

The Long Drive Home:

How Bob Stowell
and Allies Made
Ord's Future

Better Than Its Past

By Matthew Hansen



Preface

Ord is a story of a rural community that has transformed itself from crisis and decline to increasing vitality and prosperity. Author Matthew Hansen has captured this remarkable tale through the eyes of Robert (Bob) Stowell, a central community player in this

50-year long transformation. Bob's life's journey as a community builder in Ord includes his role as governmental, social and for-business entrepreneur. This story enriches our collection of Ord Stories captured and curated over the past three years.

Don Macke – e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems



Bob's Long Drive Home



Bob & Jean Stowell

Bob Stowell asked Jean if she wouldn't mind driving. He buckled himself into the passenger seat as his wife swung the Buick out of the Lied Lodge parking lot in Nebraska City and turned west to start the three-and-a-half-hour drive home to Ord.

It was quiet in the car as she took Highway 2 to Lincoln, then hopped onto Interstate 80, and then turned north and drove two-lane highways toward the Valley County town where Bob had grown up, the town to which they had returned after Bob had fought and nearly died in the faraway jungles of Vietnam. She drove north toward the small central Nebraska town, Ord, where the Stowells had raised a family, started a successful law practice, built their lives.

In the stillness of that night in August 2000, the only sounds in the Buick were wheels rolling over lonely central Nebraska pavement, the rustling of papers in the passenger seat, and Bob Stowell's voice dictating a big idea into a Dictaphone.

The Stowells had been in Nebraska City, attending a seminar put on by the State of Nebraska's Department of Economic Development – a conference focused on kickstarting small town economies. And now, as Jean drove them home, Bob, inspired, rifled through four or five other small town economic development plans he had acquired before the seminar. He strained his eyes to read them by the dashboard light, seizing on ideas he thought would work in his hometown and discarding ideas he thought wouldn't. Sitting in the passenger seat of the Stowell family Buick, Bob peered down at the plans and, into a tape recorder, dictated the first draft of what would become Ord and Valley County's own plan to reverse decades of downturn and depopulation and revive its badly wounded economy.

To understand the journey that Bob Stowell was taking on that summer night in 2000, you need to understand the metaphorical miles of crumbling road

that Stowell and his hometown and home county had been lurching and bumping over for the better part of the 20th century. And you also need to understand the miles of smoother highway Ord and Valley County build for themselves in the years to come—a 21st century small-town Nebraska path forward Stowell himself could not yet see, one that Ord and Valley County would use to accelerate, then speed, then fly.

Three decades of turmoil were visible in the rearview mirror on that August 2000 night, turmoil that had deeply frustrated Stowell and harmed his hometown.

In the 1970s, Ord was confronted with an activist school board whose members advocated the censoring of books, attempted to remove a longtime school leader and systematically starved the school system of funding. This dark and divisive period in Ord ended with a contentious recall effort that left deep scars, including on Stowell and others who helped to lead it.

In the 1980s, the American farm crisis delivered a staggering blow, forcing area farmers and business owners into bankruptcy and causing many of Stowell's high school classmates and some of his closest friends—families who had been Ord's backbone—to pack up and move to Texas, Florida, Arizona.

And in the 1990s, Ord had repeatedly stared down the reality that it might lose its hospital, one of the area's main employers and the only major medical center within an hour's drive. Doctors took opposing sides. Hospital administrators left. And some in the community worked hard to shut the hospital down instead of saving it.

As the hospital and school limped along, as the area's agricultural base and Main Street businesses eroded away like topsoil in a windstorm, and as local residents faced off again and again in a series of poisonous squabbles, many in Valley County succumbed to a cynicism that any small-town Nebraska native will recognize and understand deep in their bones.

Our hometown's best days have passed, they thought. There's no sense denying it, and no use fighting it. Our children should get as far away from here as possible, as the good memories of Ord and Valley County yellow inside our scrapbooks.

"There was this ever-present feeling of hopelessness," Stowell says. "Peoples' best friends

went broke and left town. All the controversy, all the pain from the Farm Crisis, all the consternation, all the hateful words and letters, all the times when you just had a feeling of, 'I failed. This is failing.'"

"I never truly considered leaving. But we sure understood why people did."

Only when you understand the depths of this history can you truly grasp Ord's 21st century resurgence, the turnaround that would begin in earnest soon after Jean and Bob arrived home in Ord. Starting soon after this August 2000 night, the couple, and an ever-growing number of friends and allies, would turn the ideas Bob Stowell was speaking into a tape recorder into their small town's stunning new reality. Together, they would hire the county's first economic development director, pass a local sales tax

amazed, as young adults—many of whom had grown up in Valley County, and some who hadn't—moved to town and started families and businesses.

As the hospital and school system improved, as the area's economic base grew sturdier and more able to weather fiscal storms, as the storefronts along Main Street reopened, as the local residents increasingly peacefully resolved debates and pulled in the same direction, many in Valley County began to feel something that's a little jarring to anyone who has grown up or lived in a small town—an emotion that may shock policy makers, pundits and the wider public alike.

The residents of Ord and Valley County, particularly its teenagers, began to feel good about their hometown's future. They began to feel...hope.

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that kickstarted the turnaround's funding and pool private money to fund young entrepreneurs who dreamt of starting their own small businesses.

Together, they would build a new hospital, a new fire hall, a new school addition, a new, sorely-needed housing development, while they also renovated the high school, rebuilt the courthouse, and revived Main Street itself.

Together, they would bring new jobs to the area, replacing their two-dimensional 20th century economy with a multi-dimensional 21st century version. They attracted a major ethanol plant that spawned the founding or growth of nearly a dozen related businesses. They aided the expansion of a niche manufacturer of underwater electrical parts that has grown to nearly 100 employees. They supported an aging sporting goods store as it reimagined itself as an e-commerce retailer. They created the conditions and investment that allowed a new brewery, a new day spa, a new caterer, and other new businesses to be born, survive and often flourish.

Together, they would stabilize Ord's population for the first time in four decades. Together, they would watch, at first a little

“There's a cultural shift that has happened here,” Stowell says. “And thank the Lord for the change. It did not happen accidentally. There were plenty of barriers and plenty of scars left along the way. But today, what has happened here, it is so important. It is so joyful.”

Bob Stowell didn't even dare to imagine this hopeful future as he sat in the passenger seat of his Buick on a sweltering August 2000 night.

Even as he sat shuffling his papers, and dictating what would become the city and county's first fleshed-out economic development plan, he couldn't fathom the degree to which his words would become action, and his leadership would become contagious, and this solo exercise would become a multi-generational group project.

As Jean drove them toward home on a quiet two-lane highway, the only sound in the car was the sound of shuffling papers and Bob's voice verbalizing ideas into a tape recording.

He did not know he was speaking the rough draft for Ord's future success into existence. That he was birthing the blueprint for a small-town comeback.

The Perception is the Poison. Ord is the Antidote.

In the past half-century, Americans have heard, again and again, that our small towns are dying. We have heard it so many times that it has become a sort of pessimistic gospel, The Book of Rural Decline. That dark tale threatens to choke off important conversations about what we can do—what we are doing—to make sure our smallest communities survive and thrive in present day and for generations to come.

The Perception is the Poison. Ord is the Antidote.

And that is why it is crucial to tell and to hear the story of Ord, Nebraska, pop. 2,100, the county seat of 4,200-resident Valley County in the north-central part of the state.

Ord sits at edge of the ruggedly beautiful Nebraska Sandhills, one of the least populated places in the continental United States. It is located more than 60 miles from any major chain grocery store, big-box retail store, multi-plex movie theater, four-year university or even four-lane highway. From Ord, it will take you as long to drive to a major metro airport in Omaha, roughly three-and-a-half hours, as it will to fly nonstop from that airport to New York City.

And yet, Ord isn't dying. In several important ways—economic, cultural and demographic—Ord is reborn.

Simply understanding this truth challenges many long-held assumptions about the fate of small-town America.

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But understanding why Ord is surviving and thriving—charting the path it has taken from near-ruin to relative success—is more important still, because it can offer lessons learned to the leaders, residents and native sons and daughters of the thousands of map dots that cover the Great Plains and every other region of the United States.

The simple truth is that Ord and no other small American community will ever be exactly what it once was in the early 20th century, when there were 7 million family farms, more than triple the amount there are today. But the more nuanced truth that we can learn from Bob Stowell and his allies is that while we can't return to some sort of Rockwellian reality—which, it should be noted, wasn't all that real anyway—we can forge ahead, with intelligence and with purpose, to re-envision, rebuild and renew our commitment to rural America's places.

This fight to save a small town is not easy, Bob and the gang will tell you. The work is often slow and frustrating, the road ahead littered with roadblocks and potholes.

But Bob Stowell and many others haven't picked this fight because it's easy. They picked this fight because they decided that it was a fight worth having.

The fight to save Ord is an educational and potentially transformative tale. And it's an awe-inspiring one, too.

Because, in Ord, Nebraska, they are winning the fight.





A Hard-Won Ballot Box Miracle

He started by showing up.

On that night in 2000, while riding shotgun home from Nebraska City, Bob Stowell had begun to write a plan to revitalize Ord – a plan that included a 1 percent local sales tax to fund that revitalization. There was ample reason to do so, he thought.

Ord was struggling to bring in new businesses. It had just missed out on bringing a call center to town due to having no incentives to offer. Within a year, an opportunity to recruit another call center, Timberline Total Solutions (TTS) was presented to Ord by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. TTS also requested business incentives. This time the Valley County Board of Supervisors answered the call and offered a \$100,000 forgivable performance-based loan from the county inheritance tax fund. That sealed the deal and Ord's first major recruitment success resulted in 100 new employees, some traveling as far as 70 miles to work, and a payroll of \$1,250,000.

