

Rebirth of a Town, Minnesota

As told by Olivia Obritsch

Lanesboro, Minnesota

Introduction:

This story is elegantly summed up in the question asked at the beginning: “What caused the transformation of Lanesboro from its semi-neglected state to the vibrant town it is today?” Residents’ recollections of Lanesboro in the 1970s and 80s are interspersed with the transformation of the Root River State Trail, from railroad line to outdoor sports attraction. Though controversial in the 1980s, locals credit the Trail with revitalizing the area. Lanesboro and its thriving arts community are highlighted as a model for economic regeneration in other small towns, especially those in Southeastern Minnesota. Produced in conjunction with Lanesboro Arts, Minnesota, with technological support from Erin Dorbin.

Story Narrative:

Kelly Asche (00:05): With the data I look at in the history that I know and the things that I've learned, I see communities constantly and consistently evolving and changing. And so I tend to think about small towns in a little bit more positive light that it has changed a lot, it has evolved from where it has been 20, 30, 40, or 50 years ago. I know not everything's positive. I know there are problems and challenges, but I believe we need to nuance the narrative a little bit more away from just negative or revitalization, but more towards look at all these interesting things happening at all of these interesting places.

Olivia Obritsch (00:37): Nowhere could this be more applicable than Lanesboro, a small town with a plethora of experience with change gleaned from the events that have taken place here in the last 40 years. This is that story.

Jennifer Hungerholt (00:59): When I think back to the '70s, I lived in Rochester and I'd come down here and visit my grandparents on weekends. Town was just dead. I mean, it was nothing going on

Robin Krom (01:10): Lanesboro was a beautiful town, but it was pretty well closed up.

Marc Sather (01:16): Lanesboro was like many small towns. It was somewhat abandoned, boarded up.

Olivia Obritsch (01:23): So what caused the transformation in Lanesboro from its semi neglected state to the vibrant town it is today?

Robin Krom (01:31): The trail was the first huge factor, I think, that really brought Southeastern Minnesota as well as Lanesboro a lot of growth.

Olivia Obritsch (01:47): The railroad first entered the area in 1868 with the construction of a new portion of rail line that originally stretched from Rushford to Lanesboro. The railway was first christened The Root River Railroad but changed names several times in rapid succession until 1880, when it was absorbed into the preexisting Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company, often referred to as simply The Milwaukee Road.

Olivia Obritsch (02:15): The railway greatly impacted the agricultural communities in the area by providing transport of goods and people. A railroad timecard from May 16th, 1880 describes up to six freight trains and one passenger train coming through Lanesboro daily.

Olivia Obritsch (02:33): By the 1960s however, the Southern Minnesota division, as it was called, was reaching its lowest point after many years of decreased use, due in part to the national shift to truck transportation.

Duane Benson (02:48): The train would come through once every two weeks or so, and they'd call you and they'd say, "The train's going to come through, make sure all your cows or horses aren't on the trail." It was really sporadic. So, it wasn't like you could plan on Thursday afternoon and it seems bizarre even to say plan on the train coming through. I mean, who cares? But we did.

Olivia Obritsch (03:09): In 1978, the Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Paul Railroad filed a request with interstate commerce commission to abandon the portion of railway running through Southeastern Minnesota. The request was accepted in June of 1979.

Marc Sather (03:26): I actually rode on the railroad the very last day. It was the final train ride that was given by the railway when they abandoned the railroad. And many people in these towns wrote it because it was the last time.

Marc Sather (03:44): Actually, it was kind of fun because it was an open air wood caboose. We got to stick our heads out the window and have a nice time. It was a very uncertain time because people relied upon the railroad for commerce. And of course, people were not as acclimated to truck traffic as they are today in 2016. So, there was some reticence about the dependability of trucks and the accessibility of trucks. These are just conversations that I remember hearing and that the railroad as a style of transportation or a form of transportation would be gone.

Olivia Obritsch (04:28): With the abandonment began a 120 day public use negotiation period to allow organizations to assess the feasibility of purchasing the land for public use.

Olivia Obritsch (04:40): The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources had been interested in purchasing the land for the purpose of constructing a state trail since 1971, when state officials passed legislation that provided for the creation of the trail. So in mid July 1979, the DNR promptly began their feasibility study, which they

called the Milwaukee Road Corridor Study. This development generated a lot of buzz around town.

Glen Nyenhuis (05:07): That was most of the discussion that you would hear in the bars, in the restaurant.

Glen Nyenhuis (05:18): "Well, you know, there's a rumor that they're going to put a bike trail in on the old railroad."

Glen Nyenhuis (05:25): "Oh, that going to be great."

Olivia Obritsch (05:28): But not everyone agreed that it would be great.

