

Keeping up with Kentucky communities

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Do you keep up with your hometown?

Are you worried that it might dry up and blow away on the winds of change, carrying your better memories with it?

Take heart. Everything changes in this state, and then again nothing changes. For example, the discrediting of cigarettes as an addictive hazard to health is nearly complete. Even Lexington, once a focus of the tobacco culture, has adopted an anti-smoking ordinance. And tobacco county legislators no longer smile piteously at their anti-smoking antagonists, secure in the knowledge that anything burley farmers want they can get. Things do change.

On the other hand, the state's biggest city still can't get itself together to do what places as disparate as New York City and Fort Collins, Colo., or Bunclody, Ireland, and Thimphu, Bhutan, have done: accept a smoking ban.

And hardly a word has been said, publicly, about an outrageous proposal for using money that was set aside to diversify Kentucky's burley-dominated agricultural economy: hand a bunch of it to (you guessed it) tobacco farmers, so they can keep raising the stuff for making cancer sticks.

Kentuckians, in particular, are attached to the people, places and culture that produced them.

My hard-working executive assistant, Margie Duvall, is a good example. She makes regular visits home to Burkesville, for everything from family gatherings to school graduations. When not on the phone to a relative back in Cumberland County, she's e-mailing her best friend, who works at the Burkesville welfare office.

This, and more, is what a bunch of twentysomethings from McLean County had in mind when they formed Progress on the Green Inc., or POG for short. Long-distance citizenship, facilitated by modern communication methods, is what POG president Matt Gunterman had in mind when he founded the group.

Gunterman, a Yale graduate student in history, explains, "This entire project is about restoring vibrancy to rural Kentucky. For generations, these communities have watched many of their most talented and dynamic citizens (Margie, are you listening?) leave their borders in search of opportunities for education, employment and service. And from all indications, this exodus will continue for the foreseeable future."

Indeed, the U.S. Census estimates released in mid-April make a graying and languishing small-town Kentucky seem inevitable.

But cell phones, voice-mail, faxes, e-mails, BlackBerrys and other communication breakthroughs make things easier for those who want to remain "actively engaged" in hometown civic life from a distance.

Gunterman says, "It's often the case that I, sitting at my desk a thousand miles away in Connecticut, know of breaking news in McClean County before my mother, who works at the county courthouse. And, via online banking, I can send money back home with a click of a button. If we can harness the power of this expatriate community for the benefit of rural Kentucky, we can achieve a lot of good."

The aforementioned Margie, I can testify, knows about the latest romantic sensation or pistol flourish in Burkesville as fast as anybody on Woodland Street or Allen Street -- anybody at Jones Restaurant on Main Street or at Burkesville Pool Room on the public square.

The small town about which I know the most is, oddly, not Pikeville, where I was born. It's Hazard, where I lived and worked as a reporter. I keep up with what's happening to old friends there like Paul Campbell, Bill Morton, Calvin Manis and Bill Gorman.

In fact, Gorman, who has been mayor for 28 years, called me last week to rail against the Census Bureau. He believes he can prove that Hazard and Perry County were shorted on the last count.

He faxed me the official figures, which showed 29,390 residents in the county and 4,806 in the city. But after an actual house-to-house count, facilitated by Perry County Clerk Haven King and Hazard public safety director Sam Stacy, the Mayor concluded that the official 2002 Census missed 15,242 people. He submitted his documentation to federal officials.

"They came back and said, 'We're going to give you 32 new people,' " Gorman grumbles. "It hurts us when we're treated unfairly like that. If you look at all the government grants that are based on population, every missing person costs us about \$10,000."

There was a time when I would have had to drive seven or eight hours from Louisville to Hazard, dodging coal trucks part of the way, to check out the latest news firsthand. Thanks to better technology, today I immediately get a press release about the roll-out ceremony for a new Eastern Kentucky Ronald McDonald Care Mobile, operating out of the University of Kentucky Family Medicine and Family Dental clinics at the UK Center for Rural Health Bailey-Stumbo Building.

This column (and a near-infinity of other things) can be read immediately by anyone in Perry County who has a computer at www.courier-journal.com.

Science and technology have the potential to impact rural Kentucky in other, even more important ways.

UK president Lee Todd is busing his way through 20 cities on a "Dream Tour" of Kentucky, explaining the revolution that applied research and campus-based expertise can bring to places like Hazard and Calhoun.

No less imposing a source than the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City's Economic Review makes the same point in the latest issue of *The Main Street Economist*.

"Knowledge has become the new premium fuel for economic growth in the 21st Century," the study says. "Knowledge fuels new ideas and innovations to boost productivity -- and creates new products, new firms and new wealth."

In rural America, the study points out, some communities already are "leveraging" assets like high-skill labor, higher education centers, sophisticated business networks and modern civic infrastructure, in order to transform their economy.

Not enough of those communities are in Kentucky.

In order to succeed these days, rural areas must develop high-quality labor forces, which are one goal of the historic KERA education reform. They have to tap into the resources of colleges and universities in order to educate potential workers, realign local economies, transfer knowledge and build regional partnerships and business networks. UK, for example, won a \$22 million grant to help improve students' math and science scores in communities across the Appalachian region.

The new knowledge-based economy was what Paul Patton had in mind when he reorganized public higher education in Kentucky and lifted its aspirations.

Too bad we couldn't fully fund the effort at the same time; that would have taken more political capital than Patton had to spend.

Nevertheless, Todd and his counterparts on other campuses are trying to make progress, even with the niggardly resources a post-Patton Frankfort has been willing to supply.

One can also leverage scenic amenities to attract knowledge-based firms and workers, but that's hard to do in an Eastern Kentucky where "moving mountains" usually refers to the latest, most drastic form of strip mining.

I think it was Mark Twain who once said that he never saw a Kentuckian who wasn't on his way home.

But to what?

That's what the next few years will decide.