



RISING STAR



THE CITY OF
PERRYVILLE
MISSOURI

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A few miles from the banks of the Mississippi, a little over an hour drive south of St. Louis sits the unassuming City Of Perryville, Missouri. It is a city that prides itself on its foundation in faith and small-town values. In fact, it is the birthplace of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the historic seat of the American Vincentians (Perryville actually had the first seminary west of the Mississippi).
Concordia

University was founded in Perryville and there are upwards of 35 small country churches throughout the county.

But why is a business magazine covering a Middle-American city with the population of approximately 8,400? Simply, it's their impressive economic development history. And the fact that, unlike most places in North America, Perryville currently has more jobs than people to fill them.

This is a credit to the collective efforts of the Perryville Development Corporation (a private corporation that owns the city's industrial park), the City and County. The Development Corporation has, over a number of generations, forged relationships with regional, national and international corporations with a view toward making Perryville an economic hub in Missouri.

For example, TG Missouri (a Tier 1 automobile supplier) employs upwards of 1,900 workers. Gilster-Mary Lee, which produces food products, employs another 1,600. Perryville also has Robinsons Construction, Earthworks, Semco, Perry County Memorial Hospital, Bank of Missouri, Roziers, Buchheit's and a host of other small companies all owned and operated right in the city. Natural resources are abundant and the region has a thriving lumber industry, exporting product all over the world.

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Brent Buerck, Perryville's City Administrator, about faith in the City's history, economic development, tourism and the high quality of life the small Missouri city has to offer.

By John Allaire

To understand the direction Perryville is headed, it's helpful to take a step backwards and discover its foundations. Buerck talks about the City's roots. "The city itself dates to about 1831 when we were incorporated. Our original settlers were actually from Germany, and the story goes that they were looking for something that reminded them of home. So the Lutherans settled from Germany in the east end of Perry County. That's where the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod was actually founded. Concordia University also has its roots here. There is a campus in St. Louis and one in Fort Wayne, Indiana as well. That's where Lutheran pastors go to be ordained, and it all started in Perry County in a little log cabin in a town called Altenberg."

Around the same time and toward the middle of the county, the land was settled by Catholics who started St. Mary's of the Barrens, which was the first Catholic seminary west of the Mississippi.

"The foundation of faith is very much a part of who we are," Buerck explains.

"There're Baptist churches, Methodist churches, Assembly of God churches and several smaller nondenominational services. It's very much a part of our everyday life here."

If the foundation of faith explains their roots, it is their forward-looking economic development processes and commitments that will define their future successes.



The dedicated efforts of the Chamber of Commerce, the Perryville Development Corporation, and many City officials led to the development of the Perryville Industrial Park and the establishment of an "Enterprise Zone." Since its opening, the Perryville Industrial Park has thrived and is now home to a diverse mix of industries.

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"In the first half of the 19th-century, Perryville had a Johnny Poultry's chicken factory and a couple of shoe factories. At that time, even that many years ago, the town leaders thought that they needed to diversify," Buerck points out. "And when the Perryville Development Corporation started, it was a for-profit corporation. They went door-to-door selling shares to residents. The idea was, if you buy a \$10 share in the Corporation, it was going to invest in some jobs and opportunities that everyone could benefit from."

Buerck continues to explain that some key investments by the Development Corporation has had a lasting effect on the City of Perryville. "Several years later, the Development Corporation started working with a company called Gilster-Mary Lee. It was an investment, and they thought that the company would do well and therefore the Corporation would do well, and the shareholders would get a return on their money. Well, Gilster-Mary Lee now has 1,600 employees in Perryville. And they make over 200 different types of food. For example they make the store brand cereals and noodles for Walmart and other large chains, and are also the exclusive provider for the Chick-fil-A chicken coating."



The success of Gilster-Mary Lee and other investments made by the Perryville Development Corporation invariably made their stock much more valuable than their earlier door-to-door value. Buerck offers that this is where the story shifts.

"At some point, and I think this is the most important part of the story of Perryville, these business leaders that had invested in their community with the original purpose of trying to make a little money and provide some jobs in Perryville, made enough money that they decided to start forgoing profits and they changed the Corporation into a not-for-profit entity. So they turned what was originally profit that they could've put in their pockets, and walked away from it in favor of an investment into the community — an investment that wound up becoming the purchase of the industrial park property. Today there is still a 20 person Board of Directors that oversees the assets of the Perryville Development Corporation and they continually invest in the community."

