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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2016 - Future of the Flint Hills (Larry Patton,  
editor)

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## Cowboy Creativity: An Economic Future for Rural Flint Hills Communities

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### Recommended Citation

Davis, Christy (2016). "Cowboy Creativity: An Economic Future for Rural Flint Hills Communities," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2016/creating/2>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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## COWBOY CREATIVITY: AN ECONOMIC FUTURE FOR RURAL FLINT HILLS COMMUNITIES

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In spring 1875 a cowboy walked into Charles Hyer's boot shop in Olathe, Kansas, with a special request. He wanted boots that were comfortable for riding and walking with toes that would easily slip into stirrups. Both the cowboy and the bootmaker were self-reliant and hardworking. But it was only when the practical cowboy and the creative bootmaker joined forces that the cowboy boot was born.

Like the cowboy, many small towns need a reboot. Farmers, ranchers, and small-business owners have long been essential to the survival of rural Flint Hills communities, building schools and roads, supporting local stores, and providing for basic healthcare and social services. But each year as populations and tax bases erode, it gets a little harder to meet these basic needs for those who remain.

The economic decline of the region's small towns began only two decades after the invention of the cowboy boot. Since 1900 the population of Chase County has plunged from 8,246 to 2,790 with a steep drop in the years following World War II. Between 1930 and 1970 the population of Chase County halved from 6,952 to 3,408, and the population has continued to age. The nation's median age rose from 35.3 years old in 2000 to 37.2 in 2010. But the median age in rural Flint Hills counties is much higher (45.6 in Chase County). In 2010, 591 of Chase County's 2,790 citizens were age 65 or older and astoundingly, 93 residents were age 85 or older. Nearly

OPPOSITE PAGE: FLINT HILLS SOJOURNING  
*Chiyoko Myose*



half of the county's citizens are either dependents or reliant on Social Security or investment income.

“If the boot don’t fit...” If there was a one-size-fits-all fix, an elixir to cure all rural ills, our challenges would have been solved decades ago. But, it turns out that new economic trends just may offer a solution that is compatible with the region’s closely held values of self-reliance, personal freedom, and hard work. As the nation shifts toward a creative economy, the *Future of the Flint Hills* may look a lot like Charles Hyer’s boot shop.

Few would argue that retaining and attracting a young workforce is critical to ensuring the future of the region’s culture and economics, but many struggle with how. Whereas manufacturing defined nineteenth and twentieth-century economies, economic success in the twenty-first-century is measured in terms of creativity. Economists can predict a community’s success in this new knowledge-based economy by counting the number

of creative professionals – designers, artists, musicians, librarians, architects, and writers – who live there.

The concept of the creative economy is nothing new to urban scholars, planners, and leaders who have followed the work of urban studies theorist Richard Florida. In his 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida asserts that the economic wellbeing of a community can be measured by its Creativity Index, a composite of the following: 1) creative class share of the workforce, 2) high-tech industry, 3) innovation measured in patents per capita, and 4) diversity and openness to different kinds of people and ideas. Florida argues that because creatives can live anywhere, they are attracted to places that offer both interesting work and interesting lives.

Will this boot fit? On the surface Florida’s theory may not appear to point to a bright economic future for the rural communities of the Flint Hills. In fact, the current Creativity Index for Flint Hills counties, especially



PRIMARY GRAZER  
Matt Regier

non-metro counties, is low. Creatives make up about one third of the nation’s workforce. In Kansas, approximately 17 percent of the population is employed in creative professions. The average for all Flint Hills counties is a bit higher at 17.5 percent. But the share drops to 16 percent in rural Flint Hills counties.

However, there is great potential for these numbers to grow. Why? Because

it is easier for small towns set in a stunning landscape to retain and attract creative people than to draw the kind of industries that lured people away from rural Kansas in the postwar years. And, in places with such small populations, retaining or attracting even a handful of people can make a great difference.

Rural communities nationwide are beginning to try this approach on for size.

In a 2010 article in *Journal of Economic Geography*, researchers confirmed a tie between a rural county's percentage of creatives and the growth in the number of establishments and jobs, "particularly in those rural counties endowed with attractive outdoor amenities." In 2015 Montana entrepreneur Greg Gianforte made headlines with an initiative urging creative Montana expatriates to "Come home to Montana (and bring your job with you)."

Why would we want to attract creatives to the Kansas Flint Hills? Because these folks create their own jobs – and, over time, jobs for others. In general they are people who appreciate unique rural culture and are likely to work to preserve it. By attracting creative people, places can gain new knowledge needed to survive in a knowledge-based economy. When cowboys and bootmakers get together, magic can happen.

But are rural Flint Hills communities a good fit for creatives? It turns out

that small towns have a lot to offer. Creative people prefer to work and live in a relaxed environment. They value wide-open spaces, especially places that provide for outdoor recreation. They like walkability – something that can be found not only in urban cores but also in small towns, particularly those with vibrant central business districts. They value the kind of authenticity that can be found in rural downtowns and prefer to shop local over shopping in chain stores. Many appreciate rural communities because they or their parents were raised in small towns.

Economic trailblazing isn't easy. Richard Florida argues that creative economies best thrive in places where "newcomers are accepted quickly." This can be a challenge in small towns that have grown unaccustomed to new faces. Many communities lack the basic amenities, from grocery stores to broadband. And entrepreneurs may find it difficult to access capital for projects in emerging local economies.



