

# Call it Clark W. Griswold's American road trip

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COOLIDGE –

In 1983, a puke green and wood-paneled station wagon pulls into Coolidge, Kansas, and there on a farm lives Cousin Eddie. You remember the worm farmer – the guy who barbecues Hamburger Helper without the hamburger.

And, of course, let's not forget Aunt Edna.

None of this is lost on Lori Lennen, who grew up in this town that sits as far west as you can go and still be considered a city in Kansas.

There are few trees on this acreage of High Plains – an expanse largely of wheat and prairie. And while you can see for miles upon miles, there are no mountainous backdrops either, like those depicted in "National Lampoon's [Vacation](#)," the 31-year-old movie about the Griswold family's mishaps as they journey from their Chicago home to Walley World.

Coolidge may be a long way down the "[Holiday Road](#)," but Lennen wants to turn her little hometown into an overnight stop for travelers heading east or west. Perhaps, even a destination.

Coolidge was nearly a ghost town when Lennen returned home for a visit about five years ago to help her mother settle the estate of her father, Chuck. While there were about 90 people living in Coolidge at the time, most of the storefronts were empty and the town's hallmark limestone structures were falling into disrepair.

Lennen never returned to her big-city residence, instead pursuing her father's dream – to preserve Coolidge.

For Lennen, it's meant serving on the city council and renovating an old ghost town saloon into a [bed and breakfast](#). She's helped secure a grant to put a new roof on the town's historic limestone opera house. And, next month, she plans to embark on another project dedicated to cult movie past – opening [Cousin Eddie's](#) Visitor Center.

And yes, she says, she will even sell mini worm farms.

"There is only one Coolidge, Kansas," she says as she gives a tour of the future site. "It's about bringing in dollars that we didn't have before."

## Western heritage

While Lennen sees tourism potential with Cousin Eddie, Coolidge is more than just Silver Screen pop culture material, Lennen stresses, it was a Wild West town located just a few miles from the National Cattle Trail that funneled livestock northward.

Coolidge, named after the Santa Fe's Railroad's new president, T. Jefferson Coolidge, grew rapidly, according to the "History of Coolidge, 1886-1986," The railroad used Coolidge as its base, creating a need for services. The town had three lumberyards, five restaurants, seven groceries and four hotels. There were even opera houses, a jeweler and a watchmaker.

The town had about 2,000 people in its heyday. But bust soon followed, thanks to greed of early city leaders who tried to tax Santa Fe property to fill local coffers. Soon, the railroad began transferring its business elsewhere. Even Coolidge's Harvey House moved to Syracuse, and the roundhouse moved out of town.

By 1910, Coolidge only had 145 people, according to the U.S. Census.

### **Homecoming**

When Lennen first left Coolidge in the 1970s, there were only 100 people living in town. She didn't expect to ever return. By the late 1980s, Lennen was settled in Arizona where she ran a horse ranch before selling Mercedes Benz cars in the Phoenix area.

She came home in August 2010 to help her mother, Larue, settle affairs after her father's death and put the old buildings he had accumulated over the years on up for auction.

For years, Chuck operated an antique shop on U.S. 50. A longtime Coolidge promoter, if talk turned to razing an old structure, he would buy it with hopes of either selling it to a future entrepreneur or fixing it up. He even had purchased the late 1880s opera house before he died in December 2009.

But before the auction, the Lennens overheard the auctioneer talking about the properties.

"They didn't think the properties were worth anything and that most would probably would be torn down," she said. "Mom and I canceled the auction."

Lennen didn't move back to Arizona. Instead, she is following in her father's footsteps. Revitalizing Coolidge is in her blood. Her family has lived in the area since the late 1800s. Larue's mother, Blanche Thornburg, was even the town's first female mayor in 1941.

Others are joining the effort. The Lennens sold an empty storefront to Ken Jordan, a South Texas man who last year, with his wife, Patricia, opened the Western Trail Café. He learned of Coolidge from a friend in the area.

He likes the Cousin Eddie idea, he said, and hopes it will add attraction.

However, calling Coolidge a ghost town, he questioned how many people remember the movie. "Movies come and go and people come and go," he said.

### **"Nothin' but the best"**

No, the movie wasn't really filmed in Coolidge – it was actually filmed near Boone, Colo., thus the mountainous backdrop.

Lennen, however, sees not-so-bright Cousin Eddie, who lived on a farm near town with a gaggle of children and pregnant wife, Catherine, as one of the town's many characteristics.

There is something about the persona of Eddie that has stuck with audiences for 30 years – a guy who makes [Chevy Chase's](#) character, Clark Griswold, look smart. Played by Randy Quaid, Eddie was in dire financial straights – laid off from his job at the local asbestos factory and “wouldn't you know it, the Army cuts my disability pension because they said that the plate in my head wasn't big enough.” There is plenty of quotable comic relief.

“Real tomato ketchup, Eddie?” Clark asked Eddie, who replies, “Nothin' but the best!” Lennen said the center will have “Vacation” movies for sale, a hodgepodge of collectibles or “junk” her father had, as well as some snacks and pop for travelers. She also plans to operate Cousin Eddie Trail Rides from the center, offering horse rides along the Arkansas River.

She said she and her mother, who is still a lifelong artist at 89, will begin painting the old storefront next week, with plans for a mural on one side – possibly depicting the mountains.

“It's almost endless where you can go with this,” she laughs, noting she's even considered putting “a fancy visitors' outhouse out back. We envision it being a visitor's center where tourists coming into Kansas and leaving will have a place to stop and browse.”

### **Embracing opportunity**

Marci Penner, a grassroots community promoter who is director of the Kansas Sampler Foundation, called Lennen's idea brilliant, saying there are countless other communities with Hollywood connections, including Hutchinson's “[Superman](#)” and Dodge City's “[Gunsmoke](#)” ties.

“This is what Kansas communities need to do,” Penner said. “They need to be creative. They need to find a connection to a larger picture. They need to have fun. That is what Lori is doing and she is really putting little Coolidge on the map because of her creativity.”

But not all Hamilton County residents saw humor in Hollywood's location reference.

“There was a lot of Coolidge people offended by the connotation of the movie – this Hicksville, USA, as they described it,” Lennen said. “It's been over 30 years, though, and time has changed that – now they are seeing the humor of it, although there are still a few offended.”

And, yes, she has heard from those folks. “But I have so much support on the other level,” she said. Lennen said she did write Warner Bros. of her plans, but never heard back from the movie studio. She did, however, buy the “Vacation” items from the studio, having it shipped to Cousin Eddie's Visitor Center in Coolidge.

Big dreams include to have a “Vacation” reunion with Chase and the cast – even Quaid. But [Quaid](#) has had his own legal troubles and financial issues in recent years – just like Eddie. He's hiding out in Canada.

“It would be a great story if he showed up in Coolidge,” said Lennen.

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