As one might imagine, the economies of small cities can be greatly impacted over many generations by the hard work of their economic development leaders and their ability to draw international corporations to town. Thirty years ago this past year, the Perryville Economic Development Corporation started working with a Japanese company called Toyoda Gosei.

Buerck explains that bringing Toyoda Gosei to the City was another game-changer.

"They changed the Economic Development Corporation into a not-for-profit entity."

"It is independently owned but somewhat affiliated with Toyota Motor Company. They make parts. So right now they make airbag components, steering wheels and interior trim pieces for automobile manufacturers, most notably Toyota. And they started chroming, so many of the chrome parts that you see on cars are often made here in Perryville. The company is up to 1,900 employees here. So for a town of 8,400 people, it's great to have two major employers supplying well over 3,000 jobs."

"I believe the City's location is one of its greatest strengths," exclaims Buerck when asked about enticing people to apply for one of the many available jobs and move to Perryville. "We are about 80 miles from downtown St. Louis, we're 35 miles from Cape Girardeau which is a city of about 40,000 people. There's a university and two large hospitals there. And we also have a small community hospital that is absolutely thriving. They have completed a couple of major expansions over the last few years. So for health related jobs, our location is really key."

One of Perryville's major selling points revolves around

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glistening community safety numbers and how it is contributing to a higher quality of life and a family-oriented lifestyle. In fact, the City is continually recognized as one of the safest communities in Missouri, with a reputation for having a second-to-none school system.

Buerck also emphasizes that key infrastructure investments have improved the quality of life for residents. "We have a park system that we have invested heavily in here in the community. We have a 105,000 ft.² recreation center that features an Olympic size swimming pool, a 400-seat theatre that shows first run movies, it has a large gym, racquetball, a walking trail and a library. In addition to that, we have a soccer park sponsored by the Bank of Missouri. The Optimists built 10 soccer fields on what used to be a floodplain. I think it's probably the nicest park between St. Louis and Memphis for soccer."

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Fun activities include an annual Mother's Day weekend festival in Perryville's downtown core. "Mayfest" has been taking place for the past 30 years. "We have a soccer tourna-





Buerck concludes with a statement about the unique character of the people in Perryville and how it has shaped their business community. "Perryville was full of entrepreneurs before entrepreneurs were even a thing, really. There are incredible people doing incredible things here... We've been doing things the right way here in Perryville for a long time, and our motto is "plant your family here" which we truly believe."

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On the chance that there is an influx of people getting away from the big cities to live and work in Perryville,

ment that coincides with "Mayfest" that will have anywhere from 90-100 teams depending on the weather so that's thousands of parents, grandparents and kids that come to Perryville for the weekend. We are doing a lot of those kind of activities, baseball tournaments, volleyball tournaments, that sort of thing."

"Other tourism opportunities include Tower Rock which is in the Mississippi," Buerck goes on to explain. "It's a huge tower that is literally built out of rock that just pops up in the river. Lewis and Clark spoke about it in their explorations. Perry County is unusual in its topography. It has the longest caves in the state of Missouri. The longest cave here is 30 miles. People love to go down there and explore."

There are many religious shines and historical buildings and artifacts for those interested in the early settlement of the area, but Buerck emphasized that the City and County also are keen to express great reverence for their veterans. "We have a long history of service organizations. A couple years ago we brought the traveling Vietnam Wall through the city and it was a great moment for the community in a lot of ways. A lot of folks found peace in viewing the Wall and it was well received."

The traveling exhibit was so moving, it inspired one veteran to donate substantial funds toward the construction of their own Vietnam Wall. "The veteran said 'if you guys will do something on a permanent basis I'll donate money.' And he started with \$1-million donation, and it's up to over \$2.5 million now and over 46 acres. Right here in Perryville, we are building the Missouri National Veterans Memorial, which is going to include the only full-size exact model of the Vietnam Wall in Washington DC. So, all 58,000 names will be on the same black granite. We went to India to get the granite, just like they did in Washington DC."

the City is preparing for change. "We're working hard on housing. The community is being built out. We need subdivisions, we need to invest in the community so people can live and work here. Many times, people come to Perryville for the jobs but they've had to find houses in neighboring communities. And that's the next thing were fixing. We're working hard with the Development Corporation to increase our housing stock so more people have an opportunity to live here."

It is staggering to see what Perryville has achieved, and continues to attain. And it shows no signs of sitting back and resting on laurels. Undeniably, Perryville is booming. Businesses are setting up shop, and unemployment is under five percent. It just might be what you're looking for! ●