Duane Benson (05:32): The first time that I heard the proposal or what they were going to do was not exactly what all of us thought we should be able to expect, which was we should have an opportunity to get this land back. After all our forefathers, somebody had this land subtracted from their total, et cetera. And we were legitimately concerned about the notion of having a thoroughfare going through the middle of your farm. It wasn't like the railroad who called you and said, "We're coming through, get the cows off the trail."

Olivia Obritsch (06:09): This opinion was held by many. As part of the corridor study, the DNR conducted a massive survey of adjacent land owners with hopes of contacting everyone along the study area. The findings contained some rather shocking statistics, including that two out of three land owners surveyed were opposed to public ownership of the corridor and that three out of four land owners surveyed were opposed to development of the corridor as a state trail.

Marc Sather (06:40): I think in general terms throughout the area, it was the influx of outsiders. The unknown aspect of that.

Glen Nyenhuis (06:48): You still had that generation that didn't welcome change. They wanted to keep it the town that they grew up. And you can't blame them through that. It was part of them.

Jennifer Hungerholt (07:03): They live in a small world. They wanted to keep things the same, always and weren't open minded enough to think it's a good thing for our city to have tourism.

Marc Sather (07:15): But this is a very staid community. It's very staid. It's like trying to turn a battleship in the middle of the ocean without a motor.

Olivia Obritsch (07:26): The process of bringing the trail to Lanesboro proceeded despite the early concerns. The feasibility study was completed in January of 1980, with the decision to move ahead with the project.

Olivia Obritsch (07:39): At that time, the first informational meetings were held for the community. In March of 1980, a formal hearing was conducted to help identify the hopes, and in large part, the concerns of the people. The meetings were mainly

attended by three groups of people. The land owners, people who were strongly in favor of the trail, and by citizens seeking information about the project.

Duane Benson (08:05): It was pretty much a blank sheet. Everybody had an idea. So, it was somewhat disorganized early on. It began to take a little shape as time moved on. I think oftentimes we do this as human beings. We focus in on details without the big picture. And so the question became real quickly, "Is it going to be hard-packed gravel or is it going to become pavement?" We didn't know if we're doing it yet.

Jennifer Hungerholt (08:34): In an effort to ensure that it was not done, those opposed had organized to form the group Citizen's Right to Purchase Property Incorporated. An attorney was hired by the group and great lengths were taken to present their case. But as the planning process went on, compromises began to be made.

Duane Benson (08:53): I think what happened from a political maneuvering perspective was somewhat ingenious. What basically the DNR and others did was say, "We'll take the flat land, Spring Valley and on, and we'll sell that back to the farmers. And then we'll take that land on the other side boarding or the river and we'll sell that back to the farmers." And it left, the [inaudible 00:09:24] guys, they were the remainders. And so that began to turn it because it fractionally broke the bond that we all had together.

Olivia Obritsch (09:35): By 1983, the planning process was winding down. As was the opposition, being replaced instead with an anxious anticipation of the trail that corresponded with the beginning construction.

Rebecca Hale (09:48): It was an exciting time when they were putting the trails in. It was kind of sad to see the railroads go away because I do remember as a young child, I could watch it go across the field and so that was a fond childhood memory of mine.

Rebecca Hale (10:05): But at the same time, I believe I was eighth, ninth grader when they started taking the railroads out and we would go walking out on the trails. So, it was kind of adventurous, like, "Oh, this is where the train used to come." And it just seemed like it was an untouched part, even though it had been traveled by the trains, it was untouched by feet in our eyes. And then as they added the paved bike trails, then we were able to go farther.

Glen Nyenhuis (10:39): They operated the trail for a couple of years without any paving on it. Just gravel. The trail was put in in sections. Lanesboro was the start over the paved trail.

Olivia Obritsch (10:57): The Root River State Trail officially opened in 1989.

Robin Krom (11:01): In fact, my son and my wife road the inaugural ride with the Lieutenant Governor of the state of Minnesota from Rushford to Lanesboro on their bikes and cut the ribbon. And that changed the area.

Julie Kiehne (11:20): My husband and I were married nearby in the town of harmony in 1989, which actually was also coincidentally the ribbon cutting for the Root River Bike Trail. In the first years of our marriage, we would often come through Lanesboro for family Christmas or holiday gatherings and we'd look and we'd see, "Wow, look it, now there's a winery in Lanesboro."

Julie Kiehne (11:41): "Well, now there's a theater. It looks like they're renovating that theater." Each time we came through, we just kept seeing a few more things were being added here from about that decade of '89 until, well, 2000 when we moved here. We could see a real progression and then when we moved here, things were really, really happening.