Inheritance tax funds were very limited, so it became clear the area needed a reliable way to lure new employers, to encourage construction, to spur growth. But the catch was that the most reliable pot of money to do all this, a one percent local sales tax, had proven wildly unpopular in previous discussions. Three prior attempts to pass such a tax had died quick deaths.

To gauge the public mood, Stowell and allies commissioned the University of Nebraska at Kearney to do a survey in early 2001 that asked Valley County residents how they felt about such a plan if proposed in a special election.

"The results came back and basically told us it wasn't gonna pass," Stowell says.

It would have been easy then to give up on the idea of a local sales tax, to scale back any plans being visualized for Ord's growth, to take an easier path.

Instead, Bob Stowell and a growing group of allies began to show up. At the hospital. At the VFW. At the senior center and the city council meeting. At the coffeeshop and the Chamber event. At every community group and meeting that would have them, Stowell and other supporters came, showed a PowerPoint presentation and gently, politely, began to try to educate and convince the residents of Valley County that passing a local sales tax was the right thing to do.

The previous year, two young Chamber co-presidents, Kylie White and Jim Johnson, had led the formation of a 17-person economic development committee. That committee had a lot of passion but not much power, so in July 2000, Stowell and others formed an economic development board.

This new board contained members from every existing power center in the county. Two members from the city council served on the economic development board, as did two county board members, two members of the Chamber of Commerce, and two members from Greater Loup Valley Activities, Inc., a nonprofit designed to spur development in the area.

Every single member of this new board became convinced that a local option sales tax was the right move. And they proceeded by forming yet another committee, this one narrowly focused on the sales tax issue.

Now it wasn't just Bob Stowell, alone, trying to convince the voters of Valley County to slightly increase sales taxes. It was Bob Stowell and a small army of advocates, including a high school economics teacher and the owner of the local radio station.

"Everybody on these committees became an advocate, and that was key," Stowell says. "There were older people, younger people, employers, employees and so forth...Now we were getting good guidance and good support from every segment and sector and community, and now we were ready to go out and deliver a consistent message to the public."

And that is what they did. Through the spring, summer, and fall of 2001, a proponent of the local option sales tax appeared at 33 different community events and three town hall meetings.

They showed the Powerpoint presentation that was filled with statistics about what the plan could do for the area. They played a short movie extolling the virtues of the plan that the group had filmed with the help of the local radio station.

They used several savvy and common-sense arguments that, slowly but surely, began to resonate with the people in the audience.

Argument No. 1. Even though the tax would only be placed on goods and services within the Ord city limits, the funds can and will be used to fund economic development in all of Valley County.

This part of the plan—actually a novel one in Nebraska—helped to persuade rural residents that they wouldn't be charged the sales tax when they went into town but never see any of the funds in the part of the county where they lived.

We can get better. Our shared future can be brighter than today.

Argument No. 2. Do you want real tax relief? Then we need to grow the tax base of our community, and this is the best way to do it.

This argument seemed a hard sell since it was advocating the idea that you needed to slightly raise taxes now in order to lower them later. But it resonated, particularly with local farmers who had long been opponents of high property taxes. They were convinced that the overall tax levy might drop, or at least stay steady, if the local tax base grew.

And, though this will be discussed in more detail later, it is worth mentioning here that this actually happened. By recruiting new businesses or expanding existing businesses, Ord and Valley County have grown their tax base massively in the 21st century. And that growth has allowed the tax burden on individual business and property owners to stay relatively stable, Stowell says.

Another argument, a crucial one, was actually defending the proposal against misinformation that tends to crop up in small towns and virtu-

ally any other community unless there's someone to counteract it. No, the presenters told the various community groups, this money won't be used solely for Project X or Project Y or serve as a slush fund for a local politician or make anyone in power rich.

The group of local sales tax allies also held three major community meetings, inviting anyone, supporters, opponents and those on the fence, to come ask their questions and voice their concerns. The first meeting was packed and fairly heated, Stowell remembers. By the third meeting, held at the local Elks Club, a funny thing happened. The room was half full, and the members of the crowd who did have questions tended to respectfully ask for more information.

"The heat was being taken out of this situation," Stowell says. "We were answering the questions, and people were starting to think, 'hey, this might work!'"

But the group didn't stop with the meetings. They made a list of people they should contact. Stowell personally called a group of the county's farmers who had been vocal opponents of the previous attempts to pass a local option sales tax. After those conversations, most of the farmers became neutral. Several became supporters. Two or three actually ended up writing letters endorsing the plan. In community meetings and in phone calls, the group of supporters sold the plan's details and batted down misinformation. But, even more importantly, they offered up a vision for Ord's future, a hopeful view that stood in stark contrast to so much of what Valley County's residents had heard and internalized about the area's decline.

We can get bigger, they were telling the audience. We can get better. Our shared future can be brighter than today.

On Election Night 2001, in a small conservative, tax-averse community in north-central Nebraska, the ballot proposal to add a one percent local sales tax passed. It didn't just pass. It passed easily. It passed with 74 percent of the vote.

It passed because Stowell and his allies had shown up, organized, done the hard work of persuasion. And it has passed with flying colors because a small group of Ord-area allies had changed the conversation. They had shifted mindsets from my savings account balance to our shared investment in our community. From the failures of yesterday to the promise of tomorrow.

It's hard to overstate the amount of difference this 2001 vote made in the future of Ord and Valley County, Stowell says today.

Numerically, the low interest loans to new businesses—paid for by a part of the revolving loan funds—are now circulating roughly \$6 million in the community at any given time. It has prompted a stunning \$70 million in overall deal flow, Stowell says.

But it is even bigger than that, he thinks. Because the process proved to the community—and to Stowell himself—that if they put in the work, they could accomplish big, hard, meaningful things together.

"If I had to pick one single turning point, it would be this," Stowell says of the vote and the resulting influx of sales tax money to fund Valley County's resurgence. "It changed everything."



Lt. Stowell Takes a Bullet to the Chest, Then Follows His Heart

He sat writing his weekly letter home on a Sunday morning, trying to finish it in the allotted ten minutes, trying not to cry because West Point plebes do not cry.

It was 1961, and Bob Stowell had just finished his first week at the United States Military Academy, an introduction aptly nicknamed “Beast Barracks.” He was 17 years old, “as green as a gourd,” and with every last fiber of his being he wanted to go home.

He wanted to write his first letter home and tell Mom and Dad that he was two years younger than most of the other plebes. That he was already losing weight off his skinny 154-pound frame- he would soon be down to a skeletal 137. That they allowed him thumbnail-sized pieces of food, and that they ran for miles on end, and that they should come get him and take him back to the farm near Ord because he wasn’t cut out for this life.

He cried a boy’s tears then, cried so hard that they dampened his blank sheet of paper. But then he thought about stacking hay on 100-degree days on his parents’ tiny, 134 acre farm. He thought about how his parents never had the chance to finish high school, and how they had worked their entire lives while urging him to make something better for himself.

He wiped his eyes and started to write.

“Things are kind of tough here,” a 17-year-old Bob Stowell wrote. “It is really nice here,” he wrote. He wrote: “I think things are going to be just fine.”

Over time, the West Point plebe who would grow up to become a widely respected small-town lawyer learned something about himself, something that would help him as a platoon leader and a LRRP officer in Vietnam when he led perilous long-range missions near the Cambodian Border.

It helped him as he made his way through law school, moved his family back to his hometown- and started to work on improving that small town, sometimes in the face of fierce resistance.

He learned that he couldn’t, and wouldn’t, quit.

“During that year, I learned that I could hate about everything I could think of that was going to happen during the next day, but that if I took one day at a time, I could stand on my head, if necessary until it was over.”

Robert Stowell was born in 1943, the youngest of four children in a tight-knit and financially strapped central Nebraska farm family.

He would be full grown by the time his mother told him that his birth had been unplanned, because “she thought that might affect my self-worth,” he said.

He started milking cows at 5 years old. At 12, he was riding his bike three country miles to stack hay for \$5 a day. He attended country school through the 8th grade, and then attended Ord High School, where he finished first in his class. And he worked, hard, on the family farm, frequently stacking hay at sunrise and doing chores at sunset.

Stowell believes those long, hot days in the hayfields came in handy at West Point, and then at Army Ranger School, and then, in 1966, when he boarded a troop transport ship that left San Francisco and docked in Vung Tau Bay, Vietnam.

Lt. Stowell, who had married his high school sweetheart Jean the previous year, found himself immediately in charge of a 34-man rifle platoon. This was dangerous enough, but things got more dangerous still when he became the operations officer for a long-range reconnaissance patrol.

In this role, Stowell would insert patrol teams into small holes in the jungle, where they would take turns sleeping at night while carrying out surveillance, prisoner taking and assassination missions.

“I have often mused, in recent years, that as a 23-year-old I had millions of dollars of equipment, weapons and wonderful troops as my responsibility, but as a grandfather, sometimes I have been reluctant to let my 25-year-old grandson drive the new pick-up,” Stowell wrote. “It is interesting how situations dictate different frames of reference.”

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In March 1967, Stowell led a reconnaissance team near Cambodia, where a 10,000-man North Vietnamese unit was operating.

There, after booby trapping a trail, Stowell’s team found itself surrounded and pinned down by an 80-man North Vietnamese company with four machine guns. Stowell kept fighting—throwing every grenade he had—even after being repeatedly hit, blasts that felt like “electric shock” and made it hard to breathe.

The team nearly ran out of ammunition before being evacuated by helicopter, narrowly escaping as it dodged machine gun fire and climbed to safety.

