



Advocates for Community and Rural Education

Leslie community celebrates rich heritage



Community members converted an old gym to museum, art gallery, and performance area.

As the small Ozark Mountain town of Leslie prepared for its annual homecoming celebration the weekend of June 20, the hustle and bustle on Main Street belied its official population of 481 souls.

Traffic on busy Highway 66 more nearly resembled the vibrant scene residents of the town would have observed in its heyday in the early 1900's, when the population reached nearly 10,000.

A gravel truck roared by, followed by a gas tanker, several automobiles, a John Deere tractor with a large round hay bale on its spike, and a teenager on a skateboard—testament to the infinite variety to be found in this small but still lively community.

A stroll through the town soon revealed two inescapable facts about the community: It has a rich heritage that residents proudly celebrate, and long-time residents and newcomers alike are determined to bring it back to its former prosperity.

A proud heritage

When Leslie was incorporated as a town in 1903, it was named after its founder and first postmaster, Samuel Leslie. Formerly, it had been known as Wiley's Cove, for one of two locally prominent Indian chiefs. The creek which runs through the town

is Cove Creek, and a nearby farm is still known as Wiley's Cove Ranch. That same year the town got a boost when the Missouri & North Arkansas Railway came into town.

The abundance of oak timber in the area attracted wood product companies, and by 1910 the Williams Cooperage Company was the largest barrel manufacturer in the world.

Leslie also boasted factories, a flour mill, an ice plant and storage facility, an electric light plant, three churches, and "good schools," according to the Arkansas Memory Project (asms.k12.ar.us/armem).

In its prime, the town had its own railroad depot with approximately 20 miles of spur lines constructed to service the lumber mills and camps surrounding it.



Historic Killebrew House is now a bed and breakfast with authentic early twentieth century décor (see article for details).

These surrounding communities shared in its prosperity, with their own school houses, churches, and post offices.

A large fruit orchard spread across a nearby hillside, with a canning factory in the town to preserve its fruit. The farm contained over 20,000 fruit trees, including 15,000 apple; 5,000 peach; 1,000 pear; and 1,000 various other fruit trees.

A local resident of the time wrote, "The town bids fair to become the metropolis of [this] part of the state" (asms.k12.ar.us/armem).

Unfortunately, the promised future never came about as the Depression and deforestation of the surrounding countryside led to a slow decline, which accelerated in 1946 when the M&NA pulled out.



A fruit farm with 20,000 trees was located in Leslie, Arkansas, in 1910

With U.S. Highway 65, the "new highway," bypassing the center of the town and the exploitation of natural resources not possible or even desirable in the manner of the early 1900's, in the latter part of the century Leslie gradually became something of a sleepy little byway. However, it still nurtured the seeds of rebirth in its rich and historic soil.

A strong, enduring community

Throughout the overall decline in Searcy County in the late twentieth century (the entire county's population has hovered around 8,000 since 1960), Leslie held onto its small-town closeness and cohesiveness as a community.

Its school was known as one of the best in the state. In 1996 the high school was recognized as "number one in test scores of all Arkansas high schools" (www.lesliearkansas.com).

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The Perils of Act 60 — Schools and communities undone by an unjust law



Twelve names decorate an impromptu message board on the sign that proudly proclaims Leslie school was established in 1910. Hints of the personalities behind the names show through the scripts.

Some are signed with a flourish, others with straightforward precision. One displays an imbedded peace symbol; another has a star; several have basketball team numbers.

This is the class of 2007, the last class to graduate from the high school that was once the pride of the community for its academic achievement, efficient operation, and high degree of community involvement. Over their strenuous objections, the Searcy County School Board made the decision to move grades seven through twelve to Marshall High School for the 2007-2008 school year and close down the Leslie high school.

Kimberly Patterson, who attended school at Leslie from head start through tenth grade and is now poised to graduate from nearby Marshall High School, says she will be “very disappointed” if the district shuts down the remaining elementary school.

Going from Leslie to Marshall, she says, was “a big change for all of us.” She remembers going from knowing everybody in the Leslie school to Marshall’s “crowded, packed” halls as “the ultimate change of my life.”

Sadly, Kimberly is not alone in this experience, and Leslie is not the only

small town in Arkansas to lose its school to the Arkansas Legislature’s Act 60 of 2004.

Act 60 mandated annexation or consolidation of all school districts with fewer than 350 students. This meant that effective July 1, 2004, 57 districts were absorbed into other districts. The law’s authors specified that these were meant to be “administrative consolidations” only. However, the law allowed the reconstituted school boards, made up mainly or exclusively of people from the receiving districts, to begin closing the annexed or consolidated schools as early as December of 2004.

By April of 2006 according to a report by the Rural School and Community Trust, 42 schools had been closed by the reorganized school boards. The number in the intervening years has risen even higher and is likely to continue to rise.

