point for discussions about the new Transportation Bill, favors national highways and places with populations greater than 500,000. This will not be the final bill, but Nebraska, and especially its rural areas, need to weigh into this debate while there is still time to influence where funds go.

Urban areas can be expected to request increases to improve creative mass transit funding. It may be time for rural areas to propose creative public transit systems for our communities. Rural communities have aging populations that need transportation both in town and to other cities that offer medical care and shopping not available at home. As fuel costs increase, the number of nonelderly who would make use of such systems will likely increase as well.

*Nebraska is unique in the nation with its public power system.* The Nebraska Public Power District serves a large portion of the state and NPPD has recently undergone a planning process for the future. Primary sources of energy are coal (60%), nuclear (20%), some natural gas and 10% from wind and hydro. The cost of energy is projected to continue to rise under the current mix of sources and expansion into more sustainable sources will also be costly. NPPD has already taken steps to move toward the development of more wind power. To make more use of wind will require building additional transmission lines and wind turbines which will mean increases in our electricity bills, but we can also expect increases even if we stick with our current mix. Moving to alternative sources of energy will play an important role over time in increasing our energy independence. Our infrastructure budgets should plan for the costs that will naturally accompany these changes. The good news is many of these changes promise
new business and employment opportunities that will benefit rural areas.

At this point I can’t resist putting in a plug for practicing more conservation and energy efficiency. While technically not infrastructure, such work would reduce money Nebraskans are exporting out of the state to heat, cool and light our public and private buildings and homes. This requires no new research, can be done today, and will have an immediate impact on costs.

Other big ticket items in our infrastructure are water and waste water systems. When I was in the Legislature we were concerned about remediating LUST—not what you are thinking, but groundwater contamination from Leaking Underground Storage Tanks. These were old gasoline storage tanks that had rusted and were contaminating drinking water. Other issues such as nitrates in the drinking water, which are particularly harmful to babies, were of concern. Compared to 25 years ago, we are in better shape on clean drinking water issues and waste water programs. Funding for these issues comes from Federal Safe Drinking Water Programs and waste water programs. Only nine percent of the $30 million dollar Department of Environmental Quality budget is state funded with the balance coming from fees and 42% from federal funds. One new cost is that of regulating ethanol plants to protect water quality. Scientists and others are now raising concerns about emerging contaminants in our drinking water, such as pharmaceuticals, which could lead to new water quality initiatives.

For the most part our attention has currently shifted to the area of water quantity. The Platte River Cooperative Agreement is an example of
a potentially expensive new issue that must be resolved. For example, if the state finds itself in the position of buying out water rights along the Platte River to comply with the agreement among Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming, it will be very expensive for Nebraska taxpayers. Some have said it could make the cost of the Republican River issue look minor by comparison. So far we have spent roughly $10 million to satisfy Kansas’ demands on the Republican River. Unlike the area of water quality, the issues of water quantity and use do not receive any help from federal funds.

Along with highways, roads and bridges, communications systems, power plants, and water quality and quantity; health care facilities, schools, parks and libraries are essentials to undergird a high quality of life statewide and to keep our communities attractive to current and future residents.

Most hospitals in the state are private nonprofit with some being municipally or county owned. My hometown of Chadron is currently building a new hospital using LB 840 funds. Those funds are additions to the local sales tax that must be approved by a vote of the local taxpayers. They are a source of funding many other communities have used for a variety of local development purposes. Costs for all health care facilities will continue to increase. But, as our population ages, communities without good health care systems are at risk of losing their senior populations to places closer to medical facilities. Similarly, younger populations will seek out the places with good health care facilities.

State aid to schools is one of the largest portions of the state budget and those funds, coupled with local property taxes, pay for the operation of the schools including such things as salaries, supplies, utilities and so on.
New facilities for public schools require a local bond issue. Communities interested in attracting new residents have invested in school facilities.

State aid to libraries, a relatively miniscule part of Nebraska’s budget, provides for technical assistance to libraries and other services. Federal funds can’t be used for physical facilities but allow for such things as purchases of technology, software and special programs. The physical facilities and staff for local libraries require local support. In an era of technology, libraries continue to be important places for the public to access information, particularly for those who cannot afford internet services at home. Libraries also improve the desirability of a community in the eyes of those seeking a new home.

Parks should not be forgotten as another feature that creates appealing communities. Nebraska is fortunate to have an extensive system of local, state, and national parks and historic sites. While state and federal sites obtain federal funds, local parks and historic sites usually rely primarily on local funds and contributors. Nebraska funds its state parks with cash generated by the dreaded “park sticker” but it is unrealistic to think we could stretch general funds to maintain this outstanding resource. So if we eliminated the current system, we’d need to come up with another user fee which probably wouldn’t be universally popular either. As with libraries, we should not underestimate the importance of parks and other recreational spaces in creating a Nebraska that is not only pleasant for current residents but appealing to new ones.

Finally, rural and urban communities rely on federal Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) from the Department of Housing and
Urban Development. They are administered by the Department of Economic Development in Nebraska and provide funds for such things as building community centers or providing infrastructure needed to accommodate new industry. Some large cities (Lincoln, Omaha and Grand Island in Nebraska) get a separate block of these funds and are known as “Entitlement Cities.” All others in the state, the “Nonentitlement Cities,” compete for one pool of CDBG funds. Federal funds provide around $30 million for these Nonentitlement Cities in Nebraska. A few years ago a proposal at the federal level would have rolled these and other community development funds into one pool which would have been a significantly smaller amount than the total available through all the separate funds. Fortunately, the outcry from cities all over the nation prevented this cut which would have been especially damaging to small rural towns.

The topics discussed above are not comprehensive. I’ve made no mention of such things as fire departments, airports, rail service or other critical community needs. But I thought I’d better stop before you started grabbing your heart with one hand and your wallet with the other.

Clearly state and local taxpayers who want a future for the state and their communities must support expenditures necessary to build and maintain infrastructure. We’ll get some help from the federal government but not enough to do everything. Citizens need to pay attention to the quality of their infrastructure and its life expectancy. We need to advocate, NOW, for what we believe is important with our local, state and federal elected officials. Beyond that, it seems like a great opportunity to explore ways we can cooperate as communities to maintain the quality of life in our regions. Just as our ancestors came together to build barns and brand
cattle, we need to work with our neighbors to find cost effective solutions to maintain and improve infrastructure. For the most part, infrastructure isn't just “nice to have,” it is essential and cannot be crowded out by other demands if we are to have a viable future.

I served for six of my seven years in the Legislature on the Appropriations Committee and represented the legislative district furthest from Lincoln. My philosophy as to how I could best serve my constituents was to steer funds toward infrastructure that provided the foundation for development and a high quality of life. In other words, fund those things cities and counties cannot fund themselves but must have to undergird their efforts to be sustainable. When I was Chief of Staff to the Governor and then later head of the State Budget Office I became much more attuned to urban and rural differences and it became even more obvious that maintaining a strong infrastructure across the state was probably the single most important thing state government could do for future economic development and for retaining and attracting a viable population base. However, state government can’t carry the burden alone, unless the public is willing to pay much higher taxes. Federal funds, local funds, and cost effective cooperation are required.

