

Cattle, commerce build the good life

By **KIRBY ROSS**
Main Street Media

Phillips County, bisected by highways U.S. 36, U.S. 183, K-383 and K-9, is holding its own during tough economic times, due to its agriculture, manufacturing and fuel refining industries.

Because of the strength of its economy and its active commitment to funding and otherwise supporting local economic development, in 2006 Phillips County was selected to be a showcase model for reversing negative trends that have been overtaking rural America.

Spearheaded by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation, Kansas State University and the Huck Boyd Center for Rural Development, and working in partnership with Phillips County Economic Development, the Huck Boyd Foundation, the Phillips County Community Foundation, the Solomon Valley Entrepreneurial Center, and a host of area businesses, organizations, and people, the "Discover Phillips County Project" is acting as an innovative and positive model for community development.

Then, in 2008, the county seat of Phillips County, Phillipsburg, was selected by the Kansas Department of Commerce for inclusion into the Kansas Main Street Program. Joining just 24 other elite communities scattered throughout Kansas, the program targets the preservation and revitalization of historic downtown districts, with a significant influx of state and national resources offering management, training, consulting and design assistance.

Known as being "The Cow-Calf Capital" of the state, Phillips County's fertile fields and grassy pastures make it ideal for raising beef cattle as well as growing wheat, milo, sunflowers and cane sorghum.

Entering Phillips County on U.S. 36 from the east, the driver will come upon the small town of Agra. There the traveler will find a brick bank building, several historic native limestone-block storefronts, as well as modern metal buildings, housing the city hall, library, grocery store and post office.

Just a few miles to the south is historic Kirwin, the oldest town in Phillips County. Kirwin is well-known by its nicknames, "Sportsman's Paradise" and "The Goose Capital of Kansas," due to the fish and fowl found at the Kirwin Reservoir and the Kirwin Refuge.

Both the reservoir and refuge nestle into Kirwin's western city limits.

The lake is a fishing hot spot, with species ranging from walleye to crappie to catfish to bass (multiple species).

The refuge is being restored as a prairie habitat. In addition to viewing the ducks and geese, abundant in spring and fall, a visitor can also see large populations of deer, pheasant, turkey, prairie dogs and coyotes. Rarer wildlife, such as bald eagles and whooping cranes, can also be seen at the refuge.

The town of Kirwin is noted for its picturesque, historic red brick city hall and library building, which sits on a town square.

Flanking the square is the only cafe within a 10-mile radius, as well as a large and extremely

well-stocked antique store located in an old lumber yard--named, appropriately, the Ole Lumber Yard.

On the first Saturday in October this year, Kirwin will be observing its 77th Annual Old Settlers Day, which will be celebrated with politicians, a parade, horse show, demolition derby, games on the square, food booths and a community play.

Continuing back to U.S. 36 and on west, the towering grain elevator at the little hamlet of Gretna dominates the landscape for miles around.

An old one-room school house is one of the few buildings left in town.

Phillipsburg, the county seat and business center of the county, lies five more miles down the road, and has a courthouse square, hospital, service stations, convenience stores, motels, restaurants, and businesses that line U.S. 36 and adjacent streets.

Phillipsburg is currently weathering the current economic downturn, with an economy that is fueled by its ethanol plant, oil refinery and roofing plant.

On the west side of town is a city park fit for a Norman Rockwell painting, with a swimming pool, baseball diamond, large playground, and camping facilities.

Adjoining the city park is the Fort Bissell Museum, complete with stockade and authentic historic one-room school, mercantile store, log cabins, train depot, and world-class antique gun collection.

Fort Bissell is open from May through September and has just recently underwent major renovations and expansion.

At the south end of Phillipsburg is the beautifully designed Huck Boyd Center, which is used as a community, conference and entertainment center. It also houses the Bill Clarke Model Train Museum, which includes a large collection of vintage model railroad paraphernalia dating back a century or more.

During the first weekend in June, visitors can enjoy the annual Riverless Festival on the county square in downtown Phillipsburg.

Featuring bands as well as dozens of food stands and arts and crafts booths, the Festival draws attendees from all over north central and northwest Kansas, and south central Nebraska.

Phillipsburg is also the home of Kansas' Biggest Rodeo, which will be held at the Rodeo Arena north of town from Thursday through Saturday, July 30, July 31, and Aug. 1, this year. Included are three nights of Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association competition, as well as a parade on Saturday, Aug. 1.

The Phillips County Fair is held at the Fairgrounds adjacent to the Rodeo Arena the week before, beginning with a horse show on Saturday, July 25.

Proceeding west of Phillipsburg on U.S. 36, the north side of the highway travelers will come upon a forlorn old native limestone-block house that is perhaps one of the most-photographed and painted scenes in the entire

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Fort Bissell Museum

Fort Bissell Avenue, Phillipsburg, Kansas
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