

States of the Union

LOOKING FOR A PARTNER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

THE MOST thoroughly thumbed book in and around Oberlin—a town of 2,300 set tidily amid the wheat fields of northwest Kansas—is neither the *Farmer's Almanac* nor *The Road Less Traveled*. It is the *Standard Industrial Classifications Code*, a thick, plotless volume published by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

All it contains are listings of more than 10,000 business and job categories, ranging from atom smasher to zoo keeper. But to local citizens, ever hopeful of luring new businesses to town, the drab columns make for powerful literature. The people of Oberlin believe that somewhere among those myriad classifications there lurks at least one commercial category that is just right for their town. The trick is to find it.

"It's called a targeted industry study," says Jerry Kempf, "and it's where every small community needs to start. Not with a brochure about how terrific the town is, and certainly not with a 12-minute video. Believe me, I've tried both those gimmicks and I can tell you they're not the way to economic development."

The idea behind the study is to broker a love match between the town and some

suitable industry. Kempf, a vice-president of the Sunflower Electric Power Corporation (a cooperative), has been shuttling the 120 miles between Oberlin and his home base in Hays, Kansas, helping Oberliners get their entrepreneurial act together.

Not that the local citizens need encouragement. Along with their neighbors in surrounding Decatur County, these folks have spent at least four decades beating back the tide of economic decline in the farmbelt—or, as Randall Braden, the editor of the weekly Oberlin *Herald*, has put it, "struggling to keep our little community together into the next century."

It's been quite a struggle. As in thousands of other small Midwest communities, Oberlin's once-solid agricultural base has been steadily eroding. Indeed, by most economists' slide-rule measures the town no longer has reason to exist. Yet there it is, alive and kicking and looking forward to the next century. Oberlin's stubborn boosterism is not unusual, at least not on the Plains. It is a form of rural arithmetic. Rural arithmetic, a Minnesota friend once told me, holds that "two-plus-two had better equal five, 'cause it sure as hell don't equal four."

In 1971 the demographer Glenn V. Fuguitt, having "studied small towns and villages for a number of years," paid tribute to their remarkable knack for surviving. "They prevail," he said, "despite most people's efforts to write them off. They may not perform the same functions as previously; they may in fact serve as little more than population nodes; they may even lose considerable population; but somehow they stay in there for census after census."

To demonstrate his point, Fuguitt cited a newspaper headline he had seen recently: "Small Town Dies, But Life Goes On."

For Oberlin, life begins inside people's heads. "They really believe in their town," Kempf marvels. "They consider it a privilege to live there. You can tell right away there's something special about the place," he goes on. "The neatly clipped lawns, the awnings on the storefronts downtown.... Everything's freshly swept and clean. It's a super-looking little town."

Civic pride, alas, has sometimes led to civic disaster. For better or worse, the town has gotten itself involved in all manner of commercial dreams and schemes, starting with a citizen-owned television station in the 1950s that almost went bust. (It was eventually sold to Wichita investors.) More recently the residents built a factory and began turning out small boats and fiberglass trailers designed to float. That idea didn't pan out either. The boats were elegant, according to one observer, but the trailers "looked awful and dragged like a dead hog."

In between those enterprises the citizens found other ways to keep busy. They opened a large feedlot, built a dairy (700 cows), launched a bus manufacturing company, inaugurated an annual, area-wide carnival sponsored by the Decatur County Chamber of Commerce, and salvaged a defunct movie theater on Main Street. But after all was said and done, only the carnival could be counted a financial success.

The homegrown carnival sprouted in 1973 as a wholesome alternative to traveling road shows with their "shady characters." Individual donations and

a \$2,000 bank loan got things started with a Ferris wheel, pony rides and locally constructed kiddie rides and game booths. In 1980 citizens added the "Tumbleweed Express," featuring a six-foot high locomotive, two gondola cars and a caboose. Volunteers laid the tracks.

Last August the carnival set another revenue record, grossing more than \$37,000. Some of the money may go to assist the movie theater, called the Sunflower Cinema, which reopened in 1977 after citizens spent more than \$80,000 refurbishing the building. It still shows films at least four nights a week.

In addition to all the commercial activity, Oberlin boasts a still-intact K-12 school system as well as a 26-bed hospital that has just been remodeled to the tune of \$1.7 million. The hospital is the county's largest employer.



THE DECATUR COUNTY CARNIVAL

ALTHOUGH most Oberliners tend to view economic development efforts as capitalistic rather than cooperative, in their initial stages those efforts have assumed a distinctly communal appearance. Remarkably, just about everyone in the county at one time or another has chipped in with money, time and imagination.

"In none of these cases was there any single major investor," note Cornelia and Jan Flora, two rural sociologists who have been drawn to Oberlin in order to learn what keeps it hopeful and unwearied despite so many disappointments. "Multiple community members put up relatively equal amounts that were enough to form a solid investment, but not enough to force one to leave town broke if the venture did not pay off."

Individual investments in the bus and boat projects, for instance, ran between \$500 and \$2,000. As Jerry Kempf points out, "That's a lot of money for most folks. And there's no money tree in Oberlin."

In truth, few of the contributors expected their dollars to "pay off" in any sense other than civic. "The feeling was we were investing in the community," says Gregg Lohofener, a local financial consultant who helped raise \$315,000 to start the boatworks. "Sure, people

hoped to get their money back, but mainly they hoped to improve the economy."

For the most part, those hopes have neither been dashed nor fulfilled—they have simply been suspended. All the projects started by the town are still going, though the majority of them under new auspices and in more modest guises than the citizenry may have wished. Certainly the investments have created fewer jobs than had been anticipated.

As Lohofener says, reflecting Oberlin's characteristic mood of wry optimism, "We're not getting ahead, but I wouldn't say we were going backwards too fast."

In times like these, just slowing the retreat may be counted as a victory of sorts. The farm crisis has been rough on Decatur County, as it has on all of Kansas, which lost more than 5,000 farms between 1982 and 1987.

The overall county population of 4,800 has dropped about 10 per cent during the execrable '80s, though the town has held its own. "That's because lots of old farmers keep moving into town," Lohofener says. "But one of these days we're going to run out of retiring farmers."

Rural sociologists like the Floras, meanwhile, see in Oberlin a narrow beam of hope for small communities already

written off by mainstream scholars and policymakers. "The future of small communities is not foreordained," insist the Floras in a paper prepared for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It may still be possible for "entrepreneurial communities" like Oberlin to control their own destinies—that is, to find a *raison d'être* beyond farming.

What the sociologists have in mind is nothing less than "the integration of rural communities into a global economy as relatively self-sufficient and equal players." But even such loyal fans as the Floras concede that few small towns have awakened to their peril, much less to their opportunities. Most seem befogged in nostalgia. They tend to "look to the past, often a past that assumes mythical virtues, rather than to seek and apply knowledge about current conditions that affect the community."

So Kempf and the Oberlin citizens' committees may be in a race with economic time—with the gradual slipping away of family agriculture—as they hunt through the *Standard Industrial Classification Code* in search of a perfect matchup. "We've got the list down to about 500 categories," Kempf says. "Now comes the really tough part."

Up to now, of course, it's all been a piece of cake.