

A Tale of Two Towns: The Significance of a School to a Rural Community

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The great majority of America's population now resides in urban/suburban locales and consequently most Americans don't struggle with the question of whether their community can, or should, maintain its own school. Nevertheless, this question continues to confront many rural dwellers in all states. What follows is an action research project intended to examine the consequences of the decision to keep or remove a school from a rural community. The subjects in this study are two Kansas towns that exist a mere five miles from one another. The town that kept its school continues to sustain itself, while the town that lost its school has almost disappeared.

Waldo and Luray, Kansas, are two small communities that have both existed over a hundred years just a few miles apart along rural Highway 18. The pair is fairly typical for rural Kansas. They both served as hubs for area farmers for many years, and each had their own schools, banks, churches, stores, doctors, auto and tractor repair businesses, and other similar kinds of enterprise. The two towns were established by hearty pioneers in a day when five miles was a tiring distance on horseback, and a lengthy journey by carriage. In the last half of the nineteenth century, it didn't seem unusual for two towns to exist so close together.

The circumstances that make an examination of these two little communities so interesting now is that one has declined in population to the point that most all its businesses and services are gone. Worse yet, it has lost its school. It is clinging to existence with the steadfast commitment of a handful of proud citizens who don't want to lose their town. The other community continues on in a kind of steady state, maintaining a more sizable and somewhat consistent population. It works to keep its businesses and schools going. It is surviving modern life on the Kansas plains as well as it can.

The contrast between the two communities begs the question, "why is one town surviving, and the other nearing its end?" The answers aren't simple, but there is clearly a history of indicators that might be seen as 'tipping points' for both towns.

Waldo, Kansas – A Town Lost

The smallest of these Kansas towns, Waldo, was once a thriving rural community located in the agriculturally important northwestern part of the state, in Russell County. The little town is surrounded by rich, black dirt. Area farmland is still highly valued for excellent crop production, especially wheat. The lands around Waldo are also noted for prolific livestock production. The community of Waldo is publicly characterized, as most small towns are (Flora, Flora, & Spears, 1992), by its economic base, upon which the local economy is typically dependent. Waldo originated as a farming community and a railroad town. The railroad, no longer making a stop in Waldo, was once crucial to connecting local crop production to the larger economy. Farming continues around the community, but agricultural policy favoring large-scale operations have driven out literally hundreds of small family farms that once characterized the region.

Visiting Waldo today, it is quickly apparent that the town seems is barely holding on to any semblance of prosperity. Most evident is that its streets and school yards are void of the kind of day to day bustling activity that is needed, and more so expected, in any vibrant community.

Obviously, much has changed for the once prosperous Waldo over the last century. When one stands in the middle of Waldo these days, there is a definite silence – oddly, it is the kind of peaceful silence very often coveted in today’s hectic world amongst a good many city-dwellers. The only noticeable noise in Waldo comes from a rare passing car or truck on the nearby highway, or possibly from a barking dog sending up an unanswered alarm somewhere in the distance. The fact is that there are no children to be seen playing; only a handful of folks working in their yard or garden; and there are no groups of straw-hatted farmers talking to friends or relatives in front of the traditional small town gathering place – the post office. The post office, while still operating, looks to be deserted. In fact, there is almost no sound at all in Waldo. It is almost as if the town has passed on, in a whisper.

It wasn’t always this way. The record shows that in the early 1900’s, Waldo boasted a population of 300 (Bradshaw, 1914). The community’s greatest source of pride in those days was its sturdy, state-of-the-art for the time, limestone block school, which boasted a state accredited high school program. This beautiful, well-constructed, school building intended to last a century or longer, was destined to serve the town’s youth only for the next four decades. It was essentially destroyed by “modernization.” During the first dozen or so years in the post WWII era, state and national leadership decided schools needed to be more compact, and, of course, fewer in number because bigger was clearly better. Thousands of fabulous school buildings,

similar to Waldo's, around the nation, were leveled to make room for new one story, flat roof, concrete block buildings having too many windows. School consolidation became a socially expensive political football, and continues to be so to this day.

In its heyday, Waldo had an active downtown district that boasted numerous businesses serving not only the town's residents, but the surrounding farm and ranch population. The city had a sound bank; a well-stocked hardware store; a good-sized lumber yard; an adequate general store; a drug store; a post office; two barber shops and many beauty shops; several churches; and other indicators of prosperity. The community even maintained its own system of electric lights and waterworks. And, of course, the railroad stopped in Waldo, delivering passengers and picking up wheat and other grains and products raised in the fields around the community.

