

## What Makes a Good (Rural) Town?

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Prior to the trip, I was looking forward to visiting rural towns in the U.S. I have been to the U.S. several times but had only visited urban areas that were relatively accessible or towns that were well known even to Japanese. When I had a chance to visit a rural area, the primary purpose was to visit a specific business and I didn't have a chance to learn about the surrounding area. This time, I visited 10 locations in four states—West Virginia, Ohio, Nebraska, and New York—and had the opportunity to meet and hold discussions with individuals working to solve challenges in their communities, which was a precious opportunity.

All the places we went and all the people we met were unique and impressive. Since I work for a university, I would like to write about the Rural Futures Institute (RFI) at the University of Nebraska. RFI was launched in 2012 as an organization to connect students and the university to the local region. It was very interesting to learn about the diverse programs they implement in collaboration with local leaders. I would definitely like to replicate their Community Innovation Fellows Program.

I was touched by how the entire organization welcomed us. At a lunch meeting organized by RFI, I learned that many staff were involved in RFI's activities and I could feel their solidarity and passion. At Ehime University where I work, there is an organization called the Social Collaboration Framework that is directly under the President's office. I believe both organizations have similar goals and I felt envious that RFI could organize these types of gatherings as I was not sure whether we could do the same. If there is an opportunity, I would like to learn more about RFI's activities and hope that my colleagues could have similar opportunities as well. It will be great if we can introduce Ehime University's work and carry on an exchange with them.



It was not part of the main program, but there were several things that left a strong impression in my mind. The first place we visited was Charleston, West Virginia. After arriving at the hotel, we immediately headed out to the Hops and Heat Festival. The festival featured more than 25 different kinds of craft beer from Appalachia for tasting. There were over 10 stalls with different types of chili con carne, and those attending the festival could vote for the best. I felt

groggy after tasting two or three different kinds of beer but I tasted all the chili and voted for the one that I liked. Initially I thought the chili would be spicy and taste the same. However each chili had unique flavors and I thought the event was a brilliant idea.

The following day, we visited Capital Market and it turned out to be an interesting experience. The building and its outdoor area—formerly a railyard—had been turned into an outdoor farmers market and an indoor retail and restaurant facility. It's rare for a farmers market to be open every day. Not all the vendors were farmers, but some were selling their own produce. John Crihfield Farms & Greenhouse was one of them. The woman at the stall said her grandfather, John Crihfield, used to work for the railroad but decided to buy land in 1953 and became a farmer. He started the farmers market with his friends and the market moved to its current location in 2001. The market shows how a regional industry evolved.

When we were in Ohio, the second night we stayed at an old traditional hotel, the General Denver. The reception area was decorated with a Halloween theme. We went to have dinner at the restaurant in the hotel after we checked in. The restaurant was not crowded initially, but then all the seats filled up in a short time. Since the area is not known as a tourist destination, the customers were probably from the community. I was told that the restaurant is known for using local ingredients and it was great that it was crowded with local people, too. When we spoke with Dessie Rogers, the head of the local Chamber of Commerce, at a meeting the following day, she said that the hotel had taken the initiative and reinvigorated the farmers market when it was struggling to get attention.



Last but not least, I want to mention our visit to the Cosmic Films Studio and the Storefront Theater in Lyons, Nebraska. The Storefront Theater transformed an empty storefront into seats and added a portable screen so that residents could enjoy a movie on the street. Cosmic Films Studio turned an old theater into a film studio and is busy training a cat, who will play the main character in a film the studio is making. I was impressed with their sense of freedom and



unconstrained creativity. When we paid a visit to the studio, local residents came by and started to explain the studio and discuss cinematography. It was something that they did naturally and everyone was having a good time. As I watched this, it occurred to me that this is what makes a good town: No matter how small a community is and no matter how rural, if the residents are enjoying their lives, and if the

town can create this kind of atmosphere, it's a good town.

When I reflect on the trip, I think it not only touched on the fundamental issues that rural communities face, but also showed the possibilities, and the kinds of activities that can grow out of them. It was a very well planned and meaningful program. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for being able to participate.