Stowell had been shot three times. One bullet tore off a chunk of his pectoral muscle. Another went an inch below his heart, pierced his diaphragm and lodged in his liver—where the bullet still resides today.

“Makes for a good conversation after chest X-rays,” he jokes.

Stowell was nominated for and eventually received the Distinguished Service Cross. He spent time in the hospital, and after recovering was flown back to the United States, where he taught young officers’ leadership at Fort Benning’s Infantry School.

Then, in the late summer of 1969, he returned home to Nebraska, where he enrolled at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s law school.

He and Jean had already decided what they wanted to do when he finished.

They wanted to move back to Ord, where he would start a law practice and where they would raise their family.

“I remember Jean saying, I would like our kids, when they are running around the courthouse square, and if there’s an 80-year-old man there

sitting on a bench, I would like them to have the freedom to talk to that man, because they know him.”

In 1972, the retired Army officer with a North Vietnamese bullet lodged in his liver opened a law practice in his hometown.

He and Jean were “as poor as a church mouse,” with what Stowell estimates was a net worth of negative \$1,500. He spent his first years back in town working seven days a week and most nights.

Despite the workload, it felt special to return to his hometown as a young lawyer, who was soon being asked to join boards, local clubs and chair the local American Cancer Society fund drive.

Quickly he could see that he could make a difference in Ord. But he could also see the storm clouds. “We were welcomed back, and it felt good. But pretty quickly I did notice these issues that I hadn’t expected. I first noticed it with the schools.”



He didn't want to get involved. He really didn't.

The young lawyer was already working 70-hour weeks, scratching and clawing to build a profitable law practice. And it didn't behoove him to anger any clients. Easier to just stay out of it, he thought.

A New Fight on the Home Front

But then a school board member quit and the existing board appointed a minister who espoused anti-government views. Now, the six-member board had four members who Bob Stowell, and many other community members, perceived as extremely problematic for the community.

They were trying to ban books from the library. They were trying to change the curriculum to fit with their political agenda. They were trying to run out the superintendent, a popular leader who had served in that position for more than a quarter-century. And they were attempting to starve the Ord school district of funding—trying to restrict spending that had already been allocated by the county and state.

He had to get involved. He had to.





“I got drawn into it because I just felt like it was wrong,” Stowell says. “And it was.”

The school board conflict would prove to be one of many tough conflicts that Ord and Valley County would have with itself in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, skirmishes in a larger culture war about what kind of place Ord was, and what it wanted to be.

He had to get involved. He had to.

On one side stood members of the local chapter of the John Birch Society. *(This was the right-wing organization that publicly accused President Dwight Eisenhower and President Ronald Reagan of being communists while allying with open racists and segregationists like Gov. George Wallace.)* Some Valley County residents also joined Posse Comitatus. *(This is an anti-Semitic, anti-tax group that frequently claimed the power to ignore state and federal laws and eventually was linked to the assassination of two federal marshals.)*

On the other side stood people like Stowell, a self-described “generally conservative Republican” who became convinced that the Bircher and Posse crowd was threatening the future of Ord.

Crucially, these fights occurred as agriculture, the Ord area’s traditional economic driver, faced challenges and then full-blown disaster during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s.

Faced with both the perception and the reality of decline, the area’s residents went head to head with each other again and again. These skirmishes left scars on Stowell and many others. But they were also struggles that Stowell and allies repeatedly (and often barely) won—victories that kept Ord’s core intact and enabled its future success.

First came the school.

As the Bircher wing of the board pushed ideas like the censoring of books, board meetings became loud, nasty affairs. The meetings eventually were moved to the gymnasium to accommodate large crowds who wanted to speak in support or opposition during the public comment period. The overflow crowds cheered or jeered school board members as they debated and voted on the superintendent’s future and a series of other controversial issues.

Convinced that there was no way to gain the cooperation of all board members, Stowell and allies made plans to form a group to advocate for the superintendent and oppose censorship and restrictive budget moves.

The group’s name reflected the fear and urgency felt by its founders. Save Our Schools, they called it. SOS for short.

Stowell commissioned a survey gauging the possibility that SOS could successfully recall problematic board members at the ballot box.

The survey results came back: ‘You have a 19 percent chance of recalling all four board members.’

“I remember my heart just sank,” Stowell says. “I saw that and thought, ‘What can we possibly do?’”

What SOS decided to do was get to work, mounting a campaign similar in many ways to the sales tax campaign Stowell would lead a quarter-century later.

They bought newspaper ads and wrote letters to the editor. They went to speak to every neighborhood group that would have them. They split up names and made phone calls, trying to change minds and, as the recall election approached, urging their supporters to the polls.

“I learned something (during the school board fight) that it was smart to always end with this question. Do you think you can support our position?”

“We found that key. Once somebody looks you in the eye and says, ‘Yes I can’ there’s a high probability they are going to do just that when they get in that voting booth.”

On Election Night, voters recalled four school board members, replacing them with SOS backed candidates, including several retired teachers.

It was a victory that came at a cost for Stowell. He had started receiving anonymous hate mail, both to his office and his home. His public involvement in the school board fight also strained relationships for his law practice. Importantly, Stowell and others have worked hard through the years since to heal the wounds of this struggle by coming together to respect the will of the whole community while still respecting the rights of individuals to hold their own views on issues that matter to them.

A similar bruising battle took place over the local hospital, this one spanning several decades and controversies.

Stowell, who served on the hospital foundation board for nearly two decades, found himself in the middle of many of these conflicts as well.

Hospital administrator after hospital administrator came and left. Doctors fought about the proper way to care for patients, arguments that spilled over into hospital board meetings. The arguments ultimately led to an effort to fire some of the doctors which divided Valley County residents who liked the doctors and those who did not.

Local nurses, long the backbone of the local medical community, fled the divisiveness and growing financial calamity of the Ord hospital and took nursing jobs in Grand Island or Kearney.

At one point, county board members grew so angry that they threatened to fire the entire hospital board and take control of the troubled hospital themselves.

And, as the hospital sank deeper and deeper into financial ruin, members of the hospital board tried to recruit national hospital management firms to take over, only to be told that the Ord hospital was too much of a financial risk for these outside companies.

At one point, Stowell says, “we had a day or a day-and-a-half of financial reserves left.”

Throughout these fights, the Ord lawyer remained convinced that Ord needed to keep its hospital if it wanted to attract new residents or keep aging ones.

“When people are thinking about moving to town, they ask, ‘How are your schools, how is your health care and what kind of job can I get?’

“Well, all of those areas are super important, especially in a rural area. You can’t just not have health care.”

But many residents of Valley County disagreed. A movement to close the hospital gained steam, and it nearly did several times in the late 20th century.

Stowell, always firmly on the side of saving the hospital, once again experienced challenges for his law practice. As time has passed many of these rifts have healed. What is important here is not the precipitating incident or its immediate outcome but to point out that communities can heal from difficult times. This is an important lesson for any community: today’s struggles do not have to define tomorrow’s future. It takes intentionality of action, integrity of character and a willingness to listen to divergent perspectives to move on productively.

None of these battles took place in a vacuum. In fact, many may have been spurred by the increasingly dire situation individual Valley County residents—and the community at large—found itself in the latter half of the 20th century.

Since Ord’s post-Civil War founding, farming had been king. Agriculture created opportunities for farm families starting in the late 19th century, as farmers taught their children to grow crops and raise livestock on the land, and then passed that land onto them.

But an economy heavily dependent on one industry also created big problems. The population of Valley County nosedived in the 1930s, as the Dust Bowl and Great Depression crushed area farms.

But even that depopulation was no match for what started happening around Ord in the early 1980s. Stowell first got nervous about what came to be known as The Farm Crisis in 1983, when several of his law practice’s big farming clients began to teeter on the edge of mortgage foreclosure.

Farmers across the country were hammered by rising interest rates and freefalling income.

Many, including those in Valley County, began to sell off what assets they had left or, worse yet, have them taken by the bank. And these losses created wider pain in farming-centric rural communities like Ord—pain both financial and psychic.

Stowell found himself studying bankruptcy protections and mediating increasingly scary disputes between farmers and the banks seeking to reclaim their assets—including land that had sometimes been in

their family for generations. A number of farmers aggressively challenged those who came to reclaim their farms.

Some farmers even pointed guns at inspectors.

Stowell’s clients—first farmers, and then those who worked or owned businesses in Ord—began to sell what they could and move in search of an easier life.

The widespread nature of these departures is clearly visible in census records. Valley County lost 8% of its population in the 1980s, and then another 10% of its residents in the 1990s.

But those numbers don’t capture the level of devastation that Ord and Valley County residents often felt during those dark decades.

Stowell watched as several of his employees departed for the southwest. Other friends, people whose families had lived in Ord for generations, moved south to Texas.

And then Stowell’s best friend, the owner of the local lumberyard, got tired of struggling, sold his business and moved his family to Arizona.

“It’s kind of hard to describe the level of hopelessness,” Stowell says.

“When your farmers leave, and when as a community we are almost 100 percent agriculture dependent, that’s crushing. And then when the people you have relationships with, the people who have helped build the town, they leave, too...it is crushing. In Ord, we were lower than a snake’s belly in a wagon track.”

That feeling of hopelessness—the belief that Ord’s best days were long gone—helped to give rise to the ultra-far-right groups like the John Birch Society and Posse Comitatus. And those groups, who promoted an agenda that further divided and inflamed residents, often turned their ire on Stowell.

.....
“...we were lower than a snake's belly in a wagon track.”
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Threatening calls and letters. Lost business each time he took a public stand on an issue facing Ord.