At one time, and for many years, Waldo had quite a number of single family homes, many of which were located on hard surfaced streets adjacent to the school. Writers recording life in the early days spoke of Waldo as a slice of a paradise on the plains. The residents considered it to be 'one of the best towns on earth' (Bradshaw, 1914). The city sat in a seemingly perfect location, guarded by scattered hills and buttes, and wealthy with a considerable amount of fertile open farming ground that was perfect for crop and livestock production. And, crucial to the survival of all, water was readily available from accessible wells and nearby Wolf Creek.

The town of Waldo prospered as its people prospered. Hard working folks made Waldo their home. The early Kansas settlers found and then embraced what Daniel Kemmis described as the "good life" (1995) waiting for them in this growing community until the days following the Second World War. At that point, things began to change. An even better "good life" was offered by new forms of mass media. America's future would be urban, according to those who began to market messages for the nation's consumers. Young ex-soldiers and sailors who had seen the larger world during the war increasingly fell prey to the fast living and quick money that big city life seemed to offer. The family farm came with accompanying stereotypes of hicks, yokels, and country bumpkins. So, many left.

Today, as compared to better times, everything has changed for Waldo. The town now languishes, in what may appear to any passerby on the two-lane highway that runs along its boundary, in utter despair. Like hundreds of other rural towns in Kansas and similarly, thousands across the nation, the disintegration of this once prosperous farming community seems to now be nearly complete.

There are virtually no jobs available in the town. There are few families still living in the boundaries of the city. The downtown business district has literally vanished, and the few buildings still standing along the main street are boarded up or falling in. Their roofs are collapsing and their paint is long gone. Weeds have overcome the sidewalks. There are no retail shops left on Main Street. The town's thoroughfares are nearly deserted and the houses that once stood conveniently around the streets surrounding the school have mostly been demolished, leaving behind only empty lots, littered with rusting, abandoned vehicles and machinery.

Other than the Sunday morning gathering at the town's last surviving church, and meetings of the combined Lion's Club of Waldo and the tiny neighboring town of Natoma, the only activity to be seen is around a small, in-home, beauty shop, The Waldo Wave, which still draws some of its clientele from the remaining residents. There are also the occasional comings and goings of people delivering or picking up the mail in the town's small limestone post office. There are only a handful of well-kept homes left in the community, with the vast majority either abandoned, or appearing to be abandoned from years of deferred maintenance. A few nice homes still stand, but most of these are owned by people who work in other communities, making a daily commute for their wages. Not surprisingly, 44 of the city's currently standing 53 housing units were built prior to 1939, as noted in the 2000 Census.

The "new" school, built after the original limestone structure was razed in 1957, was not as fortunate as its predecessor in terms of longevity or service. It has now been abandoned as a school for several decades, closing its doors after a too-short lifespan in the mid 1970's as just one more unfortunate casualty to the community-deadly school consolidation movement. The school's playgrounds are empty. Its flat asphalt roof has been replaced with sheeted tin, and the leaking structure is now allowing the outside weather inside much of the remaining building, hastening the decay of the old slate blackboards in classrooms and hallways that once were filled with legions of joyful children and a host of dedicated teachers. Windows in many former classrooms are now shattered, and beer cans, trash, and other forms of refuse litter the floors of a building that had proudly served to educate generations of the community's youth.

The school's gymnasium serves as a part of a community center now, but it too is in poor repair. How long it will continue to stand is a debatable question. There are no funds for repair, and no one to perform even the most basic maintenance needs for the dilapidated structure. The gym is still sometimes used to auction off the remnants of people's lives as they sadly leave the

town. There are few younger people left. Many of the remaining older residents are leaving for nursing homes or to seek the care of younger family members who live elsewhere.

Of particular note, and possibly the most compelling indication of just how bad things have become in Waldo, is the state of existence of an old wooden plaque that rests on an entry wall, just inside the school's gym. The plaque, created a half-century ago, memorialized a number of young men from Waldo who had left their home town with a common enthusiasm. They had gone off to fight alongside the men and women of the 'greatest generation' to win World War II. The men who were memorialized by the plaque never returned to Waldo. They were lost in the war that took them to foreign soil or deep oceans, far from their homes, families, and friends in Waldo.

Telling yet another equally dismal tale, the plaque is now standing alone on that old gym wall. It's once shinny, hand finished wood frame, is now covered with dust and dirt, much the same as the slowly decaying school gymnasium and little town surrounding it. The plaque suffers from inattention, seemingly forgotten by those remaining or those gone from the village that at an earlier time cared enough to hang the tiny monument to honor the men. The plaque seems, unfortunately, to be a symbol for what has happened not only to Waldo, but to other similar rural communities across the country. The plaque recognized brave young sailors, soldiers, or airmen - the cream of the crop of a once-prosperous community. Now, in its present, unkempt, condition, the plaque speaks quiet volumes to a greater sadness and loss that extends beyond those precious lives – it seems to say “this community, like so many others like it, has lost its way.”

