

Girl Camper

Going places. Doing things.

FALL 2022

ROAD TRIPS AND MAIN STREETS

SMALL TOWN CHARMS

By Kit Bernardi

It happens every time. I get that Wild West feeling riding in my RV down a small town's Main Street. Just passing through, partner. Fill up, grab lunch, get a coffee. Mosey on down the road. Whoa. Not so fast, girl camper! This is a pretty place to stretch my legs. Check out that bakery, art gallery, boutique and bookstore. Wait, the farmers' market is today! Several hours and shopping bags later, I'm back behind the wheel, rolling out of town.

Main Street curb appeal always reroutes my travel plans, so I have learned to gift myself time to linger in small towns and often plan my RV trips around them. That's the power of

"placemaking." According to the Project for Public Spaces, a nonprofit organization founded in 1975 in New York City, "placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community." It is a grassroots-driven, collaborative process whereby "communities transform their public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, spur rejuvenation, and serve common needs."

Placemaking is definitely having a moment. HGTV's *Hometown* show hosts Erin and Ben Napier's famously worked to restore their town of Laurel, Mississippi and later rescued Wetumpka's struggling downtown in Alabama. Chip and Joanna Gaines' makeover of their town Waco, Texas changed its image from crazy cult to lifestyle design capitol. Ree Drummond's brand *The Pioneer Woman* transformed her rural hometown of Pawhuska, Oklahoma into a tourist hotspot.

But communities investing in their own small town's comeback has been happening across the country long before lifestyle brands cast spotlights on them.

More than 40 years ago when people were fleeing rural areas to live in cities and suburbs, the National Trust for Historic Preservation stepped up to help save small towns. In 1980, it founded the non-profit National Main Street Center in Chicago, a subsidiary of the National Trust. Since then, the Main Street America program has helped more than 2,000 communities nationwide revitalize and restore older and historic downtowns through preservation-based economic development. Accomplishments to date: \$95.33 billion reinvested; 314,431 buildings rehabilitated; 717,723 jobs created; and 161,036 businesses started.

Patrice Frey, Main Street America's senior advisor and former CEO and president, says that in the organization's growing network of 1,200 downtown and commercial districts, approximately 70 percent are in rural areas. Frey says, "Small towns in rural communities can offer more robust community connections, affordability, and opportunities to create your own business, perhaps without barriers found in larger places."

Main Street America helps people passionate about their communities spearhead the rejuvenation of them through training, education, research, and grant funding. Frey says, "We work with a community's economic development staff, which often in small towns is just one person, and volunteers who are essential in the inclusive process, to create a vision for their downtown which they bring to fruition."

RANGELY, MAINE

In 2021, the Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust, a nonprofit organization conserving the forested region's land, water and dark sky, created the Byway Ambassadors volunteer program. RVers rolling down Maine's Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway can experience first-hand the strong connection these empowered volunteers have to their communities. The ambassadors greet visitors at roadside scenic overlooks and in downtown Rangeley, providing information about camping, directions, recreation, restaurants, museums, services and shopping.



Amanda Laliberte of the Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust helps manage the Byway Ambassadors program. She says, "The program brings together our community in a new way by including more people in important conversations about conservation and all our region offers." Trained in Leave No Trace Principles and the State of Maine's hospitality program, the volunteers explain to visitors the relationships between working forests, conservation initiatives and the region's economy. Since they began, they have met with more than 4,000 visitors and made 6,000 recommendations supporting regional businesses.

The Rangeley Lakes National Scenic Byway is a member of the nonprofit National Scenic Byway Foundation. Sharon Strouse is executive director of the advocacy organization providing educational support for Byway community leaders and raising awareness for the need of federal funding to maintain Byways and designate new ones. Strouse says, "National Scenic Byway recognition brings economic development to and sustains economic vitality in rural communities and small towns in a Byway's vicinity."

HISTORIC ROUTE 66

This famous route is a designated National Scenic Byway and All-American Road.

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the Illinois Office of Tourism administer the Route 66 Grant Program which recently awarded \$4 million to fund tourism-focused projects in communities on Route 66. Celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2026, the iconic road's first 300 miles traverse Illinois.

