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### St. Paris, Ohio

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## St. Paris, Ohio

On the surface, St. Paris, Ohio, (population about 2,000) looks like hundreds of other small Midwestern farm towns—quiet and pleasant—a nice town to drive through on a Sunday afternoon. Like many communities, the town has enjoyed a “gentle growth” of about 4 % over the past ten years.

**Underneath that traditional exterior, a persistent entrepreneurial spirit breeds new business with an aggressiveness that can be felt from the coffee shop to the farms that surround the town.**

But underneath that traditional exterior, a persistent entrepreneurial spirit breeds new business with an aggressiveness that can be felt from the coffee shop to the farms that surround the town. Like many small towns in west-central Ohio, St. Paris enjoys a very diverse economic base that would be the envy of other towns in rural and more isolated areas. A huge Navistar plant, about 20 miles away, employs thousands within its giant factory compound. Just outside of St. Paris, a parts

supplier for a nearby Honda plant employs nearly 1,000.

These employers seem to have weathered the ups and downs of manufacturing trends over the last few years, and employment levels have been fairly steady. There are many job opportunities for those who prefer small town living and are willing to commute.

Still, the striking feature of this community is the success of multiple business ventures by local residents who have learned how to nurture and support each other toward entrepreneurial success. The norm in St. Paris seems to be that each business owner starts and maintains three or four successful businesses at the same time. Many are still farming, too, and they express a reluctance to give up their attachment to the land that was worked by their parents and grandparents before them.

One classic example of an entrepreneurial success is that of a local computer parts business. Founded in the early 1980s, the company started out as a part-time business venture based in the home of a young resident. This resident, originally trained as a veterinarian, took the idea of distributing computer printers to capture a huge market share in the early days of the growing personal computer business. The expansion was so good, in fact, that the operation expanded into a warehouse, and then into a huge business that was selling more than 10,000 computer printers a month—a business that grew at a rate of 250% per year.

Eventually, the company expanded into the realm of special orders and custom configured PCs. The success of this small town business in Ohio eventually led to a purchase by one of the biggest players in the electronics industry. By 1997, the business that had first taken root in the mind of a young St. Paris entrepreneur became part of an electronics giant.

“We concentrated on doing two or three things really well,” says the company’s founder, pointing to price, quick shipment and expert sales support as keys to the firm’s remarkable growth. Product and market specialization, with an emphasis on sales via mail order and the Internet to similar markets nationwide is a recurring theme among St. Paris entrepreneurs. “The big void in rural America,” he says, “is marketing. What’s my definition of business?” he asks himself aloud, “A marketing war and an efficiency contest,” he answers.

Another example of an expanding small business success story is that of the Lakeland Golf Course expansion. Originally a nine-hole course in the middle of a pasture, the owner hired a golf course architect and expanded it to 18 holes, adding a restaurant called “The Deck” for Friday night steak dinners. “A lot of business deals are made on that course,” noted a Chamber of Commerce member. “The fact that it has 18 holes instead of nine makes it a ‘real course’ in the eyes of many golfers. People are driving 40 or more miles to come golf there, which helps to bring more revenue to the area,” she said.

Another young business owner exemplifies the marketing genius that shows up time and again among local entrepreneurs. A part-time farmer, he proudly showed off an alfalfa field that produces what he calls “gourmet hay,” that he sells on the American West Coast to owners of exotic breeds of horses. When asked what made his hay so special, his answer was simple: “The way I sell it.” After learning to sell one product to that type of buyer, he was busy exploring other opportunities to promote other products to that same customer base.

**Most people in the community are proud of the town’s ability to support new business development.**

Most people in the community are proud of the town’s ability to support new business development, but some are concerned, too, about the broad impact on the community when young people are so busy making a living. “They don’t have time to sit down,” says one long time resident, “let alone time to work on community boards, church projects, and the like.” Others agree. “Thirty years ago, aggressive young families were investing in building a community. Today, we’re more into investing in ourselves,” said one local resident. “It’s kinda scary.”

A big help in keeping the town on its feet, though, has been the Honda parts supplier, an independent company that employs a number of residents. The town may be doing well, according to St. Paris business leaders, because the cycle of farm crises over the years “made farmers into better managers, bankers into better loan officers,” notes one resident.

But in St. Paris, things haven’t changed all that much. Some 400 men and women from surrounding farms and communities still earn a good living at the plant not far from town. However, there’s a new emphasis on historic preservation as a strategy for keeping the town attractive and economically active. As a response to a need for strategic planning, the topic of historic preservation has evolved into the motivation for an increased citizen involvement and interest in the future as well as the past. The challenge, according to one regional planner, is “moving from a checkbook mentality to an investment mentality.”

In order to conserve the old-time appeal of St. Paris’s downtown streets and deal with infrastructure needs, a downtown preservation group organized to replace streetlights that were

approaching 90 years of age. With a goal of getting pledges to install just 18 new lights, the group “sold” 28 fixtures at \$500 each in just three weeks! The village board has also agreed to pay for an engineering study that will be part of a Main Street revitalization effort that may culminate in applications to include parts of St. Paris on the National Register of Historic Places.

**“We must be experimental.”**

St. Paris is a town that has worked through many changes in its evolution from an isolated farming town to a small-scale service center and quality of life magnet. As one rural chaplain for the Ohio Council of Churches explains, “The community that resists change dies. We must be experimental. We must accept the psychological as well as the economic shifts.”

Just a few years ago, a retail market analysis of St. Paris was completed by faculty and students from Ohio State University. It confirms that St. Paris grew very modestly over the past ten years and indicates that successful hardware, appliance and florist sectors are doing well despite strong competition. It also demonstrated that St. Paris received high marks from consumers in safety, low congestion, convenience and helpfulness but faces challenges in the local economy to provide more variety and selection.

By pursuing niche markets, and capitalizing on historical traditions and unique events, the town can adapt and face the future with confidence.