When the Legislature reconvenes in January, the large surplus that was drawing the attention of lots of well meaning people with plans to spend it appears to be needed just to get us through the current economic downturn. If we are fortunate enough to find extra funds, it is still a good idea when the economic future is uncertain, to limit spending surplus funds on one time programs rather than those that will create ongoing demands for tax support. Many infrastructure projects are one time expenditures.
the time to assess our infrastructure priorities for the future-- statewise, regionally and locally-- and get them on the list. We may not get them this year or even next, but we need to plan ahead. The more we can collaborate rather than compete as communities on these issues, the more likely we will be able to fund what we need. Likewise, the more rural states can collaborate and advocate for federal funding that is good for rural areas, the chances improve for obtaining what we need. *If we don’t act now the future will be very difficult in both rural and urban Nebraska.*
The Overland Pony Express

by Dan Shundoff

The global economy is exceedingly complex, turbulent, and moving at a rate that history has never seen before. One might begin to wonder if Nebraska, and more specifically Rural Nebraska, can really compete in such a business climate. As the provider of IT Services to more than 600 SMB Clients in 66 communities between Lincoln, NE and Denver, CO Intellicom has great insight and vast experience in helping businesses located in rural communities remain competitive. In this article I intend to explore the most common tech related barriers our small and midsized businesses (SMB) face in today's market and demonstrate how innovative and disciplined integration of technology can and will make a difference for our rural communities - one business at a time.

As a state, Nebraska has made significant strides over the past decade in making high speed internet available and accessible to nearly every community in Nebraska. In today's market, most communities - even small communities - have numerous choices for consumer level broadband internet access including DSL, Cable, Wireless, and Satellite. To be certain, our attention and focus on reducing the digital divide for our citizens has been a successful endeavor.

But in reality the typical small business uses the internet to address very broad, comprehensive, and mission critical business needs. Today’s internet connectivity is used for more than just browsing the internet and sending a few emails. For many businesses, the internet is the single most
important communication tool they have. It’s how customers find and buy their products. It’s how businesses communicate with vendors and manufacturers. The internet allows small businesses to build out their models innovatively with remote offices, connected tele-workers, and independent contractors. Email, voice, video, presentations, security, billing, banking, line of business software applications, data backup and storage... and the list goes on. No matter where they are located, businesses of all sizes have grown to rely on internet access as a mission critical business tool. We are now entering an era where current DSL, Cable, Wireless and Satellite simply don’t meet these needs of reliability, flexibility, and speed.

The good news is that new internet products and services with speeds of 5MB to 30MB and more are finding their way to the market. The bad news is that they are by and large only available in metro areas. And if by chance you were lucky enough to live in a rural community offering these options, they are priced out of reach for most small and mid sized businesses. As an example, depending on the speed and location, the premium paid in rural areas for like circuit speeds can range from $500 to $2000 per month more than in metro areas. In my opinion, encouraging and helping our telecommunications providers find ways to deliver options and pricing of business class internet connectivity in rural areas on par with metro areas is critical to leveling the playing field and allowing our business in rural areas compete and thrive.

Another area in which we have seen significant progress and impact is on perception and how small business leaders in rural areas view the cost of technology. Not long ago the responsibility for managing hardware and software costs was lumped with facilities, utilities, or supplies. As
technology has become more mission critical to business performance, successful companies have shifted that mindset of IT being a basic cost of doing business to one of high expectations tied to investment, performance, and value.

Purchasing decisions once made solely on price are now subjected to intense analysis focused on the total cost of ownership, return on investment, and performance impact on business processes. For high performing companies its really very simple. An investment in technology must either increase revenue, reduce costs, or some combination of both. Every day we see examples of many companies in rural Nebraska leveraging technology to drive more to the bottom line, growing revenue, expanding market share, adding jobs, creating wealth, and building a better business environment for their communities. But for every 1 company that understands the competitive advantage that technology provides, there are 5 that don’t. And it’s these companies that hold the key to economic success to our rural communities. The more we can do to encourage, support, and educate business leaders to manage their companies by the numbers, to help them view critical decisions as investments, to mentor them into a growth vs. preservation mode, the more likely we are to turn the tide of our shrinking economic base.

Lastly, as it relates to technology, we continue to see gaps in the skills of technology professionals in many rural areas. Clearly having an in-house IT staff for a small business is neither efficient nor effective which is why so many companies attempt outsourcing to local professionals. And everyday more mid-size businesses are turning to outsourcing than in the past.

Decision makers are focusing their internal resources on strategic business
strategies and objectives, and leveraging outsourcing partnership to deliver provide cost effective solutions to maintenance and support. Additionally, IT service providers are engaged for project work when areas of specialized skills are required. These approaches are increasing the regional demand for higher skills, more industry training and certifications, and more experienced IT professionals.

Conversely we also see best practice approaches from high performing mid-sized companies when it comes to investing in technology training. Spending thousands of dollars and finding a way to send 1 or 2 people to multi-day training in Lincoln or Denver is very difficult for a small company. However, for a growing number of business owners who understand the importance of skilled IT workers, there are high expectations for return on this investment in the form of improved systems, more reliability, greater scalability, and lower total cost of ownership. They fully understand that the only thing more expensive that training, is no training.

But what of the small businesses? Can they find the same level of professional expertise from an outsource relationship? Unfortunately, not often enough. As a whole, our industry lags far behind many other professional service industries when it comes to requiring minimum levels of education, experience, and training before opening a business and serving clients. The net result is that we have many hardworking computer “hobbyists” trying hard (with good intent) to meet the increasingly complex needs of small businesses. But unfortunately they often fall short of delivering the kind of skills, integration, and innovation required to provide the transformational impact that their clients want, need and expect. We have to do a better job of encouraging and supporting these young and
talented entrepreneurs to more fully invest in their professional careers by attending industry training, continuing education, basic business courses, and attending networking events with peers. One could argue that no other field is changing faster than technology, and if our small businesses are going to get the products and services they need to survive and thrive they need a high quality support system of service providers.

So what does all this mean? Well for one, industry surveys indicate rural Nebraska has a good base of IT products, services, and skills. Their ability to positively impact business and create sustainable growth across the rural communities of Nebraska is real and the impact could be significant if we work hard to prepare the workers and infrastructure for tomorrow needs. Our efforts to bridge the digital divide have proven fruitful, but we are now challenged with finding way to deliver connectivity to the rural markets with the same increases in speed, flexibility, and reliability enjoyed in the metro areas - and at competitive costs. Today more small businesses in rural Nebraska are leveraging technology, system integration, and innovation to bring transformational change to their organizations, their customers, their people, and their products and services. Only time will tell if this shift is happening fast enough. But until then, we need to make these issues priorities in the discussion of rural economic development if we hope to reverse the trend of shrinking economies, shrinking businesses, and shrinking communities.