But the lowest point for Stowell may have been the time that a group of Posse followers gathered at the Veterans’ Hall for the specific purpose of trying him in a kangaroo court.

The specific issue was the sale of a ranch, a sale that had grown messy after the buyers failed to make payments. In response, a group of residents met, voted and wrote up a public notice that Robert Stowell had been disbarred.

It seemed a little funny at first, as the meeting had no force of law. Stowell still had his law license. In fact, he had just been appointed by the Nebraska Supreme Court to serve on an ethics committee.

But, as ridiculous as a kangaroo court sounds, it still caused Stowell problems. Clients called him confused, wondering if he could still serve as their attorney. And it still stung. These were his neighbors, some of whom he had known since boyhood. In his quiet moments, Stowell thought long and hard about his home town, and his place within it.

He was too entrenched in the community and too stubborn to leave, Stowell says. But, near the end of the 20th century, he wasn’t sure he was making the right decision to stay.

All of it was deflating. We had always seen the strengths of this community, but now we increasingly saw the rejections and the dejections. I had this feeling of, “I failed. And it makes you wonder: Is it even possible to succeed?”

The Gift that Hasn't Stopped Giving

It started with a gift that no one knew what to do with.

John and Alice Wozab lived in Ord for most of their adult lives, spending nearly a half-century running an abstract, real estate and insurance business. John, who served in the Navy during World War II, also served as Valley County Veteran's Service Officer for 46 years.

After the couple died, Alice first, then John in 1998, they bequeathed \$1.2 million to the hometown and home county that they loved.

But the county board wasn't quite sure what to do with the money. They had no time or expertise to manage or dole out such a large sum.

The county board contacted Robert Stowell. He wasn't sure what to do, either, but he did know who to call. He phoned Jeff Yost, the executive director of the Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF), a nonprofit renowned globally for its ability to assist small towns to re-imagine and reinvest in their futures. Instead of pouring the money into one project, city and county leaders, working with the NCF, created the Valley County Community Foundation Fund. As of 2020, the VCCFF has funded dozens of projects with hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants, all while raising money and growing several endowments and other funds that combined now hold more than \$7.2 million in total assets. These affiliated funds benefiting Valley County ensure that the local community foundation will continue to fund local projects for decades to come.

But the importance of the Wozab gift can't be measured in money alone, Stowell and other leaders say. "That first phone call to the

Nebraska Community Foundation proved to be the beginning of an ongoing and now more than two-decade-long, wonderful relationship that has helped us so immensely," Stowell says. "That relationship changed things for us."

And after the open warfare of much of the late 20th century, the planning around the Wozab gift represented one of the first times that Ord residents from varying political backgrounds and different governmental bodies worked together.

For the first time in a long time, some leaders and key stakeholders in Valley County sensed some green shoots of progress. They sensed cooperation. Momentum. Hope.

Stowell and others built on that momentum in 2000, when they jumped through legal hoops and completed an inter-local agreement to create the Valley County Economic Development Board.

They sensed cooperation. Momentum. Hope.

Now, nothing could be less sexy than an inter-local agreement and an economic development board, Stowell acknowledges.

But these steps laid crucial groundwork for the future, he says, serving as the foundation for Ord's later success.

When formed, the Valley County Economic Development Board purposely had two members each from four existing city and county boards, a Noah's Ark approach ensuring that the new board would have power from the beginning.



The two members from the Ord City Council, two members from the Valley County Board, two members from the local Chamber of Commerce and two members from the Greater Loup Valley Activities, Inc., soon realized that, while their intentions were good and their ideas were exciting, they needed a more coherent direction.

To be more precise, they needed a director. Each existing board agreed to kick in \$15,000 apiece, and the Valley County Economic Development Board began to advertise for the position.

A small Nebraska community hiring an economic development director was all but unheard of at the dawn of the 21st century. The board members who made the decision had never heard of a town or county of their size making a similar move.

And, while the position itself was unusual, the hiring decision the board made was possibly even more original, Stowell thinks.

After receiving several good applications, and interviewing several with decades of experience, the 8-person board voted unanimously, 8-0, to hire a 22-year-old from Ord who many board members knew as a one-time teenage babysitter before she moved from Ord to go to college and then pursue a master's degree.

"We knew her, and we knew her background, and that was important, that she had roots here," Stowell said. "But it was her interview that made the difference. She knocked our socks off."

Bethanne Kunz, the new economic development director, soon opened an office that combined the efforts of the economic development board and the chamber of commerce.

Stowell and others credit her with giving energy and guidance to Ord's resurgence in the eight years she stayed in the position. She

Ord and Valley County now had the luxury of available money, a luxury the town and county hadn't had in decades.

resigned in 2008 to take another important position in Ord, serving as the local hospital system's marketing director.

Soon after hiring Kunz, Ord and Valley County laid more groundwork on which they would later build their future success.

Valley County became the pilot community for a Nebraska Community Foundation program that offered a new, holistic approach to community development. Called Hometown Competitiveness, the program focused various programs and efforts on building leaders in the community, encouraging entrepreneurship, getting adolescents and teenagers engaged in the county's future and growing community philanthropy. Many of the various programs and efforts discussed later in this story, including a leadership academy that has now graduated nearly 200 local residents, flowed directly or indirectly from this Nebraska Community Foundation pilot program.

Many other outside partners, including the Kellogg Foundation, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development and the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, have assisted in these and other efforts in Ord. But it's crucial to understand that NCF and other partners "co-produce" with Ord, says Jeff Yost, the longtime director of the



Nebraska Community Foundation. Valley County residents have shown an increasing and enduring willingness to get involved and stay involved in these projects, he says.

"Lots of conventional wisdom assumes that change happens because of ideas. In community building, we constantly find that change happens along the lines of relationships at the speed of trust," Yost says.

"In 1998 (when NCF started working with Ord) I didn't know how to say that. But that's always been the underlying basis of our work in Valley County and everywhere."

"In a place like Nebraska, where there are only two or three degrees of separation, you have to be in deep personal relationships with people in order for them to receive what you are sharing, to hear what you are saying. The community building question is never about them believing me. It's always them believing themselves."

Local economic development efforts received their biggest infusion of funds in 2001, when the residents voted overwhelmingly to pass that one-cent sales tax that would eventually unlock millions of dollars for economic revitalization efforts in Valley County.

That same year, Stowell and others formed an investment group they named the Loup Valley Investment Club. The goal of that group: Raise local money and pour it into business start-ups and expansions.

By this point at the dawn of the 21st century, thanks to a little luck and an incredible amount of hard work, Stowell and allies were starting to pile up funds that could be used to change the community's future trajectory.

Ord and Valley County now had the luxury of available money, a luxury the town and county hadn't had in decades.

"You have to have access to capital in a smaller community," Stowell says. "I can't stress enough how crucial that is, no matter the small community."

Now new questions loomed: How would this money be spent? And would it make an honest-to-goodness difference in the eyes and the lives of Valley County's residents?

Sarah Has a Dream

You might have cruised by the single-story industrial building just off of Ord's Main Street and never noticed it. It's a building that is easy to ignore, a building practically begging to be described as "nondescript."

Sarah Brinkman drove past that same building and saw a path to her dream.

Brinkman, who hails from an area ranch family, had recently moved back to Valley County from New York City in the early 2000s. She knew she wanted to open up a yoga studio and spa. She wanted to involve other like-minded business operators, maybe a manicurist, maybe a hairstylist, maybe fitness instructors, who could all share the building and operate their own businesses inside that shared space.

She wanted to create something that didn't exist in Ord. She wanted to build a big-city amenity with a small-town feel. She wanted to create something more than a business or series of related businesses. But the dream was simply that, because Sarah Brinkman, like a lot of young Americans with dreams, had little money and few connections. But then she went in to talk to local chamber and economic development officials and learned of the existence of low-interest loans.

"I couldn't have done it, without the low-interest loan," Brinkman says. "I'm just a little provider. It's not like I had investors. I mean

(with the loan) it was just, 'I can just do this.' So, I bought the building and restored it."

Today Utopia Spa and Health Studio hosts more than 15 small spa businesses inside that single-story industrial building Sarah bought with the aid of the loan program enabled by the one-cent sales tax.

Ord-area residents and, increasingly, out-of-town visitors who come to town specifically for Utopia, can get a haircut, a massage, a makeup tutorial, a personal training session, a yoga class, a salt bath, a mud wrap, all in the same place.

It is Sarah Brinkman's dream come to life.

And Utopia is one of many realized dreams in the Ord area, one of dozens of small companies—often led by young entrepreneurs—that have been funded, encouraged, nurtured and cheered on by the community's economic development machinery.

Starting in the early 2000s, the sales tax money meant a new reality for aspiring business owners in Valley County. If an entrepreneur could put up 10 percent of the funding for their idea, and find a bank to loan them another 40 percent, then they could get a loan at a shockingly low interest rate to fund the other half of the project.

The first loan went to Valley Thunder Rods & Restoration, a dream of three young area residents who wanted to start their own auto repair, restoration and detailing shop that specializes in vintage cars.

They bought a building, started their dream, and are still operating successfully in Ord nearly two decades later.

Ace VanDeWalle is a ranch kid from Orchard, located 100 miles northeast of Ord, who ended up getting a master's degree focused





on meat science. His dream, he eventually realized, was to open up a small town butcher shop and meat locker. The low-interest loan funded his dream, allowing him to make the Ord Locker a reality without having to sell off his ranch's cow herd to fund it.

And it wasn't just the sales tax money that began to nurture new small businesses and protect existing ones in Valley County.

