

One in a series of case studies on the potential for culture to stimulate development in rural places.

BC RURAL CENTRE  
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# Culture & Rural Development



## CASE STUDY

N.Y. MILLS REGIONAL CULTURAL CENTER

NEW YORK MILLS, MINNESOTA



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# CAN ANY PLACE EXIST WITHOUT CULTURE? INTRODUCTION

In the face of rapid urbanization and jarring demographic, environmental, and economic change, can culture play a positive role in shaping a better future for small towns and rural regions struggling to reinvent themselves?

Mines close. Forests disappear. Wells run dry. Companies fold. And with them, jobs and hope, leaving rural communities, regions, and First Nations in the lurch.

But there's one rural resource that always remains — culture.

From the mountains of Appalachia to the mountains of British Columbia. From the Cape Breton coast to the Sunshine Coast. When all else may seem lost, vibrant, inspiring, local culture remains.

But can art, music, theatre, literature, and dance be more than simply the glue that binds a community or region together? Is it possible to use authentic local culture as an economic lever, providing rural places with a new lease on life, with fresh promise and new jobs?

For the communities featured in our series of case studies on culture and rural development, the answer is clearly yes.

Remote Fogo Island, Newfoundland uses distinctive Celtic-tinged folkways, and a small-scale fisheries-based traditional economy to turn its apparent liabilities — a harsh landscape, often foul weather, and inaccessibility — into assets, in the process

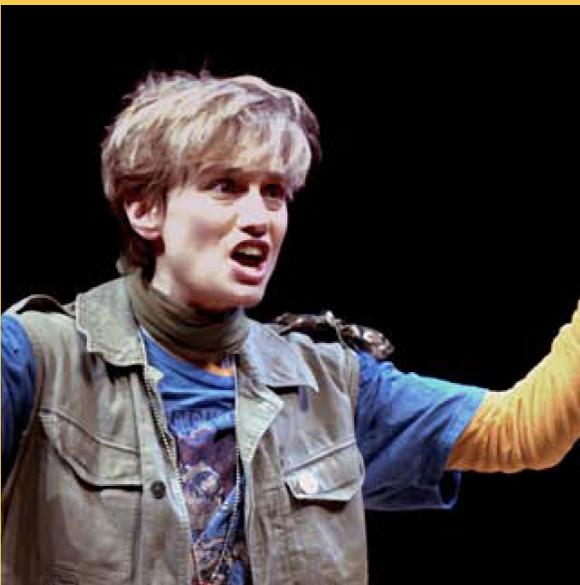
turning Fogo into a high-end tourism mecca as it celebrates, rather than paves over, local culture.

The citizens of tiny (pop. 120) Rosebud, Alberta put on a modest theatre performance back in the '90s, luring patrons in with a prairie potluck. Today, the Rosebud Theatre attracts over 40,000 annual visitors, and the Rosebud School of the Arts offers post-secondary degrees to students from across Canada. Essentially, the hamlet of Rosebud IS the Rosebud School of the Arts.

Until the 1950's, the only way to get to isolated Kaslo, BC, was either by foot or via sternwheeler. Today, music lovers from all over the West flock to the Kaslo Jazz Festival, run by a 27-year-old non-profit that is galvanizing Kaslovians to turn to the arts & culture as they strive to create a viable, sustainable new economy.

And then there's New York Mills, Minnesota, the subject of this brief case study.

We hope the information presented here will serve to inform and inspire other communities to take stock of their cultural resources. Then put them to good use in helping ensure our rural places thrive in the decades ahead.



## NEW YORK MILLS

With a population of 1,225 in 2014, located over 100 km from Fargo, North Dakota, the nearest city of any size, New York Mills is a prototypical remote prairie town. Unlike many other rural places, the town actually has a significant employer — Lund Boats, with its 575 staff — but with its modest **municipal budget**, New York Mills was stagnating.

## EMPLOYMENT

New York Mills was settled in the 1880's by Finnish immigrants — the town was founded in 1885 and named after the large number of lumber mills in town. Once the surrounding forests were gone, residents turned to corn & dairy farming. **Per capita income** today is \$15,950.

## INVESTMENT

New York Mill has seen its **median household income** grow from \$27,596 in 2000, to \$40,115 in 2015. While still far below the statewide average of \$63,488, that is still a remarkable increase. The only substantial change during that period? The surge in local cultural activity.



2,000,000



15,950



40,115

# CULTURE THE NEW YORK MILLS STRATEGY

"We're just a little town. You wouldn't think people would want to come here. But they were so impressed."

— Viola Cresswell, retired farmer

New York Mills' strategy was to use art as an economic development tool by creating the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center. The center, it was believed, would attract tourists and catalyze the development of new small businesses in town. In 1990, a non-profit group was created to lead the charge.

Their first initiative, an artist-in-residence program, served to inject new ideas & energy into the town's public life.