Industry experts continually point to our nation’s vast base of small businesses as the driving force behind innovation, business investment, and cumulative job creation. There are many ways to create hundreds or thousands of jobs in the region and we often forget that slow, steady, focuses
and deliberate growth of small businesses can produce incredible results over time. It’s doesn’t make for glamorous or exciting news, but by investing time and energy into helping the tens of thousands of small business in rural Nebraska who struggle every day to make a difference, **we can turn the tide.**
Untitled (Statue of Liberty)
Picnic in the Park, 1944
My school is a small rural school in south central Nebraska. We run nine bus routes and have a district that stretches approximately forty-one miles north and south and twenty miles east and west. Some of my students ride the bus two hours each day. My school houses grades four through eight with around 300 students and 25 full time certified staff members. It is an excellent school and students are given an outstanding education in my school.

The academic focus of my school has been on the core curricular areas of math, science, reading, language arts, and social studies with an emphasis in the area of reading and writing. To this end my school has been very successful. Each year the state writing assessment has found my eighth grade students above the state average. In addition, data shows positive growth of my students in the ear of writing each year as they progress through each grade.

Naturally, success of a school can never be measured by one instrument. In addition to high scores on the State Writing Assessment, my students have done very well on standardized tests and STAR assessments as well. Our norm referenced tests indicated an overall composite score well above average with scores in the top quartile in the areas of math and language. The percentage of our students who score in the proficient range on our criterion reference tests is five to ten percentage points above that which is set by NCLB AYP reporting.
When my students go on to the high school, those who take the ACT score well above the state and national average. In our district the average ACT score is 23.6, while the state average is 22.1, and the national average is 21.1. We have a very strong school system.

I am certain there are many rural schools in Nebraska that can show the same strong academic progress for their students. We in rural Nebraska are fortunate to be part of communities that value education and take great pride in the success of our children. Rural towns see their schools as the hub of their community. Citizens are greatly involved in school events. Any school performance be it athletic, academic, or artistic is well attended. Individuals come to the event whether they have children in school or not. They come to the events to show support for the performance, the school and the students.

This is a very important quality of the rural community. Not only are community members greatly involved in the lives of the students, but the professional staff is very involved as well. This is particularly true for those who live in the community where they work. As a result, the connection developed between staff and student has no small affect on academic achievement.

When one compares education in rural Nebraska to urban centers one generally looks at education quality from a perspective of cost per student, curriculum offerings, standardized test scores, student to teacher ratios, student population data, etc. No doubt these comparisons are valid, and in many cases reveal large gaps between rural and urban schools, particularly in the area of equity in school finance. However, in other categories, rural
and urban schools are very similar. The student population in a rural school is essentially the same as urban areas when one uses percentages rather than raw numbers to make the comparison. However, what cannot be compared is the close relationship the student body has with the professionals charged with educating them and the community in general.

It is very common for students in a rural district to have a great deal of contact with teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals outside the school day. In a small community the school staff members and students come in contact every day in settings outside the typical school day. *These encounters take place while shopping at the grocery store, attending church, going to the swimming pool, participating in club sports, working on the corn de-tasseling crew, etc., and even hauling grass to the city landfill.* Because of all the informal contact rural communities do not need to develop as many contrived activities designed to address what we in middle-level education call affective education.

Affective education has been a key component in middle level educational philosophy for many years. To define affective education one could say it is designing activities which address the social and emotional development of young adolescents. It provides middle level students with adult guidance, as these students go through various physical, emotional, and mental changes which are an unavoidable consequence of human growth and development. This middle school concept has been brought into the high school setting as well over the past several years. Those involved in public education are well aware of the recommendation set forth by the NASSP publication *Breaking Ranks* and *Breaking Ranks II*. These two publications embrace many middle level concepts and encourage
implementation at the high school level. The need for adult guidance to increase the success of our students is supported by research and has led to the restructuring of many large districts throughout the nation.

Many large school districts organize their teaching staff into teams that deal with a specific group of students throughout the day. The purpose of the team is to allow staff members to know students on a more personal level. In this structure, the district is attempting to create what naturally exists in a rural school.

At the end of the day, because of where I work and live, I have many connections with students brought about by the many informal encounters I have with them outside of school. I call each student by name, know most of their parents, and in a few cases know the name and pedigree of their dog. This connection cannot be empirically measured as to the academic success of rural students. But I am certain it is an essential component of the success of rural schools. *If it were not, why are large schools attempting to replicate the small community environment in their schools?*
A Cornfield
Agritourism: Nebraska’s Backyard Garden

by Marge Lauer

To find a fitting analogy of what agritourism is like in Nebraska, and the flavor it adds to our State, one need only look at a traditional home garden.

All gardens have something in common. For example, in a garden you generally see a great variety of plants, there is a measurable amount of human toil required to keep it producing, and at harvest time those uniquely home grown resources are going to provide sustenance. So it is with agritourism. Each agritourism attraction or event uses, nurtures, and enhances “home grown” or available resources as a source of sustenance. Attractions range from the very smallest to those that attract hundreds of visitors each year, and the variety becomes obvious by simply comparing photos of a quaint B&B to one of a vineyard, or of a pumpkin patch to one of a cowboy climbing down out of the saddle. And, there is no question that it takes an abundance of dedication and human toil to create and sustain a successful agritourism attraction or event.

But, exactly what is agritourism? It’s no surprise if you have a hard time thinking of how to define it. The word agritourism was just accepted into the Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary in 2006. Thus, the general public just isn’t familiar with the word. Plus, what the dictionary says and how people define agritourism is very different – much like the difference between how people define a garden and how the dictionary defines it. According to Webster, a garden is “A plot of ground, usually near a house, where flowers, shrubs, vegetables, fruits, or herbs are cultivated.” Yet, we
call a patio container with four plants a “garden” and we call an acre of sweet corn a “garden.” Webster defines agritourism as “the practice of touring agricultural areas to see farms and often to participate in farm activities” and the American Heritage Dictionary defines it as “tourism in which tourists take part in farm or village activities, as animal and crop care, cooking and cleaning, handicrafts, and entertainments.” Yet, if you were to attend an agritourism conference, the definition broadens further to “Agritourism is travel that combines agricultural or rural settings and products within a tourism experience. It includes providing visitors with a broad spectrum of agriculturally-based experiences ranging from fruit and vegetable stands to winery, orchard, and garden tours, from farm-based bed and breakfast and cabin accommodations, to participation in harvest festivals, farmer’s markets and cattle drives.”

With 93% of Nebraska’s land and corresponding resources being privately owned, there should be no limit to the number of rural experiences being offered in our state regardless of how you define agritourism.

Unfortunately, though, that is not the case.

