

# MUSEUM on Main Street

## Spark! Places of Innovation

A new exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution's  
Museum on Main Street program

Get **YOUR STORY** in a  
new Smithsonian  
**EXHIBITION** about  
innovation in **RURAL**  
**AMERICA!**



Rural communities across the country are innovating. They're using tools like broadband service to transform agriculture, business, education, health care, and other areas of daily life. Pine Net Telephone/Internet, Oklahoma, Photo by USDA

We're looking for sparks—ideas that led to innovations or inventions that are changing your town for the better, sparks that could be the inspiration for other rural communities.

It's happening in small towns across America. People are creating new products, processes and experiences that change local life and sometimes reach far beyond.

The story of human history is written in inventions and innovations. People are problem-solvers. Sometimes we invent. More often, we innovate—we introduce a fresh idea or an invention into use in some way that creates a new way of doing or thinking.

What's happening in your town?



Chalk the Walk features collaborative artwork in Mt Vernon, Iowa. Mt Vernon hosts numerous events and a business incubator to foster community and entrepreneurship. Photo by Mehrdad Zarifkar, 2017. Courtesy of Mt Vernon-Lisbon Community Development Group

**Spark! Places of Innovation** is a new traveling exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution that will dive into innovation and invention happening in rural America. The exhibition will travel from 2023 to 2029, sharing these stories with thousands of visitors in rural communities throughout America! Could your story be among them?

### Innovation is Alive in Rural America!

**Spark!** will spotlight stories of invention and innovation in small towns both to celebrate the rich American heritage of meeting challenges and seizing opportunities in unique ways and also to provide inspiration for others. We want to hear your story.

Think broadly: Innovation in *Spark!* will encompass a range of possibilities including: creating solutions to common rural community challenges; innovating or inventing a new tool or craft; developing cultural programming, art spaces, social justice initiatives, or sparking transformative conversations between people who'd normally not engage with each other. Technological, social, cultural, artistic, or a combination of all of these—innovation is as unique as each community and we'd like to hear about yours.

### **What Is Your Innovation Story?**

*Spark!* will be told through YOUR STORIES! This is the beginning of an ambitious outreach initiative to gather images, narratives, video, and audio from communities that will fill the exhibition. We want audiences to see the diversity, ingenuity, and tenacity of rural America from a rural American point of view. So, what innovations and inventions are happening where you live? Tell us your stories and they may end up in the exhibition!

### **WHO is Museum on Main Street?**

Museum on Main Street (MoMS), is a partnership of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and state humanities councils nationwide to bring high quality exhibitions to rural communities with fewer than 25,000 people. However, MoMS is so much more than just exhibitions! We are a rural outreach program offering diverse opportunities for small towns to highlight their unique stories through resources including traveling exhibitions, youth storytelling initiatives, build-it-yourself digital exhibitions, and oral history collecting tools. When MoMS comes to town, the local cultural and historical organizations shine!

### **WHAT is this all about exactly?**

*Spark! Places of Innovation* will be filled with real stories of small town innovation and invention, told from the diverse perspectives of the people who have lived it and supported by images and objects unique to the community. Rather than tell visitors about innovation, we want to *show* what actual innovation looks like in rural America. Real stories will be crafted into case studies in the exhibition with the goal of inspiring visitors to think about innovation in their own town. *Spark!* will highlight the unique combination of places, people, and circumstances that fosters innovation. Our hope is to represent the breadth and richness of innovation in rural America.



*Gina Locklear added a sustainable twist to continue her family's sock-making legacy in Fort Payne, Alabama by using regional, organic cotton. Courtesy of Zkano Socks Mill*

### **WHERE will your story appear?**

If selected, your story may be featured in the exhibition, in our educational materials, on our website, in our Stories from Main Street archive, podcasts, and in print and digital promotional materials for the life of the exhibition.

## WHAT are we looking for?

The following criteria will give a clearer picture of what we need from you:

### **Story Submission Criteria and Expectations for Selection**

**1. Story Focus** – Whether high-tech or low-tech, technological or people-centered, innovation can take many forms. We encourage story submissions that cover a wide range of time and disciplines. Stories can represent innovations that occurred several years ago, over the course of a community's existence, or present-day. We also want to represent different areas of innovation including: economic sustainability, job training, community rehabilitation, environmental sustainability, agriculture, high-tech, communication, education, engineering, social, cultural, and artistic. If your innovation or invention impacted the community life, economy, or direction of your town, then we want to hear about it!



*Creativity, reinvention, and community are central to Fermentation Fest, an annual celebration that brings diverse people together around food, art, performance, and sustainability run by the Wormfarm Institute in Reedsburg, WI since 2000. Photo by MoMS*

**2. Town Size and Geography** – This project is limited to towns under 25,000 people with special consideration given to towns with populations of less than 8,000. Our intent with this crowdsourcing initiative is to select communities that meet that population threshold. We want to select communities that will represent the great diversity of rural America regionally, economically, and culturally. We also aim to represent minority populations in our selections so that our exhibition is balanced and tells stories that may otherwise be under-represented.

**3. Applicant Availability and Project Timeline**– Those wishing to apply must submit the enclosed application form and answer all of the application narrative questions. Applicants must be available to answer follow up questions from MoMS regarding their story and any assets (photographs, video, or objects). Applicants may be contacted for further interviews, either in person or virtually, if selected.

