

# Tiny town revival

By Rachael Sebastian Special to The Telegram  
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Two tiny towns along main veins to Colorado are becoming more than just places to stop. They're becoming destinations — whether it's tourism or a permanent relocation. Development, restoration and pride and ownership are changing the faces of two southwest Kansas towns. Along U.S. Highway 50 in Coolidge, a returning native has a vision for the town that once boomed along the Santa Fe Trail. In Tribune, about 15 miles east of the Colorado line on U.S. Highway 96, a community has come together over the past decade to combat population decline and advance local sectors such as health, government, education and business.

## Coolidge

On a rainy day in early March, Lori Lennen tended to a fire in a wood-burning stove — her heat source at Cousin Eddie's Visitor's Center in Coolidge. The center is named after Cousin Eddie from National Lampoon's Vacation, who lived in Coolidge. In the movie the scenes in Coolidge have mountains in the backdrop. Lennen hopes to expand upon the tongue-in-cheek name with T-shirts and other memorabilia.

"They'll definitely have mountains in the background," she said.

Any driver who passes through Coolidge knows the front range of the Rocky Mountains is still a long ways off. That's the destination for most tourists, especially in the summer months. Lennen recently opened the visitor's center and has had a little traffic through the building, which doubles as an antique store. The feel of the building is that of a trading post, complete with an American Indian statue out front next to an antique bicycle and motorcycle. She's confident traffic will pick up in the tourist season. The pop culture reference name of the store can't hurt, she said.

Lennen is glad Coolidge doesn't have mountains. It's a wide open space with room for expansive ideas and cultural creativity, she said.

Lennen is a native of Coolidge and returned almost six years ago to help her late mother, Larue, manage several family-owned buildings in the town. Her family has been in the area since the 1800s. Lennen originally returned to help her mother sell the buildings, after her father Charles died.

When she overheard that the buildings likely would be torn down, the auction was canceled. Lennen decided to help keep the history of Coolidge preserved, as well as her family's heritage. She now runs the visitor's center, helps oversee an art gallery and is in the process of restoring

the remaining standing opera house in Coolidge. There were once four during the town's big boom. She hopes the building will house music and comedy shows with the option of being used for a variety of events.

Lennen and her daughter, Tori Guldner, also run Trail City Bed & Breakfast, which is a renovated saloon that was built circa 1885 in Trail City, Colo. The building was moved across the border to Coolidge in approximately 1887. Lennen and her mother purchased and renovated the historic building in 2011. The main room of the bed and breakfast displays American Indian portraits painted by Larue. The bed and breakfast has five rooms, each with its own bathroom. Down the highway to the east of Cousin Eddie's sits the Western Trail Cafe, a cafe that was a bakery at the turn of the century and then owned by Lennen's family. They sold the building in 2011 to Patty and Ken Jordan, a couple who relocated from Amarillo, Texas, to run the business.

The Jordans remodeled and added on to the cafe, and now cook in an industrial-sized commercial kitchen. The popular dishes at the cafe include the Trail Burger, Prairie Burger, the chicken fried steak (known as The Doc Holliday if you want a single portion, or The Wyatt Earp if you want two) and the Bat Masterson, a ribeye served after 5 p.m. People come from neighboring Syracuse or stop along their way traveling in or out of Kansas on U.S. 50. Relocating from Amarillo to Syracuse has been an interesting transition for the Jordans, but they're glad they took on the challenge.

Along with it came adventure, Ken said.

"We just love the people. That's the best part. They've been so supportive and just praise our food. They make you feel so welcome," Patty said.

After working as a corrections officer in Texas, Ken likes the peace and quiet.

"It's so nice. There's no crime here," he said.

The Jordans enjoy the variety of customers who take advantage of the last stop in Kansas to come in and dine. Tourists from all over the world end up in the cafe.

"It's so interesting to learn where everyone comes from," Patty said.

Leslie Carlhom, Hamilton County economic development director, sees Coolidge as Hamilton County's historic district.

"It's amazing what the Lennens and Jordans have done to Coolidge. They've breathed life into old buildings and a historic town. We're hoping more people decide to come for a day trip, or a night or two away," she said.

Carlhom said Cousin Eddie's is catching people's eye.

“They’re really enjoying the tongue-in-cheek humor and reference from the movie,” she said. Somewhere else around the world is where Lennen thought she would end up. Growing up in tiny Coolidge, Lennen couldn’t wait to get out. She traveled around and finally settled in Arizona the longest, before returning to her hometown. Lennen said she couldn’t fight fate.

This is where she belongs.

“I’m a plainswoman. I’ve lived in plenty of other places to determine that. I’ve learned rural by choice is just in your blood. There’s a connection to the earth out here that is difficult to feel in cities where buildings and crowds limit expansiveness. Out here, you have a broad vision to take it all in. It helps to expand my spirit,” she said.

Lennen hopes others see the beauty of wide open skies and the expanse of the horizon in Coolidge. She sees it as a wide open space to breathe, heal and accomplish. Coolidge is a place that helps to restore her soul, as she renovates old buildings — restoring and preserving history.

“It’s a truly unique place filled with a storied past and the possibility of very bright future,” Lennen said.

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