Agritourism offerings have to be operated as business enterprises. Just because the resource is available (the land, the produce, or the lodging accommodations) doesn’t mean you just put up a sign and tourists will arrive and you will make money. Basic economics have to enter into the equation and there are a lot of economic factors that impact the bottom line. The first thing you need in order to generate revenue through agritourism is to have tourists, and you need a number of them at that. Without a doubt, attracting an adequate number of tourists out into the country is probably the greatest
challenge of any agritourism venture. First, you start with the fact that the general consumer doesn’t know what agritourism really is, plus you have to add in their lack of knowledge and comfort with gravel roads and country byways. Then, you have to compete with other vacation destinations and get-away experiences. This means that along with promotional and marketing dollars, the agritourism provider also has to do a fair amount of “educating.” And, in regard to competition, how can a consumer even “compare values” between agritourism and general travel experiences? They can’t. They simply cannot compare the price of the agritourism offering on something like www.hotels.com.

As well, there is almost a nostalgic association with agritourism that seems to give consumers the impression that they are going to find an opportunity to relive “yesteryear” with cowboys and Indians and horse drawn plows. Yet, the reality is, they want to experience this authentic and real environment with all of the benefits of modern day conveniences. An agritourism provider better be sure that there is indoor plumbing available, great cell phone service, and local Internet access, too. This collision of expectations often leaves the consumer apprehensive about what they might experience on an agritourism adventure – they want it to be real but not too real. And, it often leaves the agritourism provider having to compromise between “authentic” and “commercial.” For example, an event enjoyed by many would be a cattle branding or grape harvest. The provider can’t set up an arena just to brand the cattle, nor can the vineyard let everyone tear through their grapevines. Since these activities are the livelihood of the rural resident – which is what makes them authentic agritourism activities -- managing a crowd, which is essential for profitability in their agritourism
efforts, creates a dilemma. Agritourism providers need large numbers of tourists to generate net revenue, but a large number of tourists interfere with the authenticity and operations of the event.

Another business cost to agritourism providers is liability insurance. Whereas the availability of this unique insurance has increased in the past four years, the cost certainly isn’t all that favorable. A farmer, rancher, or rural resident simply can not afford to have only an occasional guest come to their location and experience farm and ranch activities. The insurance cost per person would be so prohibitive that if the provider did try to cover the expense within the sales price of the activity, the cost would likely stop just about any average tourist from participating. Perhaps staying at a B&B, going horseback riding, being served home cooked meals, and watching the calves be branded is a neat experience at $150 per person per day, but at $450 a day, it isn’t so neat.

Even once a provider has marketed their attraction well, convinced tourists that it is a great value, purchased liability insurance, and have worked out their balance between the “authentic” and the “commercial”, the fact remains that there are some elements beyond their control. Just as with a garden, regardless of how well you tend to it, bad weather can leave you little to harvest. In 2008, agritourism providers didn’t experience bad weather but rather a bad economy. High commodity prices and high gasoline prices created a combination that certainly decreased the revenue harvest for the agritourism providers and State alike.

The reality of these economic factors has led to two things; one, agritourism offerings near a large metropolitan area are experiencing
growth and profit, due to the large number of nearby “tourists,” while those that are remote with little else around them in the way of attractions, are not thriving; and two, agritourism offerings in more remote areas are having to ‘commercialize’ their events to accommodate the larger numbers.

Is such commercialization bad? Only the tourist can actually decide that. However, let’s look at one more ‘garden’ comparison. In days of yore, the garden was filled with traditional vegetables and flowers . . . green beans, corn, peas, asters and marigolds. Today’s gardens are more likely to contain some of those same plants, but also incorporate new varieties such as organic broccoli, new hybrids of squash, and unique plants imported from around the world. Nebraska residents are offering traditional agritourism experiences but they are also starting to capitalize on unique offerings. Who ever thought that a weekend getaway of scrapbooking at a quaint B&B would be an agritourism offering? Or that “Getting Tanked” meant a lazy, floating fun time down the Dismal River in a cow tank – rather than a re-play of your college dorm days. Both of these are novel ways to utilize existing ranch and farm assets. More examples include “Riding on Faith”, a horseback experience that goes far beyond a trail ride, the ingenuity of creating a new, great sandwich spread by blending home raised honey with other flavors, and since a country western band just sounds better out in the country, you build a great party and conference facility right in your front yard like they did at Haythorn Ranch. And, then there are real, true organic foods such as mouth-watering homemade pie combinations made from wild berries. You would expect Nebraskan’s to be resourceful – and they are!

Yes, Nebraska’s garden of agritourism is quite the mix. Yet it certainly has far more potential than what is currently being cultivated.
So, how do we make our agritourism garden grow? Since travel trends indicate that it takes a “destination location” type of attraction to pull in the tourists, then more regional and community-based cooperative agritourism efforts need to be developed. Another resource that could be promoted along with agritourism attractions is the authentic rural amenities such as the ‘mom and pop’ restaurants that serve great food at reasonable prices. As well, there are a number of dairies and feedlots, and other ag-related operations, that could be the best ‘living museums’ available for educational purposes. Nebraska has remote sites and beautiful scenery that cries out for a photographer, or hiker, or family NED (no electronic devices) getaway. Even local chambers of commerce and visitors bureaus could create a mutually beneficial country-city relationship by expanding their support and resources beyond city limits.

Examining existing legislation and proposing new laws supporting agritourism development is another need. For example, if any ‘new’ B&B (new construction or opening an existing home as a B&B) requires a complete fire sprinkler system or an exit from every bedroom, how many new B&B’s will be developed in Nebraska? If a farmer or rancher can be held totally liable for harm to a visitor because they stepped in a gopher hole, how many farmers and ranchers will want to take the risk – even if they could attract large numbers of tourists? You might say that Nebraska could add a little ‘fertilizer’ to their agritourism garden by moving the state’s legislative efforts forward to compete with other, more aggressive rural states which have adopted more supportive legislation and which are growing their agritourism revenue substantially.
However, we must extend a compliment to our State as well. Nebraska has put effort into promoting agritourism. The State’s travel and tourism office has designated individuals to assist residents with developing agritourism and ecotourism opportunities. It strongly endorses the mix of its top two leading industries – agricultural and tourism. It provides economic incentives by means of grants, and it hosts agritourism conferences to provide educational opportunities for those in the industry and to those considering offering agritourism activities. Nebraska, like most gardeners, possesses a real passion. A passion for promoting its resources, whether that be its people, the land, the special activities, its commercial attractions, or every combination thereof. And, with the main ingredients for agritourism abundant in Nebraska – the combination of agriculture and tourism, the work ethic of its residents, the support and promotion by State offices – it will only take a little more cultivating and favorable economic conditions for agritourism to really bloom and provide a bountiful harvest for Nebraska.

*Wheat Harvest*
A Drowsy Day
From the Calamus

by Bruce Switzer

In 2000 my wife, Sue Ann, and I found ourselves in circumstances which every Ranch family hopes for and which looked nearly impossible to achieve. Our son Adam, who had gone to college and worked off the ranch for several years, came home one weekend and wanted to stay.