In southwest Illinois, the Great Rivers 6 Routes Tourism Bureau received \$919,000 in grant funds to restore cultural and historic sites and add tourism experiences around 12 communities along Route 66's last 100 miles in Illinois. Projects include a new visitors center and museum in Edwardsville's vintage gas station; restoration of Carlinville's historic Macoupin County Cannonball Jail constructed of surplus cannonballs after the Civil War; and giant postcard-style murals and Route 66 emblematic sculptures, perfect for road trippers' social media posts.





Tourism bureau president and CEO Cory Jobe is also chair of the Illinois Route 66 Centennial Commission. He says, "Regional tourism supports small town America. As travel trends indicate, people want to take road trips and seek outdoor recreational and rural experiences which smaller communities offer to encourage visitors to spend more time and dollars in their region."

GOSHEN, INDIANA

I plan some of my seasonal RV trips around small towns in Northwest Indiana's Amish Country to shop for farm-fresh foods, garden plants, hand-crafted furniture, antiques, quilts and artwork. Campgrounds abound in this Midwest agri-tourism region. RVers often book campsites at the Shipshewana Flea Market grounds and Elkhart County 4-H Fairgrounds just minutes from vibrant downtown Goshen. This town is one of my go-to Midwest small towns for authentic Americana charm. The Elkhart County 1868 Renaissance Revival Style courthouse anchors Goshen's historic Main Street of restored late 18th and 19th century storefronts.

Goshen native Jeremy Stutsman and his family have been investing in and renovating downtown buildings since 2001. He was elected mayor seven years ago and his children are eighth generation Goshen residents. Mayor Stutsman says, "Some communities develop for tourism. Goshen worked hard to develop first for our residents and local businesses that we are proud of and believed that tourism would follow."

And so it has.



Letter from THE EDITOR

Everything about a road trip fills me with excitement, but a Girl Camper Road Trip makes me feel like a kid counting down the days until Christmas. The first road trip I ever did with a girlfriend was when I pulled my 1959 Field and Stream camper from New Jersey down to MacIntosh Reserve in Georgia. I talked my best friend Carol into coming with me, but she made me promise that we would stop at junk shops, antique malls and divert off the highway to visit small towns. In other words, it was about the journey and not the destination. We did so much exploring, we almost missed the campout completely. We laughed so hard and still talk about all the fun we had on that first trip.

Fall is my favorite time for road tripping and this issue of Girl Camper is full of ideas to get your next trip started. Kit Bernardi also offers us a great article on the efforts being made to save Main Streets across the country. Goshen, Indiana is one of my favorite small towns and I visit it often staying at the campground at the county fairgrounds. If you've never tried any alternatives to regular campgrounds, this is a great place to start. The Cherokees Hills National Scenic Byway has been on my to-do list for too long and I relished new contributors Cele and Lynn Seldon's stop-by-stop



North Carolina Guide Terri Sasser and her favorite camping buddy, granddaughter Ava Grace



virtual drive. I am hoping that fall 2023 finds me doing the real thing. Also new among our contributors is Aja Hannah, who details 68-year-old Sharon and 63-year-old Julie's 260-mile hike on the John Muir trail, which ended with them summiting 14,000-foot Mt. Whitney. It made me want to shout out loud – "Go Sharon! Go Julie!" What a triumph at any age.

Of course, we love to indulge in some fun camp grub. Our latest obsession has been foods on a stick and we explored all kinds, from salads to charcuteries, for something new to try at the campground. Kim Foley MacKinnon's brilliant Snackle Box hack for great Bloody Mary toppings will have you looking for old tackle boxes to transform. Wherever you are camping this fall, we hope your travels find you enjoying small town pleasures, roadside stands chockful of your favorite things, hiking paths carpeted in colored leaves and, above all, among friends (old or new) with which to share it.

Happy trails!



Follow me on
Facebook: @girlcamper
Instagram: @girl_camper

Janine Pettit

JANINE PETTIT
FOUNDER GIRL CAMPER MEDIA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,
GIRL CAMPER MAGAZINE