In 1990, a dilapidated 1885 general store was donated to the group. After raising \$35,000 from local groups and citizens, New York Mills council agreed to match that amount — the per capita equivalent of asking a city the size of Minneapolis for a \$13.7 million grant for a new arts centre. As then-mayor Larry Hodgson put it, "Sure it was a risk. But towns our size are struggling to keep businesses downtown and our population growing."

To reduce the town's risk, the arts organization agreed to grant the town ownership right to the building for five years — that way if the initiative flopped, the town would gain a newly renovated commercial space for their \$35,000 investment.

After more fund-raising and thousands of hours of volunteer labour, the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center opened in June, 1992. The Center's exhibits were cleverly designed to make art accessible to locals. Abstract art was paired with free hotdogs. Another exhibit was made entirely of agricultural products.

Perhaps the Center's most successful initiative is the annual "Great American Think-Off," in which everyday folks from across the US respond to a philosophical question. Local community leaders and teachers select the best answers, and sponsor a televised debate in the local high school auditorium broadcast across the USA on C-SPAN. This event, along with other Center exhibits over the years, has helped put New York Mills on the map, attracting media attention from the likes of The Today Show, the New York Times, and National Public Radio, granting it a presence that stretches far beyond the state of Minnesota — a presence that attracts a steady stream of visitors.

New York Mills stands as an excellent example of how the arts can be embraced by a rural community, and reinvigorate a local economy.



# PEOPLE MATTER

While other communities withered in the face of declining populations and deteriorating main streets, New York Mills has remained stable economically, while the Cultural Center continues to draw people, activity, revenue, and national attention to the community.

It's striking how often a single, determined person serves as the catalyst for culture-driven change in small rural places.

Kaslo Jazz Festival would never have happened with the efforts of founder Jim Holland.

The Rosebud School of the Arts exists thanks to the initial vision and efforts of LaVerne Erickson.

In the case of New York Mills, the driver of this small Minnesota town's culturally-tinged revitalization was one John Davis.

Davis, a recent art school graduate, left Minneapolis in search of a quiet place to paint. New York Mills with its cow pastures and cornfields, fit the bill.

In the beginning, Davis painted barns to get by. Over meals with his clients, he discovered a local thirst for the arts.

"I had my preconceived notions about rural living," Davis admits. "I found highly educated people, farmers with degrees. They wanted the arts, but there was a void. The elementary school had no art teacher. People drove to the city for events."

In 1990, Davis attracted artists from around the world by providing them with a

farmhouse in which to live and work for up to a month. The program was the beginning of a cultural renaissance for New York Mills, starting at the same time the local arts group acquired the building that was to become the Cultural Center.

"The cultural center is a big drawing card," says Mo Smith, owner of What a Rush Antiques. "If tourists are in the area, they stop in and shop around town."

If the key to making big things happen in small places is the emergence of a local champion, then just as important is the need for broadly-based community buy-in. Previously urban newcomers, who bring high-fallutin' ideas with them from the big city, often fall flat on their faces when trying to ram through what to them seem perfectly sensible ideas. Rural change needs to feel of-the-place — the most successful projects are those described by locals using words like "we" and "our."

"The key is so fundamentally simple," Davis says. "You must make arts accessible to the 80-year-old woman and the high school student. It's a meat-and-potatoes approach and can be stated in three words: cultivate the arts."



# NEW YORK MILLS BY THE NUMBERS

**POPULATION** (2014) **1,225**, a 5.8% increase since 2000

**AGES** 18 and under: **23.9%**; 18-24: **18.9%**; 24-44: **22%**; 45-64: **22.6%**; 65+: **22.5%**

**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME** (2015) **\$40,115**, a 56% increase since 2000

**MEDIAN HOME VALUE** (2015) **\$93,340**, a 65% increase since 2000

**UNEMPLOYMENT** (2015) **3%**

**NEAREST MAJOR CITY** Minneapolis, 150 miles away



**EAGLES CAFE**  
Catering  
&  
Fundraising  
Downtown New York Mills  
218-385-2469

Between 1990 and 1998, 14 new businesses opened in downtown New York Mills. The number of jobs increased in the town by 40%.



# CONCLUSION

Every rural place is different. But the fact is, one of the least recognized assets in many rural towns and regions is culture, in all its forms.

In the case of New York Mills, a cultural center became the new community focal point — more than simply a cultural gathering place, it helped, and continues to help, drive economic growth while affording local citizens an opportunity to both share their own creativity, and enjoy cultural activities and events.

For small towns whose main streets are lined with shuttered shops, a revitalization strategy that deploys culture at its centre may, as in the case of New York Mills, emerge as a successful strategy to turn things around.

For more information on the role of culture in rural development, and rural revitalization generally, visit our website:

<https://www.bcruralcentre.org/focus/population-attraction/>



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