We are located in Loup County in north central Nebraska. We are in the eastern edge of the Sandhills. Only fifteen years ago the acres on which we were struggling to operate on had supported five households, but with the sad ag prices of the new millennium Sue Ann and I were struggling to keep our heads above water. With Adam wanting to come home we had to squeeze out more income from the same amount of land. Being true Sandhillers and accustomed to the “hardships and privations of a sandy country” (direct quote from Sue Ann’s Grandmother Scherzberg) we listened with our heart and put our heads together to come up with a plan that would allow Adam to stay on the ranch.

Of course being young and energetic Adam had a plan of his own, and we jumped in with all the borrowing power we could muster, which wasn’t a lot at the time. Adam proposed using the natural resources we already had on the ranch to start a hunting business. He would remodel an existing house on the ranch for a lodge and sell guided hunts including pheasant, quail, prairie chicken, grouse, deer and turkey. Sue Ann used an example of a business plan from the SBA website and created a business plan for Calamus Outfitters. We approached our local bank with the plan and asked...
for $90,000. After some discussion and a few meetings our bank stated that Adam could sure buy cows with the $90,000 or he could start “that hunting business”. Having ranched my entire life I advised Adam I knew for sure that if he bought cows he could loose $120,000 in 2 to 3 years easy, so let’s go out on a limb and start the Outfitters.

As neither Adam nor I are handy with a hammer, Adam hired a local carpenter to renovate the house into a lodge. At night we did the destruction and cleanup and Russ, our carpenter, did the construction. Adam started to try and drum up some business. He attended several sport shows and had good success in booking several out-state hunting parties for the fall of 2001.

We hit a couple of detours in the summer of 2001; Adam got married on July 8 (good news) and on July 17 a tornado hit one of our pastures and killed 58 head of cattle and blew down 4 windmills (very bad news). But we figured that was the bad luck and everything would start to liven up as soon as the hunting started. However, September 11 hit and all of our booked hunters cancelled. We didn’t blame them. The country was going through a change which had everyone nervous. People were afraid to leave home. It was hard to fly with or without hunting guns. So the Outfitters was pretty dark in the fall of 2001.

We had a few fishermen dribble in that fall and the next spring, but summer came and a whole new world was at our door step; the family summer vacation. Grandma and Grandpa came with all the kids and grandkids and rented the whole lodge for the weekend. Families were searching for something simple that would allow them to spend time together. They wanted to ride horses and go down the river in our stock
tanks and tubes and have bon fires at night. Some of them wanted us to cook meals for them and they all said they enjoyed my attempt at cowboy poetry around the camp fire at night.

Most of these Grandmas and Grandpas came from, of all places, Omaha, and eastern Nebraska. They must have all known each other because each time someone else booked they said their friends has just stayed with us so they thought they would check us out as well. By 2003 we had renovated the machinery shop into the second lodge. It has 5 bedrooms, 6 bathrooms, kitchen and great room like the first lodge. We opened the second lodge in April and had it booked even before it was done.

With the completion of the second lodge, we had learned some important truths which we would have never appreciated if Adam hadn’t started the Outfitters. *The first truth being: we need Omaha.* Now you have to understand, first and foremost, I’m a rancher. I never thought I would have “city people” in my yard, my barn, my corrals, driving my cattle, riding my horses. But the fact of the matter is, those same city people have money. And they want to come to my place and pay me to experience the things I see and do everyday for a living. We had never been exposed to the reality of where the highest concentration of high paying jobs were, compared to the agricultural economy of rural Nebraska. Every dollar we can bring from eastern Nebraska to the western side of the state is benefiting us as well as our small town, our neighbors and the county.

*Truth two: we need to educate all of our new “city friends”.* We always have kittens to play with, baby calves to feed with a bottle, colts and horses to pet and ride. We welcome help from our guests in doing the
chores. But the help we get is usually the moms and dads who remember helping their grandparents do the chores on the farm. Most of the kids’ grandparents, now days, live in a condo. So the moms and dads are telling their children, “this is how we did it when we were your age”. Most kids are five generations from the farm. They don’t know where their food comes from. They don’t understand how being a good steward of the land is the best conservation program there is. Doing “chores” is a small way to open the door to rural culture as well as our values and priorities. The trail rides are one of the best opportunities to educate kids and mom and dad. *My favorite question to be asked is “what are these hills good for?”* A great opening to relate the story of the Sandhills, its history and future and why the Sandhills are important to the state.

Truth three: our way of life is unique. Guests can’t understand how we can live 90 miles from the nearest Wal-Mart. They are not sure why everyone waves when you meet them on the road. People here still will look you in the eye, shake your hand and ask where you are from. Guests can’t believe that the room isn’t locked, you can just go on in. If you need more fire wood for the camp fire after 8:00 p.m., just get it and tell us in the morning. I think people miss being somewhere like that.

Truth four: After all is said and done, I’m still a rancher. I still chase cows, check pastures, feed calves and ride my horse everyday. I am truly blessed. I have my son and family here on the ranch. The Outfitters has also allowed our daughter, her husband and family to come back home as well. Our four grandchildren are the fifth generation to live on this ranch. Adam, Sue Ann and I work together everyday and still look forward to getting up in the morning and planning the day’s activities. We might be what they
talk about when the family “farm” is discussed, even though we’re ranching cows and tourists. Families committed to working together everyday when quitting is not an option. Now I will have to admit that on some days Adam and Sue Ann have asked me if I didn’t need to go check some pastures. That is my cue to disappear for a while. I do need “my space”, as I have lived a fairly solitary life for the first 28 years of my marriage.

Truth five: Everyone has the ability to adapt to changes in their lifestyle and surroundings. Even ranchers. I still have neighbors who think we are crazy to have all these people on our ranch. But, we realize you do what you have to do to live where and how you want to live. The generation of revenue can help soften the discomfort of change. And I have not changed the important things I believe in; just the way I spend my extra time.

In 2005 we added 4 small cabins to the operation. In 2006 we opened the Valleyview General Store and in 2007 we built an indoor riding arena. We are still expanding the river trips, horse camps and, oh yes, we are doing a fair amount of hunting. The hunting has room to expand and probably would if we did more advertising. Most of our hunters are from out-of-state. Out-state monies are good, but it has been the people from eastern Nebraska that have paid the bills for the Calamus Outfitters.
Landscape in Evening Light
I plopped myself down on the couch and was flipping through channels when I came across the PBS presentation of Beef State. I immediately recognized one of the interviewees as my fellow social studies teacher at Omaha South High School. I also recognized a second name, the foreman of the Coffee Ranch in Sioux County, a family friend in the western end of the state. It wasn’t long before I realized that one of the program’s aims was to show the interconnectedness of the state and how our ability to work together in the past created one of the most powerful agricultural states in the country. That same interconnectedness also nurtured the burgeoning world-class city of Omaha.