The closures have hurt and continue to hurt every area of the state, from Biggers, Swifton, Delaplaine, and Crawfordville in Northeast Arkansas to Grady, Gould, Lake View, Elaine, and Holly Grove in Southeast Arkansas; Bright Star, Carthage, and McNeil in Southwest Arkansas; and Altus-Denning and Winslow in Northwest Arkansas, to name only a few.

Majority African-American districts have been especially hard hit, with 49% of the first round of closures happening in the Delta. Elected African-American school

board members declined by 55%, majority African-American school boards fell from 11 to two, and the number of African-American superintendents fell by 25% in the first year.

One place where the Act 60 consolidation has gone particularly poorly is Elaine. After falling below 350, the school was forcibly annexed into the Marvell School District. With only one Elaine member on the consolidated board, the high school was immediately closed down.

Parents from Elaine complain that classrooms at Marvell are overcrowded, some students don’t have textbooks, there are issues with violence, and test scores have gone down. One parent notes that the town of Elaine has suffered economically, with one of four stores closing down and many families leaving rather than having their children bused long distances. (The farthest students, at Snow Lake, have a 140 mile round trip.)

Nor have the last repercussions of Act 60 yet been felt in rural Arkansas. Small communities like Cushman, Weiner, Lockesburg, Delight, and Turrell may also lose their schools if they cannot stabilize their enrollment above 350.

At Bradley, a town of about 550 people, a community member says they are “holding our own” at 384. “We try to make everything better that we can to keep all of the students we have,” she continues. “We worry—we definitely worry.”

At Lead Hill, where superintendent Bobby Gray says they are “holding fairly steady” at 380, there is “always that concern.” That district is addressing the problem by making sure of the quality of the teachers and the curriculum and promoting academic excellence and success to build up trust in the school.

ACRE members in Delight, concerned by their declining enrollment and hoping to attract more students, have produced a brochure advertising the school’s good test scores and personal attention for students.

The mayor of Delight, Paul Lane, says that closing the school “would just be disastrous.” He calls Act 60 “unfair,” and says, “The school is just central for any town, for the relationship with your children.”

Randy Hughes, a former superintendent at Delight, now retired, says he fears because of Act 60 a lot of good small schools are going to be shut down. He says, “Looking back in 10 or 20 years, we’re not going to be saving the money anticipated and there are going to be communities that are going to be irreversibly damaged.”

LESLIE, cont.



ABOVE: Leslie's award-winning high school before it was forcibly consolidated into Searcy County School District in 2004 by Act 60. **BELOW:** The town's residents are now fighting to save their Career Center, once one of the most innovative facilities of its kind.

A "wall of honor" inside its immaculately maintained building proclaims the many academic successes of both elementary and high school students over the years. A recent survey of school district facilities shows Leslie buildings still are the best in the district.

Recognizing the importance of youth to a community and the infusion of school funds to the economy of a small town, Leslie residents have waged a valiant battle since 2004 to keep a school in their community after Arkansas Act 60 forced consolidation of all school districts with under 350 students. They are now reduced to grades K-6, with all other students being bused to Marshall, 10 miles away.

Leslie's North Central Career Center is another proud accomplishment for this small town. This unique facility was once a joint project of the Leslie School District and the state's Department of Workforce Education. Now its future is uncertain due to its ambiguous position in the Searcy County School District headquartered in Marshall.

In the early 1990's Leslie philanthropists Rex and Daphne Killebrew contributed to its refurbishing and provided a new, modern computer lab. At its best, the vocational training center served about 100 students a year from Leslie and surrounding towns with vocational programs training students in auto body repair, computer technology, cosmetology, and other job skills.

Another cultural icon developed by Leslie residents is its museum, art gallery, and heritage center with a performing arts center, located in a beautifully restored old WPA constructed gymnasium.

The project was funded by Rex and Daphne Killebrew, who also set up a trust to support its continued operation.

The Killebrews' home, a historic landmark built in 1907 by a State Senator Greenhaw, now belongs to their great-nephew Tom Knapp. Exquisitely preserved in authentic early twentieth century style down to original furniture and wallpaper, Knapp and his wife Sandy operate it as a comfortable and unique bed and breakfast.

In fact, while keeping one foot firmly in the rich traditions of the Leslie's glory days, residents nonetheless point to many factors in their community that position them to take advantage of future growth.



Leslie then.... And now. Uncannily similar, the profile of Leslie present mirrors Leslie past, and residents hope to bring back its once vibrant economy.

Poised for a brighter future

Since the 1970's Leslie's core of long-time residents has been supplemented by newcomers from surrounding states like Texas and Oklahoma who came there for the small town atmosphere. This mix works well to bring both stability and innovative new ideas to the community.