Misko's Sports is a longtime foundational business in Ord, a sporting goods store housed inside a building that was built all the way back in 1883.

When Misko's teetered on the brink of closure, the Loup Valley Investment Club helped engineer a sale in part by buying a building and making a loan so the new owners could afford the inventory. And then, when those owners wanted to sell and move, the investment club again stepped in, buying the previous owners out and then selling the business and building to a new owner in installments.

Misko's Sports is a longtime foundational business in Ord, a sporting goods store housed inside a building that was built all the way back in 1883.

In many other small towns, Misko's would have simply closed. In Ord, because of this creative and committed investment, it is a now-thriving small business that is moving into the Internet retail age with its new owner.

The reach of this government and private investment has proved profound.

The low-interest loans have gone to seed dealers and pharmacies, dentist offices and plumbers, new child care providers and new restaurants and the hardware store.

The sales tax money has been given to nearly 70 projects in Ord in the past two decades, business loans that together total more than \$6 million. Most of the small businesses who received these loans are still open.

All but one or two of those loans has been paid back in full, Stowell says. "It has created a ton of economic activity in the area," he says.

In many bigger and medium-sized cities, economic development remains focused on enticing and keeping large employers.

In many towns the size of Ord, there is simply no economic development strategy to speak of. Many towns Ord's size continue to bemoan what used to be and what might have been. They have never attempted to diversify beyond their 20th century agricultural roots.

But in Ord and in Valley County, much of the public and private money pumped into economic development has ended up in the hands of small business owners, including small business owners who might have never become small business owners if they had been living in a bigger city, or in a different small town.

This nurturing of entrepreneurship has helped to diversify and modernize Ord's economy. It has made Ord a better place to live—a small town that can boast a local brewery, a local butcher shop, a local hot rod auto shop, a local health spa, a local sporting goods store and so much more. Residents who otherwise would have to drive to Grand Island or Kearney for a nice cut of steak or a pair of football cleats can instead buy those right in town and do so with pride.

This investment has helped to build a new generation of young Ord business leaders, a transformation that will be discussed later in this story.

And, for dozens of Ord residents, this investment has helped them do something simple and profound. It has helped people like Sarah Brinkman and the 15 other small business owners now located inside Utopia Spa and Health Studio transform a far-off idea into a day-to-day reality.

"When I got to talking to other women around town it was like, yeah, (Utopia's shared space) would be so great because all of us, all of our services really complement one another."

"I mean it really is kind of a tribe...everyone with a vision came together and was in one place...it just works good. It does for us anyway. Right?!"

The Coffee Crew Gets a Talking To

Not so long ago, a local businessman and former Ord mayor named Gaylord Boilesen sat eating breakfast and drinking coffee with a few friends. One of those friends “started in” on Bob Stowell, who had long been a lightning rod for criticism in the Ord area for his public stances on the school, the hospital and the need for the local sales tax.

Boilesen let his buddy talk for a bit, put his fork down and looked him in the eye.

“Well, you know, do I agree with everything Bob’s done? No. But at least he did something,” he said. Boilesen himself decided to do something in the early 2000s, partnering with Stowell and other local economic development leaders and championing a series of investments that brought the ethanol industry to the area. And, while that industry is far

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Boilesen, Stowell and others had indeed done something risky, something that could get you criticized at the local coffee shop.
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from perfect—the first Ord ethanol plant has weathered a bankruptcy and a sale while narrowly avoiding layoffs—it has also brought a serious amount of new economic activity to Valley County, including local companies that have sprung up around the new plant.

Rural economic expert Don Macke calls it “Ord’s ethanol value-chain cluster.”

Like the growth of entrepreneurship, the economic activity that eventually sprung up around ethanol never would have happened if Ord hadn’t done the dirty work that laid the groundwork for success, Stowell says.

Unlike that entrepreneurial growth, the ethanol victory—an actual plant being built four miles outside town—was the sort of thing that made Valley County residents take notice.

“A nice thing about the ethanol thing was, early on, it was something you could really see,” Stowell says. “It was tangible progress to folks in town. It got people thinking positive. Excited.”

The ethanol action started in earnest in 2003, when the Nebraska Department of Economic Development told Ord-area economic development officials that a company, Fagan Development, was looking for a Nebraska community to locate a new plant.

Ord had already completed a community ethanol study with the help of the Nebraska Public Power District—a study that showed that an ethanol plant could work in the area.

So, when Bethanne Kunz, Stowell and Boilesen learned of Fagan’s interest, they sprang into action.



They needed to act quickly; Fagan was set to make a decision in only 60 days.

Kunz convened a series of meetings, putting together a new group of leaders and potential investors that Stowell dubbed, “Snow White and the Eight Grumpy Old Men.” This was actually the first economic development board.

Snow White and the Eight Grumpy Old Men sped through the application process, figured out annexation and sorted through a local tax increment financing plan. They took field trips to Central City and Minden to visit those town’s ethanol plants and talk to local officials and learn more about how those towns sealed the deal. They brought on a Central City businessman who had made that town’s ethanol plant deal as an adviser.

“New ideas are new ideas. Some of them are good.”

And, crucially, they quickly raised \$4.7 million in local investment from the people around the table as well as other local investors—putting local skin in the game to show Fagan that they were serious and ensure the project was located in Ord.

It was. Fagan broke ground in 2004 and opened in 2005. The ethanol plant immediately became one of the largest employers in town. It also immediately put money into the pockets of local farmers, who negotiated contracts with the new plant.

But that success—and the millions in local investment—was sorely tested starting in 2007, when the ethanol industry began to falter because of an overbuilding of new plants coupled with the high price of corn.

The Ord-area plant was sold, then sold again. The company that eventually bought the plant filed for bankruptcy, and many local investors lost money. The plant’s dozens of

employees, most of whom lived in the Ord area, were kept on the payroll but worried about potentially mass layoffs, as the plant sat idle.

There was a time, not so long ago, when Ord leaders and residents would have turned on each other, pointing fingers and assigning blame. When they would have told each other, and believed, that of course this ethanol project would not work, because nothing here ever would.

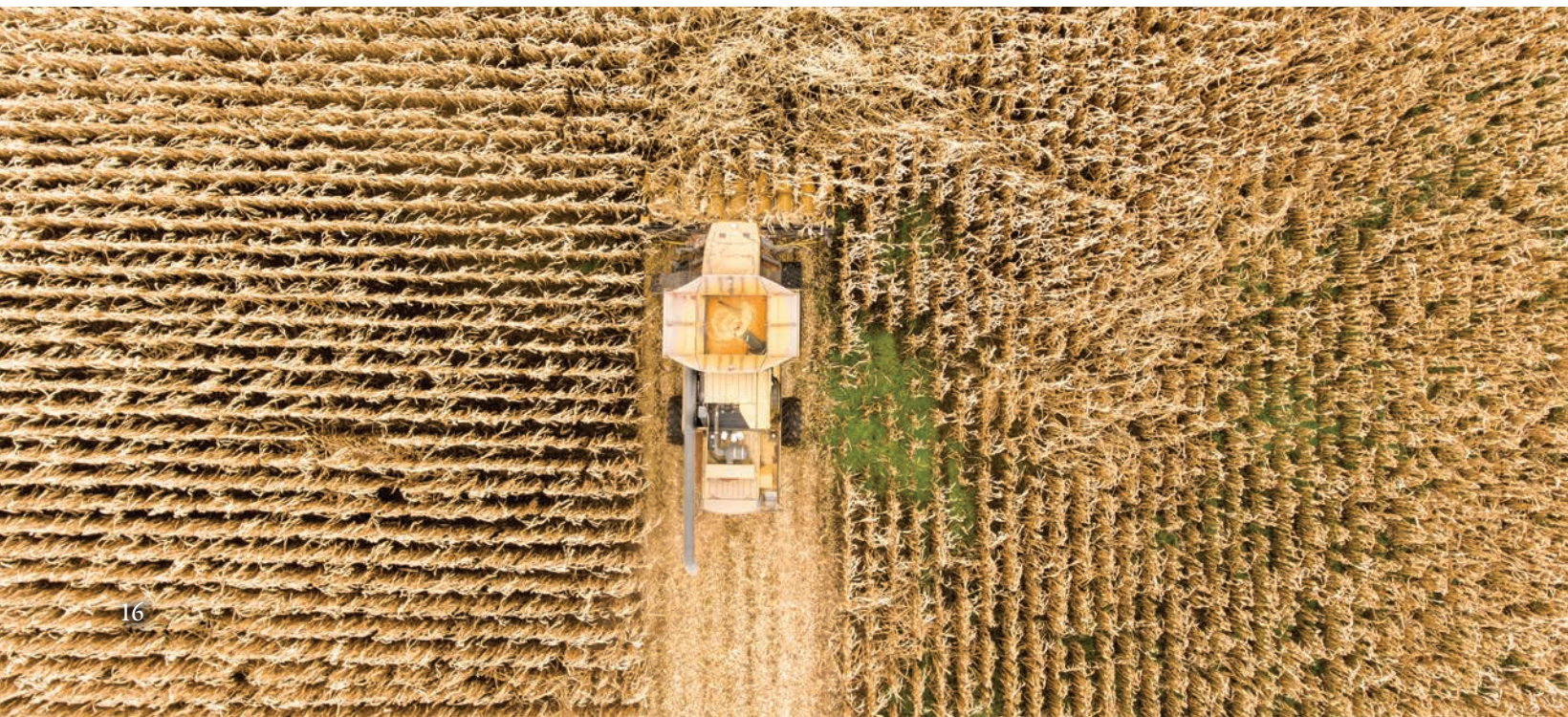
That is not what happened as the plant sat idle. Instead, Boilesen, Kunz and others searched for a solution, speaking to company after company involved in the ethanol industry.