In my life I’ve been able to experience all sides of Nebraska, from the dusty drought-stricken fields of the west to the concrete streets of Omaha. And it amazes me that so many Nebraskans are always eager to bring up the differences between east and west. My experiences have shown me that we are not that different. The education problems of rural and urban Nebraska are similar. Rural farmers don’t want to bear the burden of property taxes, much like the city of Omaha doesn’t want to bear the burden of educating low-income students without an increased suburban tax base. The struggle of the small business owner is easily seen in the empty storefronts in both small towns and Omaha, because both city and country folk are willing to sacrifice customer service and friendly conversation in favor of cheap, made-in-China products sold at the new big box stores that now dot the landscape.

Immigration issues are always an easy target on both sides of the state,
but the fact remains that without immigrants’ hard work and willingness to move to Nebraska, we would have a serious lack of labor and a negative population growth. And finally ensuring that new generations of Nebraskans remain in the state and continue to build one of the strongest agricultural regions in the world is vital to all our futures, no matter what side of the state you’re from.

I’ve seen the wide breadth of Nebraska; I’ve driven the Interstates, highways, roads and dirt trails. I’ve seen the diversity of the people, places and upbringings. I had 54 students in my entire graduating class in Western Nebraska and I now have nearly 30 students in my social studies classes that I teach in Omaha. I’ve seen Nebraska change, with some parts getting wealthier while other parts are barely surviving. And I’ve seen Nebraskan citizens stubbornly vote for a party and not for a change. But when I look at a map of the state, I don’t see the differences, I see the middle of America and I see a wide state with a common purpose.

**Traveling East to West**

I would like to say that my first memory of driving across the wide state of Nebraska is as clear and clean as the windshield is when you start a trip. But to be honest the nearly 25 years that have passed have muddled my memory a bit. However, as I age towards 30, I am slowly beginning to realize that my first trip provided the roots for my belief in the need for a Nebraska that values both its urban and rural surroundings. A Nebraska that understands the needs of both farmers and professionals. A Nebraska that cultivates small and large business. A Nebraska that realizes the importance
of a quality education for everyone. A Nebraska that shares its wealth across the entire state.

There I was, sitting in the front seat, barely tall enough to look out the passenger window, let alone over the dashboard and out through the windshield. But it didn’t matter. I was sitting as tall as I could, I was on my very first road trip, proud as could be because it was just my old man and I... no brothers or sister, no mom; just my dad, me and 486 miles of Nebraska roads.

I’ve long forgotten why we made the trip from Omaha to Morrill, but I have never let slip those first memories of seeing the rolling Sandhills, eyeing Chimney Rock over the horizon, traveling through Mitchell Pass and spying the tunnels of Scottsbluff Monument or thinking how good I must have been to get my dad to take me through those passageways.

And while it would be a few more years before that first memory of Morrill, NE and the 486 miles that came to separate my two homes made an enduring impression on my life and beliefs, it was slowly becoming obvious that my father was beginning to turn me into more than just a resident of Omaha. He was molding me into a true citizen of the great state of Nebraska.

**Dundee Days**

I was born during the last month of the 1970’s and spent the first 4 years of my life living in a small bungalow across the street from Dundee Elementary in the city of Omaha. During this time of avocado-colored appliances, wheat-trimmed Corelle dishes, large polyester collars and even bigger glasses; our family took many walks through the tree-lined neighborhood streets. Sometimes we made it to the soda fountain
at Cris Rexall; other times we moseyed over to Dundee Village. But what I remember to this day was the friendliness of the people; they were always willing to shut off their lawn mowers in mid-pass to ask how your day was going or comment on the weed-like growth of your children and their yard.

In the winter of 1983, we moved only five blocks north and it became increasingly apparent that as we got closer to the heart of Dundee, the community ties and neighborhood bonds became stronger. This was especially true as the 51st block of Webster Street began to be overrun by small children with their parents always willing to lend a hand or a sharp eye to make sure mischief was kept to a minimum.

During the late 80’s, my boundaries expanded and, as my bike became my main mode of transportation, I became more than willing to travel to the local store fronts, i.e. to belly up for some phosphates at Cris’s, to air up a low bike tire at Abe’s 66 or to explore the off-limits ravine and storm sewers along Happy Hollow. During this time, I began to realize the value of small business and their desire to provide service to their customers no matter what their size.

As the 1980’s came to a close and the years of integrated busing in Omaha began to wane, I spent my time on the 20-minute bus ride to North Omaha thinking and staring out the opaque bus window at the broken panes of the projects and the knee-high grass of the abandoned homes and empty lots. The lack of community involvement, dilapidated storefronts and their effect on the residents and my fellow classmates concerned me. But on another front, I also spent those there-and-back-again daily bus rides trying
to grasp and understand the impending collapse of my parents’ marriage and what it would mean for our family.

My father had recently been “called back” to Morrill to help with the family bank and try to successfully steer it into the 1990’s. With his lengthy absences and our summer vacations spent in western Nebraska, it became increasingly clear that supporting two households nearly 500 miles apart was proving very difficult. In the spring of 1991, a day’s drive and the Mountain Time Zone split our family and guaranteed that I would learn all the best gas stations and rest stops along Nebraska’s I-80, as well as become a member of the frequent flyer citation club with the state troopers.

Morrill Memories

My clearest memory of Morrill, NE would have to be the coffee-pot-like water tower standing near the center of town. Painted a now faded silver and black, the structure prominently displays the name of the town for all to see and is visible from more than a mile away. It now competes for blue sky with the recently striped microwave tower and the barely standing grain silos of the feed plant. Dust, rust and a few empty storefront windows decorate the two-block main street, while generational family names decorate signage throughout the town.

The town itself could easily be forgotten as you travel the nearly two-miles of Highway 26 that bisects the village at 25 mph. Nothing really out of the ordinary sets Morrill apart from any of the other hundreds of small Nebraska towns that compete for the ever-elusive population increase. Nothing that is, except for the fact that Morrill is about as far away from Omaha as geographically possible while still remaining in the state. It’s
Nebraska all right, even though being only 8 miles from the Wyoming border it sometimes feels like Wyobraska.

During the early 1990’s I spent summers in Morrill, and my father always made sure there was work for my brothers, sister and me. And while my older brother was eager to jump into the family banking business, I took a more blue-collar path.

At the age of 12, I was “hired” to whitewash a barn (I’m pretty sure my father arranged this, as he did most of my early summer jobs). Not quite a country mile south of our home, I solemnly worked with a small radio at my side – scrapping, painting and sometimes walking the dirt road to paint what then seemed like the biggest barn ever. I spent the next two summers fixing up and painting repossessed homes. During my final summer before high school, I landed a more-than-fulltime job irrigating nearly 400 acres of corn and soybeans, despite knowing next to nothing about farming. By the end of the summer, I was faced with the biggest decision of my then-very-short life.

