

Internet: The Farm-to-Market Superhighway

By Roy Bragg

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SNYDER, Texas – Bill Robertson sees a future for this remote West Texas oil-patch town that involves a global conference center, a vibrant tourist economy and a work force of big-city expatriates who'd rather telecommute from cattle ranches than waste time in urban HOV lanes.

The key to getting it rolling is a gutted oil worker's hotel on the courthouse square, where Robertson hopes to open the town's first Internet cafe next year.

"This is essential to all of it," the Snyder native and one-time television journalist says of the Internet cafe and coffee house. "This is the technology that will take Snyder into the 21st century and beyond, but still have a town where visitors will feel like they've stepped into a small town of the past. And this is where local people will see it."

Like the farm-to-market road system, which revolutionized life for thousands of country towns, the Internet is bringing about a fundamental change in small-town Texas, yanking isolated communities out of the sticks and putting them on the grid.

With the ability to move terabytes of information in seconds, stretches of empty highway become insignificant and small businesses that sit hundreds of miles from customers can compete with larger competitors in larger cities.



Translation: Forget everything you know about rural Texas, even in a boom-and-bust, aesthetically-challenged town of 10,000 like this one, some 330 miles northwest of San Antonio.

Snyder never will become a dry, flat version of the Silicon Valley, but change is under way.

For example, former schoolteacher Deanie Mills has seen 11 of her suspense and true crime books published by New York houses. Research used to take months. Now, with the Web, she can research from her country home outside Snyder. She communicates with sources on police-themed message boards. She even exchanged notes and rewrites on her most recent

two books with consultants she didn't meet face-to-face during the two years spent on each project.

Jerry Baird, a caterer who specializes in "chuck wagon" meals, now makes a living selling seasonings over the Internet.

His factory is near Fort Worth. His distribution center is here. And he has customers on three continents.

Several manufacturers say instantaneous communication and a remote location actually give them a tactical advantage over their big-city competitors.

"We can compete with anyone in the global economy," says John DeLille, who heads the Development Corporation of Snyder. "And there's

no reason to feel isolated in Snyder, Texas. You can get anything here that you can get anywhere else.

"There's no reason to go to town unless you just want to walk through a mall."

While metropolitan areas hit economic home runs with projects such as the Toyota plant in San Antonio or the IBM and Dell campuses in Austin, smaller towns need less and can thus aim lower.

A Snyder-size town, for example, needs only to create a few small companies, each employing a handful of people, Clary says, to remain economically viable.

Most of those businesses, he added, will be startups rather than companies lured to the community.

The Internet is potentially as important, Clary said, as the creation of the farm-to-market road system in the 1940s. That project brought small-town Texas into the 20th century.

"Once they (paved) these roads," says Eric DeLaughter, a Texas Department of Transportation official, "it made travel easier. You could go from town to town whenever you wanted. It increased activity in small towns."

Rather than being forced to do business with local monopolies, farmers and consumers could shop around. A cotton farmer, DeLaughter said, could bypass the local gin for one offering a better price in an adjacent county.

The interstate highway system bypassed small towns, DeLaughter said, and that hurt them.

The Information Age, then, has come at the right time for rural Texas.

Here in Scurry County, where oil booms and busts are an accepted part of life, the Census Bureau reports the population dipped 12.2 percent from 1980 to 2000, though there has been

a bump of several dozen families as oil prices have risen.

Still, the town bears the unmistakable scars of the energy price roller-coaster.

Highways leading into town are lined with vacant commercial and industrial buildings. Many open businesses bear the markings of life on the economic edge.

They're shoehorned into decrepit buildings that have seen a litany of failed ventures and show it – peeling paint; old, broken, painted-over signs; orphaned gas pump islands; drive-through lanes to nowhere; and the general sense that an office is a bad fit in a converted muffler shop.

But there still is life in small-town Texas, and much of it is happening in the broadband pipes that deliver high-speed Internet to homes and businesses, as well as a general change in how outsiders do business.

Mark Zeck, whose startup company designs equipment for the energy industry, says the Snyder work force is better than a large city work force.

"The quality of people I can use here can't be beat," he said. "There is a different mindset in Smalltown, USA. These guys here are used to getting a job done and doing it well. They want to be here, in a small town, and they'll work hard to make sure their job is done right and the company does well."

Some fear that technology will change the unique nature of small towns. In the past, because of isolation, smaller communities were full of eclectic characters and unique traditions.

"There is a fear of change," says Sandra Tenorio of Texas Rural Communities, a group that helps small towns with economic development issues. "And the Internet is one of them."

But John Davis, executive director of the Institute of Texan Cultures, says

change always has been part of a small town's evolution.

"Isolation helps preserve elements of culture," he said, "but only for a couple of generations. After that, it becomes difficult."

The last generation of Texans that grew up in isolation, he said, is dying off. The new generations will be part of the Information Age.

"We'll still have characters in these small towns," he said, "but they won't be sitting around the courthouse square playing dominoes, like they do in East Texas. But they'll be there, in different roles and in different places."

Robertson is hopeful his projects will speed the economic transformation of Snyder while letting the city retain its unique West Texas ambience, which he feels is a hot commodity.

"We are actively ping-pong people to bring them here for a West Texas experience," he said. "People want the West Texas experience. We have to do it to survive."

That's what Robertson is hoping to do with his family ranch, his Internet cafe and the rest of a project that takes up half of a block facing the Scurry County Courthouse.

Ultimately, he plans to have condos, a bed and breakfast and his own home on the square.

Right now, he's got cabins and a conference center on his family's Windmill Preserve Ranch, just outside the town. The conference center and the guest ranch, which advertise exclusively on the Internet, have been busy with local groups, but Robertson is starting to see regional groups gather there.

"Next, we go coastal," he said, referring to his hopes to lure national visitors to the center.

And there's more. "I hope one day to hear different languages being spoken there."★