In July 2009, the ethanol plant began to grind corn again after being bought by Green Plains Renewable Energy. The employees kept their jobs. And, over time, the plant’s presence spawned an entire new local economy in Ord.

A trucking company co-founded by Boilesen hauls grain and grain byproducts. Increased trucking tied to the plant created ten new jobs. A truck stop opened in part because of that increased trucking, creating still more jobs. A distiller grains business opened, turning the ethanol byproduct into a cattle feed. A cubing plant opened, taking that cattle feed and making it more easily transportable. And related oil extraction and bio-diesel production businesses also grew up around the ethanol plant.

Boilesen, Stowell and others had indeed done something risky, something that could get you criticized at the local coffee shop. But they had done something; though imperfect, it has proven a net positive for the Valley County economy and community.

It is a new, better story he can tell around the breakfast table with his buddies. A story about the future. “What we really gotta do with these young people is we have to get them involved. And then, we have to listen to their ideas,” Boilesen says, speaking about the future of Ord and Valley County. “New ideas are new ideas. Some of them are good.”



Ribbon Cuttings, Renovations and Oh-So-Visible Change

For decades, the local hospital had stood as a symbol of Ord's decline, a key institution that found itself bogged down in divisive squabbles, losing employees and patients, forever teetering on the edge of closure.

Which is what made what happened on Oct. 3, 2010 all the more stunning. On that day, city and hospital leaders cut the ribbon and officially opened the brand-new Valley County Health System Hospital on the west edge of town.

A ribbon cutting on a brand-new hospital was only possible because the residents of Ord and Valley County had passed a \$22 million bond issue to make it a reality.

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“We couldn't pass a drink of water in the 70s or 80s,” Stowell says.
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“We couldn't pass a drink of water in the 70s or 80s,” Stowell says. “And through all our efforts, and through the community starting to trust us, and through greater harmony, this happened. To think that we would ever pass a \$22 million hospital bond, when we had so much trouble with health care in the community before it was just... wow. It was an exciting, heady time.”

A new hospital was far from the only stunning transformation to Ord's physical and cultural structure during a period that began in the middle of the 21st century's first decade.

After years of laying groundwork, slowly changing mindsets and investing in both big and small businesses, Ord blossomed. And that



visible change touched the lives of every resident, while also becoming part of an increasingly effective recruiting tool as Ord started to attract new families for the first time in a half-century.

In 2005, residents passed an additional half-cent sales tax to fund an extensive renovation of Ord's downtown. The community also applied for and received an additional \$750,000 in state and federal grants—downtown revitalization funds that Ord was awarded in large part because it could show local buy-in.

New streets and sidewalks replaced crumbling infrastructure in downtown Ord. New historic replica lighting brightened the area, both literally and figuratively. New brick pavers were placed behind the new curbs. New water mains and service lines were installed—the sort of work that is often invisible but also crucial for the continued viability of a community. And, for the first time, Ord's downtown became largely accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“The downtown renovation was something you could see and take pride in. You may not be daily involved (in the revitalization of Ord) but when you drive in and you see those historic lights, you see those park benches? Everybody saw and felt that.”

The high school was old and sorely in need of a better gym. So residents passed a \$9.8 million bond, money that refurbished the high school and added a sparkling new gymnasium.

Stowell, who had initially believed that Ord should build an entirely new high school, found himself open to the compromise position of renovation and addition. That is still progress, he thought. “I realized that wasn't a fight we should fight,” he says.

With the aid of yet another, smaller bond issue, the Ord Volunteer Fire Department built a sorely needed new, 8-bay fire hall. This project, like the ethanol plant or the school bond issue, brought in new residents who previously hadn't engaged much in Ord's comeback. New people in the community led the fight for a project they cared



about—and, in the process, often became more familiar and more allied with the overall revitalization work being done in the community.

And remember the Valley County Courthouse? The place that Bob and Jean Stowell once envisioned their kids playing around—the place where they hoped their children would know and talk to the elderly residents sitting on courthouse square benches?

That magnificent courthouse was built in 1919. It had fallen into disrepair, and lacked an easy way for Ord residents of lower mobility to get up the courthouse's interior stairs.

Until 2011, when the county got a United States Department of Agriculture rural development loan and began to renovate it. A new exterior staircase was built, and a new elevator to move older and disabled Ord residents up and down the building. A new fire alarm and fire sprinkler was installed. Finally, the old courthouse's terracotta and brickwork exterior was restored, giving the courthouse a facelift while maintaining its historic nature.

Future generations of Ord children will continue to be able to play on the courthouse square, just as Stowell's children once did. And that's not the only place Ord's children can have fun—in 2019, the city opened the Alfred and Irma Burson Aquatic Center, a new city pool and splash pad.

During this period, Stowell has watched in wonder as former opponents became allies, marveled as one time enemies became friends. He felt the level of animosity lower, felt fury and fear dissolve into acceptance and even excitement.

Another interesting thing was happening, too. Because Stowell himself was still occasionally viewed as a lightning rod, and because he had been involved in so many projects, and because more people wanted to get involved—in-creasingly he found himself moving into the background as others moved to the forefront.

Stowell no longer needed to lead each project. And his leadership style allowed him to celebrate others' success, and the larger community's success, as if it were his own.

The visible progress being seen and felt in Ord soon extended to Ord's housing situation, as Stowell and others searched for solutions to a problem felt persistently in many rural communities.

A local resident and friend of Stowell's had long ago donated 30 acres of land on the western edge of Ord to use for community betterment.

Stowell and others worked to get a \$750,000 grant from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development meant for new neighborhoods. The city agreed to match that grant, and provided streets and lighting using sales tax funds. As a part of the grant, the project's leaders had to include moderate and low-income housing in their project. They used existing tax money to build 7 homes and other duplexes meant for people of varying income levels and older residents.

Today, that low-to-moderate income housing is done. The town's newest doctor has bought a house in the neighborhood, which was named Rolling Hills. There is already a waiting list of residents who are age 55 and over wanting to get into the duplexes.

The logistics of building this new neighborhood were difficult, Stowell says. It wouldn't have happened without the buy-in of city leadership.

Stowell compares this to a similar effort he participated in to build a new subdivision in Ord in the 1970s. At that time, the city council told the planners that they wouldn't even build streets to connect that planned subdivision to the rest of the city.



“What I’m pointing out to you is the difference in the attitude, the difference in the City Council, the difference in actually getting things done,” he says.

“This didn’t happen accidentally. There were plenty of scars along the way. But today it’s joyful. And thank the Lord for that change.”

More recently, this pattern of visible progress in Ord and Valley County has extended to the area’s arts and cultural scene.

As recently as 2012, Ord’s historic theater sat empty.

Jean and Bob Stowell decided to lease the space, in order to protect it until something better could be done with it. That happened a year later...when Dale Zadina, a local farmer, donated the money to buy the building. A non-profit corporation was formed, and many local families and local endowments came together, pooled their resources, bought equipment and rebranded the historic theater The Golden Husk.

In the past few years, the previously empty theater—another symbol of small town decline—has come alive as “The Husk,” as locals affectionally call it. The Husk has hosted regional plays and musicals. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Glenn Korff School of Music has put on three live operas on its stage and will bring another show this year.

The world renown Glenn Miller Orchestra has performed at The Husk accompanied by the Ord High School band and the following

year by the Arcadia High School band proudly sporting new uniforms and a new percussion section purchased with a grant from a local endowment. Missoula Children’s Theater has come to town five times, teaching local kids about how to mount a performance and then having them putting on a show for proud parents and grandparents. The Wyoming Bar J Wranglers performed several times to the delight of local ranchers and farmers.

In part, the Husk facade restoration benefited from a local Business Corridor Improvement Loan. The revolving loan program offered by Valley County Economic Development was created by leveraging a portion of the 1% sales tax funds with an external grant to support commercial property revitalization. Today, performances are enjoyed by the entire community. Stowell says, “It’s a place where you can experience your children performing in a play...and today we can all enjoy some hometown pride.”

Since 2019, the Golden Husk has been the location for Valley County residents to come together, take stock in what cultural assets exist in the area, and dream about how they can build on those assets and create a better cultural future. The process is known as community assets mapping, a process led by the Nebraska Community Foundation meant to help local leaders clearly see the present and envision the future.

The Husk is the logical home base for such discussions, where artists and music lovers and town leaders gather together to talk about hopes, dreams and what it means to feel like you belong.

It’s the home base for community celebrations and has become another visible symbol of change in Ord and Valley County. Longtime residents like Stowell are thrilled by that change. They are also a little startled to learn that, once they built it, people started to come.

They came to Ord and Valley County, with spouses and young children, looking for jobs, looking for houses and thinking this might be a great place to live.



“There’s a Lot of Opportunity”— Young Families Begin to Flock to Ord

Caleb Pollard was tired of the two hours he spent in a car each day commuting to Omaha. He was tired of feeling like just another contestant in the Interstate-80 rat race, trying and often failing to get home before his kids were asleep.

And Pollard, who had worked in both state and city economic development, was also intrigued: Who were these small town leaders aggressively recruiting both he and his wife to relocate there? Could they really move their young family to Ord, even though they had no relatives there, no roots there, no history?

They visited, and saw the new businesses dotting Main Street. They heard about the ambitious plans to continue to improve the area as Stowell and others recruited Caleb to be the county’s new economic development director. And they heard about the improving hospital system and the ambitious plans to build a new hospital, as hospital leaders tried to lure Christina Pollard to work there.

And the Pollards felt something, too, a pull that dozens of young adults and young parents like them similarly felt starting in the first years of the 21st century.