Near the last week of that summer, my freshman year of high school was looming, and I was soon to be rid of the seven-day-a-week drudgery that taught me the tenacity of farming in western Nebraska and the stubbornness of farmers who refused to give up despite the lack of precipitation. In the face of these three months of intense character building, I had fallen in love with the land and was beginning to contemplate leaving all I had known and ending the comfort of cultivated friendships. I was contemplating leaving the city for the country.

It was down to my last hours when the Central time zone was finally calling my mother to bed that I finally made the call to tell her I had
registered for high school in Morrill, NE and would not be returning to Omaha to attend Central High School with my friends.

**Becoming a Conduit of Nebraska**

One of my main reasons for attending a rural high school was the accelerated shop program that included a construction class that built a house every year. While my first year of secondary education was more of a survival guide for city mouse vs. country mouse, I soon was able to weave my way into the lifelong friendships of a rural high school.

By my junior year I was playing C-1 football, not because I was good (athleticism does not run in the family) but because it was expected. I was slowly working my way into the bonds of friendship that high school forges. And I was driving to Omaha nearly every month to visit my mom and see my friends and the city life I had left behind. *I didn’t realize it at the time, but I had become a chameleon of Nebraska life, able to blend in either setting.* But more importantly, I was learning to not only value city and rural life; but to appreciate the nuances and needs of both.

As an avid, youthful reader of the Omaha World-Herald and an inquisitive listener – I frequently heard farmers talk about the difficulties of property taxes on rural Nebraskan populations and how little of that money came back west. I also experienced the educational and vocational struggles of inner city Omaha. I witnessed the decline of both rural and urban small businesses. And I discovered underlying currents of rural resentment and urban indifference that for too long had festered along the geographic divide of the high plains.
With this mind-set and these experiences, I packed my mind, body and belongings off to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to study to become a high school social studies teacher and a journalist. I had spent the last seven years of my life logging nearly 30,000 miles a year driving two used cars into the ground and traversing nearly every Nebraskan road and, by golly, I had some opinions to share with my fellow students and Nebraskans.

In my junior year, I applied to work at the fifth largest newspaper in the state and one of the top college newspapers in the country. I was full of opinions and the Daily Nebraskan was more than willing to nurture my desire to share my urban and rural Nebraskan perspectives.

Living the Good Life

The most profound effect of my secondary education was the accelerated high school shop program that taught a handful of students the life long and hands-on skills that every homeowner should know. The four-years I spent working at UNL’s Landscape Service’s were more enlightening than the ten semesters spent in the college classroom. And I think it was my statewide experiences paired with my blue-collar work habits and my desire to argue that landed me one of the most powerful jobs on campus - opinion columnist, which allowed me to not only develop my thoughts and beliefs but share them with more than 25,000 students and temporary residents of Nebraska. All of this made me who I am today, more importantly, living on both sides of Nebraska, as well as traveling throughout the United States, has allowed me to appreciate what we have in this state and to strive to make it a better place for all our state’s citizens.

Today my wife and I live in the Dundee neighborhood of Omaha. Nearly
every day we walk the dog past the two houses I grew up in. We also walk past the hardware store, drug store and grocery store that couldn’t survive the likes of Home Depot, Walgreen’s and Wal-Mart, and we’re trying to establish a strong community bond, much like that of rural Nebraska, amongst my neighbors. I don’t travel back to Morrill as much as I used to, maybe five or six times a year, but every time I do go back to western Nebraska it seems that I see fewer small businesses and more big box stores.

My teaching job at Omaha South has put me on the front lines education and immigration, and put me in the backyard – the stockyards – of one of the biggest economic engines this state has ever seen. And more than ever, I see the need for the citizens of Nebraska, and more importantly the lawmakers, to bring our state closer together and address the fundamental problems of a state divided by distance, opportunity, money and population. If we are all to build on the success of the past and take Nebraska into the 21st century as an agricultural powerhouse united with the new jobs of tomorrow that Omaha is creating we need to embrace our interconnectedness. We need to cultivate our small businesses, nurture our children’s education and share with all of Nebraska the bounty of our state.

*Summer Veranda*
Sodhouse Family
Hi, my name is **Jordan Popp**. My age is eight and I am in grade three. My Mom brings me to school every day. When I get to school I get to write on a chalk board. I use a three line chalk tool.

I like to live on a ranch because I can drive the 4-wheeler.

I live by the South Loup River. Sometimes we go swimming or wading in the river. I often go to the river fishing with my family. I really like living on a ranch.

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My name is **Caleb Smith** and I am in the third grade. I have one sister here. I like going to a rural school because I like to see the animals at school and on my way to school.

At show and tell we have had crawdads, hedgehogs, cats, dogs, sheep, butterflies, rabbits, praying mantis, and fish. My sister, Hannah, brought her pet raccoon. Carrie brought chickens and Jordan brought a spider.

I like living on a ranch because I can hunt, fish, and go hiking. My brother and I hunt rabbits. Then we take them home and eat them. When we go fishing we eat the fish that are big enough to keep and let the others go. When I go hiking I look for bugs and deer antlers, and other animals. Living on a ranch lets me do what I like to do.
Hi, my name is **Carrie Jones**. I go to a country school named Round Hill. I have one person in my class and she is me. There are 5 people in the whole school. I like the school because we get to play in the sand box as a reward.

Sometimes we go on field trips. My favorite field trip was the visit to the Henry Doorly Zoo. It was fun because we got to go swimming with my classmates. On another field trip to Stuhr Museum we made jelly and candles and corn bread. I like school because I get to go on field trips with my friends.

Hi! My name is **Charmayne Popp**. I am 11 years old and I go to a country school. We have 5 kids in our school – one 4th grader, two 3rd graders, two 5th graders.

Round Hill School is a one room school 15 miles from the nearest town. When my Mom brings me the 7 miles from home and back we practice spelling words and I do my homework.

We never know what to expect during the day at school. One day the boys saw a snake while they were playing a game, and our teacher killed it. Another day while in math class we saw a cattle drive, and some of the cows came into the school yard.

My favorite part of the day is lunch time. We bring our own lunches and warm them in the microwave. Sometimes we bring something to share with everyone in school.
I really like going to Round Hill because when I go to school I get to see my friends that have always gone to school with me.

Hi! My name is **Hannah Smith**. I am 10 years old, and I go to a country school that is 2 miles from my home. I have a little brother, Caleb, who is in the same classroom. Sometimes Caleb and I walk to school, and our three dogs often follow.

I am in the 5th grade with my one classmate, Charmayne. For our six years of school we have been the only students in our class and have had the same teacher.

I like going to Round Hill because I can bring my pets to school for show and tell. My favorite part of school is going to the library.

Our family lives on a ranch and we raise a lot of cattle. When I get home from school I help my Dad move cows on my horse, Sylvia. During lambing season I take care of the ewes with the new born lambs and help my Mom band and tag the older lambs. If there is any time after chores I ride my horse for fun or play with my lambs. There are a lot of fun things to do when you live on a ranch!
Round Hill School District 164, Custer County, Nebraska was organized in 1886.