Wayne Witcher, praise and worship leader at the New Life Fellowship church which occupies two storefronts on Leslie's Main Street, is one of the people "from off" who have made Leslie their home. He wrote about a church member's first experience of the town in a song:

Broken down in Arkansas, walking down the street/ On Highway 65, in the August heat/ Little town of Leslie, not much to see/ Yet everyone I saw, they seemed so free...."

Witcher and his wife Carol moved to the Leslie area from Dallas 18 years ago because they didn't want to raise their kids in the big city.

The pastor of their church, Carl Mays, is another "newcomer," who came to the Leslie area 23 years ago



Carol Witcher (left) came to Leslie from Dallas to raise her children in a small-town atmosphere. Kimberly Patterson (right) hails from generations of Leslie residents and plans to return there to live after college.

from Austin, Texas. Besides pastoring the church, Mays has helped to restore many of the old store buildings and is working to get them occupied with viable businesses. He and his family are opening up two additional storefronts with a coffee shop/ice cream parlor/ antique store and a garden store/ clogging studio.

Leslie's café, also run by an out-of-stater, offers delicious fare that is famed for miles around, as does the Serenity Farms Bakery.

Meanwhile, there are hometown businesses that have resisted the trend to standardize. Leslie still has its own home-owned grocery store, auto parts store, and Derickson Lumber Company, which has been operated by several generations of the same family.

Kimberly Patterson is a high school student whose family has a farm just outside of town. She remembers that her grandfather owned a roller mill in Leslie that ground corn meal and flour. After college, she says, "I'm coming back home to my small town."

This everyday mix is leavened by antique stores, an art gallery, an artisan who makes and sells goat milk soap, and an alternative medicine facility that does a thriving business, giving people living in or visiting Leslie many options that provide real potential for a prosperous future.



A gathering of town fathers: In a common small-town scene, Herschel Simmons, Fred Campbell, J.C. Stephenson, and Sam Smith sit outside Lewis Grocery to exchange news and views on a warm June day.

Save our schools

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Remembering Mary Scott

On May 10, ACRE communities everywhere lost a good friend when Mary Scott of Moro in Lee County passed away of a stroke at the age of 64.

Mary was born in Wilmot, Arkansas, on January 30, 1944, and grew up in Dermott.

With a Master's degree in education, she taught in the Lee County School District for 28 years.

After her retirement in 1994, Mary remained active in community affairs. She did consulting and leadership training, most notably for AARP. She was one of the founders of Our House community center in Marianna, which has an outreach to young people.

"She was a person who had a love for her community and was always reaching out to help," remembers Agin Muhammad, a fellow community member.

Mary helped found the ACRE chapter at Marianna, and she once shared the following observations on rural communities and schools and community organizing with ACRE board members.

Comments by Mary Scott

1. You (ACRE) are the leadership for tomorrow's rural schools and communities, and we are just getting started on this journey of change.
2. Schools, like most organizations, have been built on the concept of the leader directing others to fulfill a vision conceived and designed by that leader. I want you to challenge this paradigm to introduce an inclusionary approach. The

time is right for positive intervention. Leadership is fluid. It changes with time in order to meet emerging needs. The distinctive feature of this approach is its participatory framework.

3. This is by no means mere participatory management. It involves creating a vision of a "preferred future" and developing "a shared commitment to core values" that will, by their nature, change more than coordination of people and resources. It involves developing core values that will change how the people involved work together.
4. All people must share the responsibilities and rewards of leadership and work together to improve the school district or community of which they are all a part. All involved should be able to reach their full potential as they move into the future with passion and confidence.

CORE VALUES

1. Openness to participation—All stakeholders are valued and participating in any decision that affects them.
2. Openness to diversity—Embrace reality for each group. You need to know and accept the good, bad, and the ugly.
3. Openness to conflict—Trust the group's ability to resolve conflict in a healthy way that leads to stronger solutions for complex issues. Use conflict by valuing the energy of dissent and let people inside and outside the group know where they stand. Honest conflict in a "safe" environment provides the seeds for rich solutions as long as you set ground rules,



encourage honesty, demand respect, and come to a group consensus.

4. Openness to reflection—Value everyone's reflecting on his own and others' thinking in order to achieve better decisions for the group. Find ways to allow everyone to express thoughts without fear of intimidation or recrimination, learn to separate the person from the issue, and help individuals develop the capacity to publicly challenge their own thinking even if it reveals some uncertainty on their part.
5. Openness to mistakes—Value acknowledging mistakes and learning from them. One could be right and another could be wrong. Learn from the mistakes and use this knowledge to strengthen the group. This is a lesson in humility.

Mary's insights will be sorely missed. May they inspire us all to work harder for our schools and communities