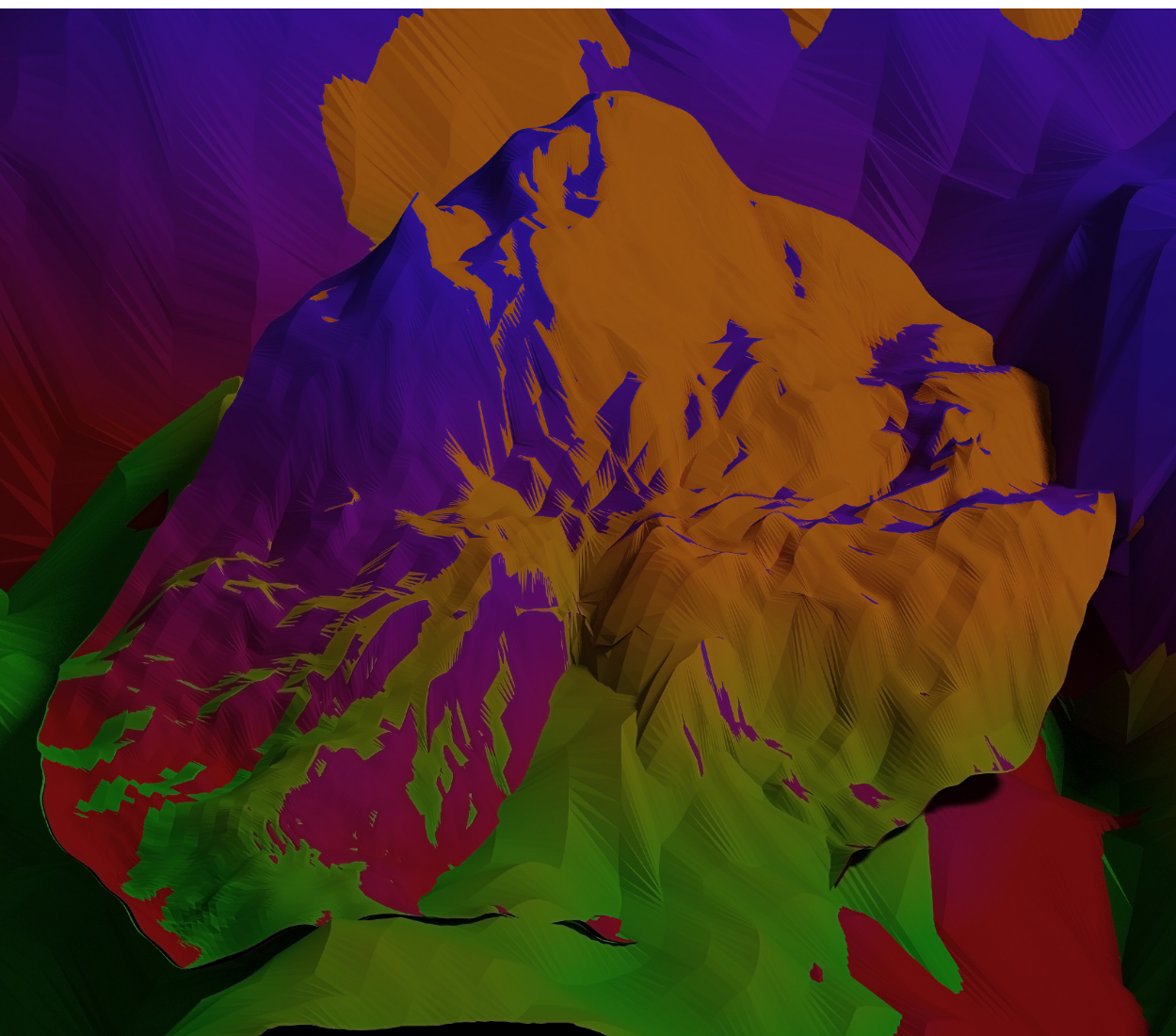
GRASSES – SILVER RIBBONS  
*Chris Wolf Edmonds*

Regional leaders are beginning to boot-scoot to Florida's tune. In 2014 the Flint Hills Regional Council released the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the Flint Hills Economic Development District. The organization established the following vision for the region: "A highly educated populace, working in an evolving knowledge-based economy,

living in the rich heritage of the Flint Hills ecosystem."

The report emphasizes entrepreneurship with a commitment to establishing a curriculum for entrepreneurship education and the development of "a plan for supporting people through the uncertain formative years to encourage more people to take those risks." Flint Hills Technical





LANDSCAPE IN A LANDSCAPE  
*Derek Dobbins*

College has led the charge with its popular “How to Start a Business” class, which has inspired forty new businesses in the Emporia area in the past ten years. To help fund the next generation of rural entrepreneurs, the Flint Hills Economic Development Plan proposes a “High Five Program” that would encourage Flint Hills natives to commit 5 percent of their income to helping “fund the next generation of rural entrepreneurs.” In its Flint Hills Regional Plan, Flint Hills Frontiers identified goals that include retaining and attracting youth, boosting entrepreneurship, improving Internet service, and encouraging succession planning.

If you live in the Flint Hills, what can you do to help your community succeed in the new creative economy? If you’re a business owner, farmer, or rancher in the Flint Hills, develop a succession plan. If you’re a native of the Flint Hills who has moved away, consider bringing your skills and/or job back to a rural community. If

you’re a recent college graduate, explore the Rural Opportunity Zone program that may provide incentives for returning to rural Kansas. If you’re interested in turning your passion into a business, take a class on entrepreneurship and talk to your Chamber of Commerce or Economic Development office. If someone you know has a great business idea, encourage them. If someone new comes to your community, welcome them. Finally, don’t forget to shop local.

*The Future of the Flint Hills* relies on the success of our rural communities. To succeed, we must support education, technology, and tolerance. The future hinges on our ability to encourage a creative economy, an economy that respects and enhances the region’s unique culture.

If you’re lucky, your town may be home to the inventor of the next cowboy boot.

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*Christy Davis*