- **Enrollment in 1886:** 10 students
- **Range of grade levels in early 1990s:** Kindergarten through twelfth
- **Alumni Career Achievement:**
  - Chief Flight Engineer of Johnson Controls
  - Recorded country music songwriter
  - Muscle equine therapist
  - Architect
  - Hewlett Packard Administrator
  - Educators
  - Doctor of Physical Therapy
  - Professionals
  - Businessmen
  - Ranchers and Farmers
- **Enrollment in past 15 years has fluctuated from 5 to 20 students**

Round Hill School has been serving children in this area for over 123 years. Only its students and alumni can tell you the advantages of living in rural Nebraska and going to a country school. The present students attending Round Hill come from strong families. The children’s parents are intact, as are their aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Most of the mothers are stay at home moms, and are a large part of the success in educating these students. The students come to school ready to learn.

Observing the classroom you will see the natural mentoring settings. The younger students benefit from the older students, and the older students’ education is reinforced through helping the younger students. In
addition to mentoring, efficient study skills are developed through the one room multi-grade environment.

The students also have experience speaking in public as well as acting. Many of the graduates from the school have gone on to local high schools and have been leading actors in the productions as well as speech medalists.

One teacher from the local high school who has had several Round Hill graduates said, “I can always count on the students of Round Hill knowing the material as well as being respectful, hardworking and dependable students”. These students have also been members of the National Honor Society, state athletic qualifiers, and state speech qualifiers.

The families of the community have appreciated Round Hill's location. At the present time, two of the families would travel 23 miles to send their children to the nearest town school. They live 7 miles from Round Hill.

Not only do the students have high academic achievements, but they learn life skills that serve them well. You will find the alumni and students of Round Hill to be responsible, hard-working people, with strong family ties.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The Rural Development Commission would like to take this opportunity to thank the authors who took time to share their thoughts for this edition. Authors are listed alphabetically by last name.

Elizabeth Barrett, Gothenburg Times, Gothenburg, Nebraska

Sarah Graham, teacher, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

Carrie Jones, student, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

Mark Karpf, teacher at Omaha South, Omaha, Nebraska

Marge Lauer, Executive Director of KAAPA and Country Adventures, Kearney, Nebraska

Cindi McCullough, teacher, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

John Osgood, principal, C.L. Jones Middle School, Minden, Nebraska

Charmayne Popp, student, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

Jordon Popp, student, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

Sandy Scofield, Director, University of Nebraska Rural Initiative, Lincoln, Nebraska

Dan Shundoff, President, CEO and Founder of Intellicom, Kearney, Nebraska

Caleb Smith, student, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

Hannah Smith, student, Round Hill School rural Custer County, Nebraska

Bruce Switzer, owner of Calamus Outfitters, Burwell, Nebraska

Dr. Weldon Sleight, Dean, University of Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture, Curtis, Nebraska
ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The Museum of Nebraska Art (MONA) in Kearney has graciously collaborated with the Rural Development Commission on artwork for this volume.

Works in this edition are listed alphabetically by the title of the art.

*A Cornfield* by Marion Canfield Smith

- oil on canvas, c. 1920-1922
- Gift of Anonymous Donor
- Adopt-a-Painting (conservation) by MONA Guild
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

*A Drowsy Day* by Elizabeth Tuttle Holsman

- oil on canvas, 1915
- Gift of Class of 1915, Nebraska State Normal School (now University of Nebraska Kearney)
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

*Catlin’s North American Indian Portfolio, Buffalo Hunt, Chase – No. 5* by George Catlin

- lithograph, c. 1844
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

*Dash* by James Eisentrager

- oil, 1966
- Gift of Nebraska Arts Council
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

*Harvest Festival, Brownville, Nebraska* by Augustus Dunbier

- oil on canvas, c. 1950s
- Gift of Elizabeth Miller
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

*Hoops* by Les Bruning

- steel, 1990
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection
**Landscape in Evening Light** by James Butler

lithograph, 1986  
Gift of the Artist & Kathleen Butler  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Picnic in the Park, 1944** by Terence R. Duren (1904-1968)

oil on canvas, c. 1944  
Gift of Eloise (Dierks) Andrews Kruger and Miller & Paine/R.E. Campbell Collection  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Roberts and Uncle Pete** by Mary Beth Schmidt Fogarty

pastel, 2000  
Gift of Mary Beth Schmidt Fogarty Estate  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Sodhouse Family** by David Routon

oil on canvas, n.d.  
Museum Purchase made possible by Cliff Art Endowment  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Summer Veranda** by Carol Pettit

oil, 1992  
Gift of the Artists in memory of Robert E. & Lois M. Downing  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**The Overland Pony Express** by Unknown Artist

wood engraving published in *Harper’s Weekly*, November 2, 1867  
Gift of Larry Peterson and Gary Zaruba  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**The World’s Granary** by Dwight Kirsch

serigraph (edition of 75), 1942  
Gift of Nebraska Department of Education  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Untitled (landscape)** by Miriam (Mim) Worlock

watercolor, n.d.  
Gift of Jeanne Erickson Johnson  
Museum of Nebraska Art Collection
**Untitled (Statue of Liberty)** by Grant Reynard

- pen & ink, c. 1944
- Gift of Jane Wilcox
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Valley Farm** by Gladys M. Lux

- watercolor, 1935
- Gift of Harry & Zellamae Hoffman
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

**Wheat Harvest** by Aaron Pyle

- tempera on board, 1968
- Museum Purchase made possible by Marilyn F. Belschner Arts Endowment Fund
- Museum of Nebraska Art Collection

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**MONA**

The Museum of Nebraska Art (MONA), home of Nebraska’s official state art collection, is the only museum dedicated to telling the story of Nebraska through the art of Nebraska. See art representing the work of artist-explorers like George Catlin; early Nebraskans Robert Henri and J. Laurie Wallace; modern era artists Grant Reynard and John Falter; and artists of today. MONA also displays a collection of works by John James Audubon focusing on indigenous Nebraska wildlife. The permanent collection contains over 5,000 works by artists of regional, national, and international importance. MONA is housed in a 1911 Renaissance revival building listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

To learn more about the Museum or to see more information on the artists visit us on the web at monet.unk.edu/mona.
ABOUT THE NEBRASKA RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

The Rural Development Commission was created by the Nebraska Legislature in 2003 as a voice for rural Nebraska communities in the creation of laws, policies, and other initiatives that affect economic, civic, and social conditions, and foster cooperation and understanding among all agencies and organizations, public and private.

Commissioners are:

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Scot Blehm, Lincoln
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Christine Peterson, Lincoln
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“The Rural Development Commission advocates for effective development in rural Nebraska.”

For more information about the commission, visit www.ruralnebraska.info.

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