Maybe they could live the small-town life while also realizing their career goals and becoming a part of this small-town resurgence.

Maybe Ord was a really really good idea. So, the Pollards did move to town. After five years, and much of the visible progress mentioned above, Caleb resigned his economic development job. He and two

other young men—one of whom had recently moved back to Ord from Omaha—started Scratchtown Brewery, which today is the town’s main watering hole and one of its most exciting young businesses as it distributes award-winning beer across the state.

“There’s a lot of people in the United States that are looking to get away from the rat race and they’re looking (to capitalize) on one important thing, which is quality of time. It’s the most nonrenewable resource there is,” Pollard says. In Ord you can have a “direct effect on the outcome of the community and you can also have breakfast with your kids and supper with your kids almost every night of the week if you want. You can tuck them into bed and be a part of their lives. There’s a lot of opportunity.”

The Pollards were far from the only young adults who sensed this opportunity. Many had grown up in Ord, gone away to college and then a post-college job, and then moved back to start businesses and families. Others, like the Pollards, moved to Ord because they had some experience with small town life, and wanted that, plus all the rest that the area had to offer.

Susie Blaha and her husband had tired of working for the same corporation and being “a number.” They moved back in part to care for Blaha’s elderly parents.

Tanner Hackel went to Kearney for college, built homes in that area, and then moved back with his wife Jeana to start Hackel Construction.

Melanie Boden grew up in Ord and swore she would never come back. She got a job with Gallup, started a family with her husband, but found herself pulled back to her improving hometown. She even-



tually started a catering company after being encouraged to do so by then-economic development director Caleb Pollard.

Sarah Brinkman moved to town and started the aforementioned Utopia Spa and Health Studio. Ace VanDeWalle moved to town, as did his sister, to start the aforementioned Ord Meat Locker.

None of this happened by accident. By the 2000s Ord leaders were often aggressively recruiting young professionals for jobs in town, or to move in and start businesses.

The housing improvement, the downtown revitalization and the low-interest loans and other business incentives offered in the area all helped lure these young professionals and many others like them.

And, crucially, Ord started the SynoVation Valley Leadership Academy, a program for residents where local adults learn how to better impact their community and become the next generation of leaders. Dozens of residents have gone through the academy.

The current president of the SynoVation Valley Leadership Academy: Tanner Hackel. The vice president: Melanie Boden.

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Stowell laughs. “There’s no longer this resistance to letting in the young punks with their crazy ideas.”
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Bob Stowell helped to recruit some of these young professionals to town. He has watched, satisfied, as many have made the transition from “the new kids” to the city’s and county’s leaders.

“Years back, young people here felt like they weren’t invited into leadership. That they weren’t welcome. Since 2000 we have really worked to change that. Now, I think young people aren’t just welcome, they are often encouraged.”

Stowell laughs. “There’s no longer this resistance to letting in the young punks with their crazy ideas.” This shift is so profound that you can see it in U.S. census records.

The total number of young adults living in Ord spiked by 53 percent between the years 2000 and 2010. School enrollment has also spiked, as those young adults move in with young children, or start families once they relocate.

The number of students jumped by 14 percent between 2013 and 2018. And, in 2017, the school district’s kindergarten class was the largest it had been in a decade. That kindergarten class was also the largest of any grade level in the school, a fact signaling that enrollment should continue to stay healthy for years to come

Today, the chairman of the Valley County Community Foundation isn’t Robert Stowell. It’s Robert Stowell’s 27-year old granddaughter, Melani Flynn. Three 30-somethings serve as the vice president, secretary and treasurer.

Other 30-something businessmen and women serve on the town’s economic development board and other important area committees and boards.

This development and nurturing of entrepreneurial leadership is also taking place among Ord residents who don’t yet have their driver’s licenses.

Starting in 2004, fifth through eighth graders at Ord’s St. Mary’s School have created their own products to sell to the public. That blossomed into a school district-wide eighth grade class on leadership, as well as elective classes for high school students who want to start their own businesses.

For the past decade, the county has hosted a summer entrepreneurship camp for teenagers, a camp developed in partnership with the Nebraska Community Foundation and paid for by an endowed fund at the Valley County Community Foundation.

It’s easy to see how this early work will soon result in yet another generation of Ord leaders.

Local high school seniors have, for years, taken a survey meant to gauge their attitudes about their hometown.

A decade ago, 30 percent reported that they would like to return to Valley County after departing for college or an initial job.

Today, the percentage of high school seniors who report they would like to return to Valley County:

70 percent.

Many dream of starting their own businesses in Ord, just like many of their parents now have. Stowell looks at this new generation of younger adult Ord leaders and says they are thinking about 2030, about 2040—about a future that they, not Stowell himself, will mold. Ord has helped them. And they have changed Ord.

“They have melted into the community. They have helped us to move our culture, from one that was more inward looking, maybe, to one that is looking more outward and more to the future.”

“Once upon a time, we thought, ‘oh we’re all gonna die off.’”

“To see this infusion of young talent, the only word I can think of it is exhilarating.”





In September 2020, Don Macke, a leading national expert on rural economic development and a Nebraska resident, co-authored a paper that sought to answer the question: Has two decades of work made a serious difference in the present and future of the Ord area?

The analysis, which compared Ord both to rural communities in general and a peer community in particular, is a fascinating look into the effect that 20 years of local tax policy, philanthropic giving, economic and cultural revitalization and collaborative effort can have on Bob Stowell's hometown—or, quite possibly, anyone's hometown.

It's Working. The Numbers Say It's Working.

The analysis is nuanced, and careful to note that various storm clouds could make the future look darker than Ord's present.

But when it seeks to answer the key question—'Have Bob Stowell and Co. made a serious difference?'—that answer is sky-blue clear. Yes. Unequivocally, yes.

"Outside of urban adjacent communities, which are growing because they are close to a big city, I would be hard pressed to show you a community comparable to Ord," Macke says. "I actually had no intention (to study) Ord, and then I ran the initial analysis, and then I was going, 'Holy cow. Something powerful is happening here.'"

How powerful?

Let's start with this sobering fact: In the decade between 2010 and 2020, rural Nebraska lost 12% of its population. Nebraska's small communities are, on average, losing more than 1% of its residents each year.

But, in that same decade, Ord kept its population remarkably steady even as most other small towns and rural counties in Nebraska faced sharp declines. Between 2010-2020, Ord lost a total of less than 1% of its population. Valley County also stabilized its population loss, a steadying that Macke expects to last through at least 2025.

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"I ran the initial analysis, and then I was going, 'Holy cow. Something powerful is happening here.'"
.....

Viewed another way: The population loss in rural Nebraska was a staggering 16 times greater than the tiny population loss in the Ord area.

As previously noted, the Ord area has also gotten younger relative to most every other Nebraska small town. In the first decade of the 21st century, Ord's 30- to 34-year-old population exploded, growing by nearly 54% in just ten years' time. The 40- to 44-year-old population also grew.

Those numbers stand in stark contrast to the prevailing mindset about small towns, namely that they are filled with elderly residents, often farmers, whose grown children have moved away. As they age and die, there will be no one to replace them, the thinking goes.

Yet Ord has managed to recharge with younger adults, many of whom are raising young families even as they start and run businesses, are offered and accept leadership roles in the community, and diversify the local economy while strengthening its tax base.

In Valley County, which is more than an hour's drive from the nearest population center, Grand Island, more people now drive into work in the area than drive away to work each day.

The Ord area is becoming an employment hub, the analysis notes, a positive sign that its economy is strong and growing. Net employment is up in Ord in the 21st century despite the serious agricultural recession that hit rural communities hard in the past decade, and despite the fact that the number of county residents who make their living as farmers continues to fall.

Ord is also becoming a retail hub. After decades of Ord residents buying goods and services in larger cities outside the county, people from all over north-central Nebraska now travel to Ord for goods, services and for health care. Ord and Valley County both have net retail surpluses, a fact that puts the lie to the cliché depiction of a dusty, boarded-up small town Main Street.

And this flurry of retail activity means both more local tax money and more tax money specifically captured for continued business development in Ord. Ord's local option sales tax hasn't discouraged people from spending money in the area. Much the opposite. And Ord continues to harness that local option sales tax money to help both established, expanding businesses and young entrepreneurs, creating a positive cycle where more business activity leads to more spending, which leads to more businesses and business activity, which leads to more spending, etc.

In the year 2000, there were 964 "proprietorship" establishments in Valley County, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.



Generally, in smaller communities these proprietorships are small businesses, historically mostly small farms and ranches.

In 2018, there were 1,049 proprietors in Valley County, an increase that reversed decades of declines in the area and did so even as small farms and ranches continue to disappear.

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“They didn’t bootstrap. They didn’t penny pinch. They went after real money.”

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This is even more startling when you place Valley County next to peer Nebraska counties of similar size which are similarly isolated from bigger cities.

Those nine Nebraska counties most like Valley County lost, on average, 855 proprietorships between 2000 and 2018. They lost, on average, nearly 10 percent of their small farms and small businesses.

Valley County grew its number of proprietorships by nearly 10 percent in that same time period. The focus on entrepreneurship in Ord, the focus on helping young residents and transplants chase their business dream, appears to be working.

“They didn’t bootstrap. They didn’t penny pinch. They went after real money,” Macke says. “And then they used it, 100 percent, to go to business development.”

“And they got really good at it. They went out, over and over, and said (to business owners and potential entrepreneurs), ‘What are you trying to do? How can we help you?’”

“And now that’s a powerful message, and a highly transferrable approach, that we can take to other communities, including ones bigger than Ord.”

