

**IN PRAISE OF BLUE HIGHWAYS AND RURAL PLACES:  
AN ODE TO LEAST HEAT AND LEON**

*By David A. Watson, Ph.D.*

Its nearly noon on a fine late summer day in early September, and I've stopped at a picnic area just outside the hamlet of Hico, Texas on State Highway 6. I'm so hungry I'm eating a gas station sandwich (as my brother would say). I'm returning to Texas, my home, following a brief sojourn to the New Mexico desert. For a change of pace I am following what William Least Heat-Moon called the "blue highways", secondary roads that follow the topography and invite me to linger in small, friendly towns along the route. Its warm, though not hot, and the grasshoppers scatter wildly in all directions as I make my way over to the concrete tables and benches (installed in 1964 following a generous gift of the land on which to build them, according to the plaque positioned nearby). Traffic is light on SH6 on a weekday, with only the occasional 18 wheeler hurtling past at highway speed, toward Waco, in all likelihood (Paul Burka once noting in *Texas Monthly* that this highway is "...one of the longest roads in Texas that is not an interstate or a U.S. highway.") My hunger satiated for the moment, my thoughts drift toward some of my favorite works of "road" literature—John Steinbeck's "Travels with Charlie," William Least Heat-Moon's "Blue Highways," and of course anything Leon Hale ever wrote in the Houston Post or Chronicle newspapers on the subject of traveling around Texas. Allow me, then, to offer a few thoughts on rural America, and where the future might lead.

According to the Center for Small Towns at the University of Minnesota Morris, there are in the United States on the order of 15,000 towns smaller than 2000 persons in size. This represents roughly of 60% of the municipalities, but only about 5 % of the

population of the country. Having grown up on a farm in a very rural part of the country, I can tell you first-hand that for much of the USA, these small towns, villages and hamlets are not prospering, nor are they even in many cases holding their own. Across large swaths of the interior regions of America, downtowns are shuttering their windows. The only new construction, if any, occurs on the edge of town where Wal-Mart's rise amid the corn, wheat, soybean, or other crops.

It was the need to service the agricultural industry that led many small towns to arise and thrive, and it is due to the transformation of that market sector that so many of these quintessentially American locales are now struggling. Market pressures, advances in technology, and government farm programs and policies have all combined to dramatically reduce the numbers of people required to carry out agricultural production. Couple this with the movement of factories to the developing world, where labor costs are much lower, and good jobs that allow young people to support families have simply disappeared. The next generation then has no choice but to migrate to where there are jobs, i.e. larger cities, especially in the south and southwest.

What, then is the future of small towns in our country? Ironically, the same technological leaps forward that contributed to a decline in jobs for rural America may yet be involved in its renaissance. Ultimately, though, what may matter most is good old-fashioned leadership and the development of trust and understanding. *The Cattleman* magazine suggests that community leaders, from government to schools to agriculture and business, must come together and agree on a common vision for a town's future. Because this involves a frank assessment of existing infrastructure, there must be consensus concerning what aspects of the community need attention (e.g. schools, roads,

and housing) and by what mechanisms (e.g. bonds, taxation, or federal grants) these might be addressed. A safe community that attracts and retains business in a setting of affordable housing and high-quality schools is a goal that many small towns and cities are pursuing with vigor, and there are success stories. Towns like Hico and Comfort in Texas, or Shelbyville and Effingham in downstate Illinois where I grew up offer proof that this is so.

When I think about William Least Heat-Moon's evocation of the beauty and wide-open spaces of much of this country, I'm in awe, both of the land and of his prodigious talent for describing it. If I then consider Leon Hale's years of lugging a manual, then an IBM Selectric, typewriter across Texas in all kinds of weather and to every corner of the state, well, frankly I'm both impressed and envious. What a way to spend one's salad days. Though I'd love to linger just a few more minutes in this sunny little corner of Texas, maybe grab a few Z's (even a concrete bench looks inviting when you're spent the entire previous night driving), I must be moving on. Friends and family, not to mention a new job, await, and unlike my literary heroes, writing for me is just an avocation, not my profession. See you on down the road.