### **Story Collecting Phase – May 2021 to July 27, 2021**

Museum on Main Street will send out applications and collect story submissions. Applications are due by 5pm Eastern, July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Submissions must thoroughly address application questions, narratives, and lists of available imagery, audio, video, or objects. Museum on Main Street may reach out to you with further questions, including requests for clarification.

**Story Selection Phase – July 2021 to Fall 2021**

Successful applicants will be notified. Applicants must be available for follow-up questions. Applicants will be notified if MoMS would like to do more interviews and discuss your list of potential objects and imagery.

**Story Writing Phase – Fall 2021 to Winter 2022**

Applicants submit final image files or physical objects for the exhibition. Museum on Main Street will prepare the exhibition script based on your submission and review appropriate script sections with the applicant for accuracy. Any follow up in-person interviews with applicants will be scheduled.

**Subsequent Story Interviews – Winter 2022 to Spring 2022**

MoMS coordinates any additional in-person video or audio interviews to be conducted with people in your community. These A/V resources may be used in the exhibition, for promotion, or other uses related to the project. In-person interviews will take into consideration COVID-19 safety precautions.

**4. Available Story Elements** – A community’s narrative will be an important consideration for selection. Selections will be based on the strength of the narrative description of the community’s innovations or inventions and their demonstrated relevance to this project, and availability of imagery or objects. Even if you do not have imagery available, we want to encourage you to apply. We may select your community as a candidate for further interviews based on the strength of your story.

**5. Collaboration and Support** - Preference will be given to communities that show evidence of a network of organizations or people who have agreed to collaborate in telling your innovation story. Applicants may provide a letter of support from community organizations such as the local Chamber of Commerce, Main Street programs, educational institutions, social and civic organizations, as well as other cultural organizations.

**WHY should you apply?**

One of our goals with this exhibition is to inspire visitors to think about innovation in their own lives – to look inward and reflect on their town or how they may help spark innovation. We want to learn more about your town’s special innovations and bring that story to a wider audience. Your story can help broaden the public’s idea about what innovation is and who can innovate, inspiring people throughout the nation to see themselves as innovators and problem-solvers. We want to hear about your town’s challenges, successes, and hopes for innovation as you look to the future. Your story has a chance to inspire the hundreds of thousands of visitors who will discover this exhibition. Just by submitting your story, you are giving us a wider glimpse into the dynamic and full picture of rural communities and their diversity. We appreciate your help in creating an exhibition that is an exciting and accurate snapshot of the creativity, ingenuity, and tenacity of small-town America for all to celebrate.

**If you are interested in applying, let us know as soon as possible!**  
**Contact Project Director Tiffany Cheng, [chengti@si.edu](mailto:chengti@si.edu) / 202-633-5339**

**Submissions are due JULY 27<sup>TH</sup>, 2021**  
Contact Project Director, Tiffany Cheng  
<chengti@si.edu> for more information or if you have questions

**Spark! Places of Innovation Application**

Are you applying as an individual or on behalf of an organization? \_\_\_\_\_ Individual \_\_\_\_\_ Organization

**Name / Title:** \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**Organization, if applicable:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Type of organization, if applicable:**

Museum      Library      Historical Organization / Society      Community Center  
School / College      Chamber of Commerce      Local Government      Arts Organization  
Main Street Organization      Non-profit      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Mailing Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_

Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact E-Mail Address:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Total population of your town:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Tell Us Your Story**

We have provided some prompts to get you started. This section has 7 segments:

### **1. Tell us about your community.** (Please stay within 400-500 words)

#### **Consider the following in your description:**

What are your most interesting assets or resources?

What are your major challenges?

What makes your town unique?

What are your town's strengths or defining characteristics? These could include: flexibility, diversity of people and perspectives, risk-taking, resources for inventive people, openness to new ideas, or demonstrated innovation in arts, technology, music, etc?

**2.) What is the story you want to tell for this exhibition? (How is your town a place of innovation?)**

**Consider the following in your narrative:** (Please stay within 400-500 words)

Significant innovative projects or initiatives

Special characteristics of your town that support innovation

Impact of creative thinkers, inventors, leaders, and movers in your town

Local/regional resources and spaces that have supported your innovation

Collaboration, flexibility, and openness to communication

Flow of ideas between people of diverse perspectives, disciplines, and backgrounds

Community acceptance of risk

Sources of support or funding



**3.) How would you categorize your innovations or inventions? Typically, innovations cross multiple categories. Select ALL that apply and describe why:**

Artistic  
Technological  
Social  
Cultural / Heritage  
Economic / Business  
Other:

**4). Please include any other details you would like to share:**

### **5. Media Assets**

Although media assets are not required to apply, we would like a descriptive list of any images, audio files, video, or objects you may have available. These items could potentially be used in the exhibition to help tell your story. It is expected that any assets submitted to this project will be free of copyright restrictions or fees. Applicants will be required to sign image or video release forms as applicable. Thumbnail examples of images or audio files can also be sent to Project Director, Tiffany Cheng, at [chengti@si.edu](mailto:chengti@si.edu) at the time you apply.



**6. Collaboration and Support:**

List of community partners for this application, if applicable. Include those who you do not normally work with in your community.

What type of collaborations do you expect to forge by submitting this application?

(Please attach any letters of support to the submission email.)

**7. Other Thoughts and Comments**

Is there anything else you want us to consider?