“You gotta go talk to your entrepreneurs. You gotta give them a chance, help them.”

“And then, you get those communities saying, ‘If Ord can generate a quarter billion dollars of new investment in 20 years, for Heaven’s sake, can’t we do that, too?’”

Valley County is doing far better population wise than the peer county that Macke compared it with. It is growing more small businesses, and those small businesses are making more money.

Personal income is growing in Valley County even as it greatly shrinks in its peer county. Average household wealth in Ord is now nearly 56% higher than in its peer community. Ord has grown a stronger upper-middle class than its peer county.

People in Valley County have more income to spend on goods and services, which they often do locally, while people from outside counties also travel to Valley County to shop. There are roughly



200 more retail jobs in Valley County than in its peer county, the analysis suggests.

What's striking about this peer-to-peer analysis is that, not so long ago, in the late 20th century Valley County and its purposely anonymous peer looked like nearly identical twins demographically, economically and geographically.

The past 20 years of work has boosted the Ord area far ahead of its former peer, suggesting that this peer county—and many like it in Nebraska and throughout the Great Plains—should pay close attention to the Ord/Valley County example and emulate it whenever possible.

“...the Ord story is unique in that it represents a typical small rural community that has truly transformed itself from crisis and severe decline to an increasingly thriving community,” the analysis concludes. “While many commitments and investments by Ord have contrib-

uted to this amazing turnaround, growing a robust entrepreneurial economy has been foundational to empower this change.”

Bob Stowell has read the comparative analysis. He knows the stats about the influx of young parents and can recite polling data showing that Ord high school students feel much more positively about their hometown than they used to.

But he doesn't really need the hard data to know things have changed in hometown. He feels that change in his bones.

“I feel so much differently about my community today than I used to feel. I have always loved it, but it could feel pretty bad when I was getting those hate letters, when there was always fighting, when everyone thought there was an enemy lurking behind every bush.”

“Now there's trust. We trust each other. We believe in this thing that is happening. And it feels great.”

More than two decades after that fateful drive home from Nebraska City, when he wrote the rough draft of Ord's resurgence from the Buick's passenger seat, Bob Stowell is still driving down lonely Nebraska highways, thinking about how to make things better.

Back on the Highway, Spreading the Small Town Success Gospel

But now Bob Stowell is driving to Valentine, to Ainsworth, to Burwell, to Creighton, to David City, to Red Cloud.

Now he's driving and thinking about the lessons he has learned in his hometown, and how he can take that wisdom gained—much of it the hard way—and impart it to other small-town Nebraska leaders so that they might have a slightly easier path.

Stowell has become sort of a small-town rebound evangelist, spreading a gospel that says, yes, you can do this. Here are several of the Psalms of Stowell:



Lesson No. 1. Look for the Helpers.

Start by looking over your community with a cold, hard eye. Identify the potential allies, the people who might join you in the hard work to come. Make sure these people aren't just your friends, that together they comprise as diverse of a group as possible. And identify the existing volunteer community groups that have the most energy, that seem most likely to work for progress. Get that group or groups onboard, too. Finally, find outside partners like the Nebraska Community Foundation and willing state and federal government agencies.

Lesson No. 2. Connect Local Energy with Local Government Power.

Stowell thinks it's easy to assume that a small town city council or rural county board doesn't much matter. He thinks that because he himself assumed as much for decades.

But now he knows: That's a deeply flawed assumption. "Until 2000, I didn't realize how much power the city and the county actually have," he says.

When you have committed individuals and volunteer and community groups in the community, take those people and link them to the power of government, Stowell says. If you can get local energy and local government to play well together, you will get so much more done.

And if you can convince the local energy to run for and get elected to local government offices...well, that's all the better.

Lesson No. 3. No Money, No Comeback.

Ord voters' 2001 passage of a local option sales tax, making it possible for the county to fund millions in new business ideas and restore downtown Ord, is a decision that both Stowell and experts alike point to as one of the biggest single decisions that sparked the city and county renaissance.

Because of this vote, and the successful use of those dollars, \$6 million in funding for business development circulates through the Ord and Valley County community at any given time. It has prompted \$70 million in overall deal flow, a stunning number for a rural community.

And that money has been buttressed by millions more in local philanthropy and investment, which funds the leadership training, youth engagement, arts-and-culture boom and economic revival discussed throughout this story.

Simply put: If you don't have access to capital, you aren't going to get all that much done, Stowell says. He stresses that the amount of money needed—and where that money will come from—differs in every small community. But there must be funding, he says, a practical prerequisite to big and sustained change inside any small town.

Lesson No. 4. Smack a few line drives before you swing for the fences.

There will be a tendency to want to change it all inside your small town, and right away, Stowell says. It is an understandable impulse, and an admirable one, but you need to lay the groundwork, gain the public's trust by being transparent and collaborative, and prove that you can be trusted by starting and completing smaller-but-significant projects that matter to the community.

This is a project that will take years, not months. And it's one that can build on itself, as one success leads to another and another, until you are ready to take a mammoth cut and hit a home run. "We would have never gotten the downtown renovation done without building the credibility of the previous five years," Stowell says. "You have to gain the trust of the people first. Without that trust, something like (downtown) will never truly happen."



Lesson No. 5.

Be a leader who is willing to lead in different ways. At the outset of the 21st century, Bob Stowell often led fights from out front. But he and other pioneers in Ord's comeback also shared credit, encouraged and celebrated others, and increasingly stepped back to let others lead fights that were meaningful and crucial to them. Growing future leaders, nurturing them and then allowing them the space to change their community—even when that proposed change doesn't fit perfectly with Stowell's own vision—is a hallmark of Ord's continued and continuous transformation in the past two decades.



Lesson No. 6.

This will be long and hard and sometimes ugly...and worth it.

Bob Stowell has spent most of his adult life fighting for Ord. And the turning point—where he and others started to win the fight—began nearly 22 years ago. And, yet, in 2021, the victory is far from complete.

The rural communities of the Great Plains face tremendous challenges of all sorts, headwinds that started blowing as long ago as the Great Depression.

Just in the past 15 years, communities like Ord have had to weather the Great Recession, an agricultural recession, a price-and-overbuilding crisis in the ethanol industry and a global pandemic.

But Bob Stowell, his allies in Ord, and people like him all across the rural communities of Nebraska and the Great Plains are not fighting because they believe that this fight is easy, or even eminently winnable. Bob Stowell is fighting because he has decided that it's a fight worth having.

And so, fight he has. And, two decades after that fateful lonely drive, hundreds of residents are fighting with him, working to ensure that their small town survives and thrives long after they themselves are gone.

That, more than anything, is the lesson of the turnaround of Ord and Valley County, Nebraska, Bob Stowell thinks.

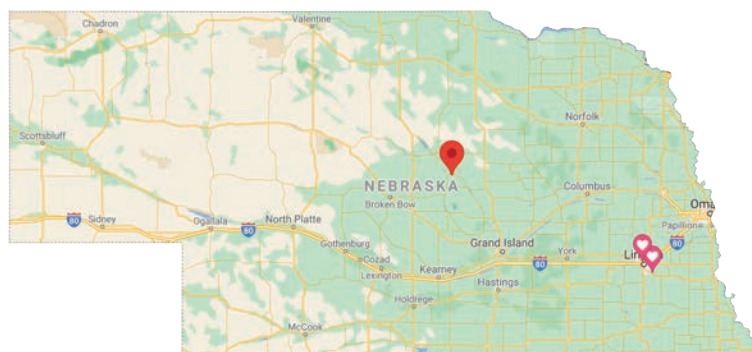
The lesson is that the fight will never end. But it's a fight you must start, with the understanding that—if things go well—eventually it will no longer be your fight alone.

Not long ago, Bob Stowell sat down in the house he shares with Jean, settled in to cast his votes for an annual celebration during which the county names the year's winners in ten different categories, like “best new business” and “rising star” and an award for a local teenager making a difference.

And a funny thing happened as Bob Stowell, the original architect of one of the most stunning turnarounds in recent small-town American history, scanned the list of new businesses up for some of the awards.

“There were some new businesses I hadn't had anything to do with,” Stowell says. “There were some new businesses I had never even heard of.”

Bob Stowell smiles...“I thought that was pretty cool.”



About Matthew Hansen

Matthew Hansen, a longtime Nebraska journalist, is the co-founder and executive editor of the Flatwater Free Press, Nebraska's first statewide journalism nonprofit.

Hansen worked in newspapers for 16 years, traveling to Cuba and Afghanistan, while also writing hundreds of stories about small-town Nebraska. He has won multiple state, national, regional and national awards for investigative stories, feature stories and columns. Hansen was named the 2015 Great Plains Writer of the Year.

Hansen, a native of Red Cloud, Nebraska, pop. 1,000, is married to Sarah Baker Hansen, a longtime Nebraska writer and food critic. In 2017 they co-authored a book, "The Better Half" that focuses on the untold success stories of small-town Nebraska.

About the Ord Story Capture Project

For the past three years and counting our story capture team, led by Don Macke with e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, has been curating these stories and community building resources. We want to acknowledge and thank our friend, colleague and inspiration Bob Stowell, the community of Ord, Andy Stoll with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (e.g., funding and moral support) and e2 for its investment in making this project. To learn more about all the available Ord Story resources contact Don Macke—e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems—A Hosted Initiative of NetWork Kansas- 402.323.7336 – don@e2mail.org.

www.energizingentrepreneurs.org





The Long Drive Home:
How Bob Stowell and Allies Made Ord's Future Better Than Its Past
By Matthew Hansen

COMMUNITY OF ORD NEBRASKA AND THE VALLEY COUNTY REGION



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