The mayor of Waldo was interviewed at length in the spring of 2005. He mentioned the town's election that year. Not a single candidate stepped up to run for the positions of mayor, or for the city council. At the time of the election, however, the mayor was re-elected by write-in ballot, as were all the city councilmen. It seems the reason no one ran, as reported by the mayor, was that there was a \$5 filing fee. Since everyone voting knew the incumbents, it seemed like an unnecessary expense.

There is a final note about Waldo from the mayoral interview. |When he was asked about the prospect of out-of-towners moving to Waldo to re-energize the community, the mayor responded that there was little interest among current residents for that to happen. He said they had some recent experience with someone from California who thought they would come in and

clean up on cheap real estate. The plan apparently didn't work out for the Californians and they apparently lost money and eventually abandoned the project. The mayor said, 'you know, we aren't too interested in those people – they just think differently.' There appears to be a general malaise among the remaining residents of Waldo – an acceptance of what is, and what will eventually be.

These are hard times in Waldo's history. The current population of 48 people is predominately retired, with a median age of 62 as reported in the 2000 Census. The average income was at or below the poverty level, with full time working males averaging \$26,250. The average household size was 1.25. Waldo's dedicated mayor, in an interview during the spring of 2005, reported that there has been a steady decline in population, but optimistically added that twins were due to one of the city's families. Of further interest is the fact that in the last census only two of the city's residents reported being engaged in any farming-related occupation.

Clearly, the Waldo mayor would be a ready target for author Thomas Frank, who attempted to explain Kansans for the benefit of the rest of the nation. He speaks sharply about those who are always off in the "wrong direction" in his recent book, *What's the Matter With Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004). Frank is critical of those in the state who have set their sights on issues such as "the nation's purity, good wages, fair play in farm country, the fate of the small town."(p.68). It is the stated view that there is something wrong with worrying about life in rural Kansas (farm country) that threatens the possibility of finding ways to address problems that are contributing to the demise of the rural culture, not just in Kansas, but across the country in all rural areas.

The gnawing truth is that since the end of WWII, Waldo and so many other Kansas communities have somehow lost their vibrancy, and their hope. Like so many thousands of its sister cities across the nation, Waldo has slowly become, as Osha Gray Davidson described (1990), a "rural ghetto."

Luray – A Town Found

Just five minutes east of Waldo is the town of Luray. Founded by buffalo hunters in the 1870's, Luray has a long and proud history. After visiting nearby Waldo, driving the streets of Luray is considerably more hopeful. The town is well kept - nearly pristine, in fact, with only a few minor exceptions. Houses are painted, yards are manicured, and the city park is in manicured

condition. The park includes a nicely maintained gazebo, basketball courts, and tennis courts. Attention is being paid to the quality of life in Luray, as well as the quality of the city's infrastructure.

Activity in downtown Luray focuses on its tiny grocery store, which appears to be a natural meeting place. Next door to the grocery is a fairly new community center that was donated by a generous, long-time resident – a true citizen of Luray. His contribution has clearly added to the current vibrant character of the town. The building is at least symbolic of a town that intends to endure in spite of the challenges. Across the street from the civic center is a modern bank building, proudly advertising and providing its services to residents. Two well-oiled bars also line the main street, if that is any indication of prosperity.

The fact is that nearly every building in Luray seems to be considered important by its populace. The vast majority of the homes are occupied, and the shops along Main Street are generally open. There seems to be an ongoing sense of community pride in the condition and associated future of the town. Luray's school has a prominent place of importance in the town. Setting on a knoll just off the main highway, the building is the first large structure that greets visitors. It has a memorable, unique, architectural design. The building is as serviceable today as the day it was first opened a half century ago, as it has been meticulously maintained. The grounds are trimmed and manicured, and the playground is up-to-date and obviously well used by the city's children every day of the week. School busses are parked nearby in a neat row alongside the building; brightly colored street signs indicate 'school zone' to passing vehicles; and crosswalks for students are freshly painted. Showing the kind of broad community collaboration and connectivity needed for small town prosperity, the city park adjoins the school, hosting tennis and basketball courts, a shelter house, and other facilities to serve the community.

Some degree of concern, however, may be revealed by an examination of recent Census data (2000) showing steady population decline in Luray. Perhaps it is a town on the cusp of change. Census figures show the population in 2000 as 203 people. The Census of 1990 indicated a population of 261. Even more worrisome is the fact that the data revealed only three children in the preschool and kindergarten population. According to the 2000 Census data, there were 52 resident children in the kindergarten through twelfth grade school. The average age was 49.3 years and nearly a third of the population is over the age of 65. Six residents have master's degrees, while forty-four people have some college background. In 2000, the average income

was \$25,208, as compared to a national average of \$41,994. The average household size was 1.45.

During a recent interview with an older resident of the Luray community, she responded to the question “Are you a native?” with “Oh, my no! I just moved here in 1948.” This sense of being a newcomer was, incredibly, still evident after 57 years in the area. From a ‘newcomer’s perspective,’ she honestly saw the energy in the community coming from two sources. First, she noted there was the “new” grocery store in town that had recently opened. She relayed that the owner has worked to provide many sustaining necessities for the community, including a small deli, a limited hardware section, a video-rental counter, and a pizza parlor – all existing within the confines of one small room in the building. The grocery store was clearly attempting to fulfill many retail needs of the community, reaching far beyond mere milk and bread. Of significant note is the fact that in 2005, the store owner was successful in winning an approximate \$10,000 Renewable Energy Systems and Efficiency Grant, matched by an additional \$30,000, to help pay for substantial improvements to the business. Secondly, the interviewee proudly stated that Luray ‘still had its school.’ She was clear in her feelings that the school, its classrooms, and its activities all combined to provide a sustaining focal point for Luray’s populace. She said, “We have good kids and good people here. We care about each other.”

Observations and Conclusions

Noted rural community historian and advocate, Paul Theobald (1995), stated that the history of the farm culture in the Midwest is clear in its demonstration that the settlement dynamics were due primarily high rates of mobility. They had the desire to move to, and maintain lifestyles, in rural places. The eventual departure of a vast citizenry from those formally prosperous farming communities isn’t surprising. Coupled with the generational experience so powerfully impacted by the power, size, and success of the American military in WWII, the innate migratory propensity and growing mobility of those populations in the plains, made the final decision to move on to more urban, industrialized centers almost impossible to prevent.

Waldo and Luray are towns that are typical of countless small, rural communities that exist, not only on the plains, but throughout the nation. These two towns were interesting to compare because of their geographical proximity, with a mere five miles separating the two on the same blacktop highway in the Smoky Hills of Kansas. It was the stark contrast between the

two communities and their closeness that caused an interest in investigating the reason why one community sustained itself and the other did not.

One town managed to hold on to its school, its bank, and the grocery store. These crucial establishments provided employment for people in the community, as well as necessities required for daily life. In addition to these businesses, there are observable entities that provide employment and services. The grain elevator is busy, a thriving picture of the agriculture-based area. In Waldo, the only apparent place of business is the beauty shop: The Waldo Wave. Luray goes so far as to advertise community celebrations and events on the Internet and in their weekly newspaper. The newspaper serves as a reminder that each resident is part of a large community-family.

TOWN	School	Bank	Post Office	Grain Elevator	Main Street Businesses	Restaurant	Grocery	Hair Salon	Newspaper
Luray	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Waldo			X					X	

The above chart begs the question – why the marked difference between two towns, so close to one another? When asked this specific question, the mayor of Waldo expressed his belief that three major, historical events made the difference. First, the grain elevator closed due to new technology that was put into place in Luray in the 1950s. This new technology was not embraced in Waldo and subsequently led to the closure of an outdated building and operation. Secondly, the owner of the local bank married a prominent citizen from Luray. Following the marriage, he moved the bank out of Waldo to Luray. His only parting concession to Waldo was that he institutionalized an annual fish-fry to help maintain his Waldo customer base. The third and final significant event was, of course, the closing of the Waldo School. Without the school, the community lost a crucial focal point for daily life, and accordingly, it lost its hope. This is one glaringly apparent difference between Luray and Waldo – the fact that Luray still has its school means it still has its lifeblood. Although the school has consolidated, the agreement to do so allowed the Luray building to remain as an elementary school.

Another important point that should be made is the fact that Waldo lost several of its fine young men to World War II. In a town the size of Waldo, the loss was substantial. It is entirely possible that had those eight individuals survived and returned home, all or at least some may have set a very different course for the future of Waldo. Thus, the long-forgotten memorial plaque in Waldo's gym serves as a statement about this – about the loss of hope and possibility.

It might be concluded from these observations that a number of seemingly minor events, along with the obvious trauma caused by closing down the town's school forever, made all the difference between Waldo and Luray's continued prosperity. Combined, they serve as major catalysts that led to the ability of one community to sustain itself, while the other seems to have met its end. The tale of these two small towns, one lost, and one found, seems to be informed by the way the residents of each community managed to respond to the ebb and flow of events both large and small. These events, and the decisions the residents of these two towns made, were the "tipping points" that combined to change the destiny of each.

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