Julie Kiehne (11:58): It was very clear that much of what brought people to Lanesboro with the bike trail was now triggering this whole economic development of arts and of lodging, the dining, the shopping, things were happening downtown. Tourism was well underway.

Robin Krom (12:18): The bike trail was the one biggest factor early on that opened up this area because it opened up this area for other things to come in. Soon after the Commonwealth Theater came to town and did incredible things in Lanesboro. The arts came in and they were doing things. Mrs. B's was the first bed and breakfast that opened.

Marc Sather (12:43): It's the synergy that these, these activities, the theater, the arts, the history, the recreational opportunities. All of these things are interrelated and they're actually going on because of the other business being there, or the other activity being there.

Olivia Obritsch (13:00): One huge driver we have in our area is Lanesboro Arts.

Robbie Brokken (13:05): We have a sales gallery, we have an exhibition gallery, and the organization is very, very busy with lots of other programs which include education, artist residencies, we have a theater that we program with lots and lots of different performances going on. The list goes on and on.

Robbie Brokken (13:21): My experience is that the people that come in and out of the gallery are here for many different parts of the community. We have so many people walking in in their funky bicycle gear. We have people coming in in their swimming gear from the river.

John Davis (13:37): And when people come for the arts, they discover nature and the bike trail. And when people come just for the bike trail, they discover the arts and the theater. And so it really is different things to different people. And so there's really a whole menu and I think it's that combination of arts and culture and the beauty of the environment and the outdoors that makes Lanesboro work really well.

Robbie Brokken (14:01): It's just been a wonderful, perfect combination of activities and events that everything supports each other.

Marc Sather (14:09): I think it's a very interesting story to see the trail that has been kind of not so well received has been very beneficial.

Duane Benson (14:22): I'm not ashamed to admit I was wrong on resisting the trail. The trail of was quite unexpected the way it turned out.

Glen Nyenhuis (14:32): They didn't realize what the people that rode bifocals were like, that they didn't destroy their happy biking ground.

Duane Benson (14:44): We get the best tourists in the world here. They don't throw a gum wrapper. They don't want to see a lot of Ferris wheels. They just want to walk around and look at trees and it turned out to be something that was the opposite of what we thought it is. And the people that do come through your property, you want them to come through. They're nice people.

Duane Benson (15:09): We never know on a political issue what the outcome is. We only perceive it. And so that's never totally accurate because perceptions aren't reality.

Olivia Obritsch (15:22): What is the reality is that Lanesboro has grown to become a leader in our area.

Marc Sather (15:27): I refer to Lanesboro as the economic engine of our area. And so there is this interest in replicating what has happened here. We have people from all over the United States that come here trying to learn how to do this. So, there's this, "We want to be like you." Kind of thing. "We want to experience a little Renaissance in our town."

Olivia Obritsch (15:51): Yet in the area, surrounding communities resist becoming places that look and feel exactly like Lanesboro. While each wishes to become even more of a destination, they also want to maintain and honor their own identities in the process, a situation that requires a great deal of balance throughout the region.

Robin Krom (16:11): Lanesboro is not a stand-alone community within Southeastern Minnesota. I've always said that it takes all of us to make Southeastern Minnesota better. And when our neighbors do better, we all do that.

Julie Kiehne (16:22): You know, I think the regional identity is something that's still could be built for all of the small towns in our region. There's not one single community that should ever feel that they're the only travel spot because clearly we have all of that beauty and the resources and activities and assets all along that whole corridor that we need to share. Being that we are connected by the artery of the trail, there is that overall regional brand that should continue to be told. That story should be told.

Julie Kiehne (16:57): With that said, I also believe that each community really has their own individual identity that makes them unique. You just kind of think of all the other communities. When you think of Houston, I think of owls. I just do. I just think of their nature center, right?

Julie Kiehne (17:13): When you think of Rushford I think of Lefse, right? I mean, where can you find a Lefse factory like that, you know? And when I think of Whalan, I think a pie. When I think of Lanesboro I think of BnBs. I still do. For me, that's has always been the brand piece that I think makes us unique in that we have the most licensed bed and breakfasts of any town in the state of Minnesota. Oh, and rhubarb. If I said Lanesboro wasn't about rhubarb. Being the rhubarb capital. So, I think that identity is important for each community.

Eric Leitzen (17:51): It's a great idea. If you can find that thing about your town or your community that gets people down here, Lanesboro's done a great job of becoming a destination. I'd like to see all of the towns in Southeastern Minnesota become like Lanesboro. I'd like to see it become something like upstate that they do in New York where there's all these different little towns, they all had a claim to fame. There's a reason to go from town to town.

Eric Leitzen (18:15): But to do that, number one, we're all going to have to work together. Unfortunately, you can't just do it alone. Everyone does better when we all do better. And I do think we have enough people, particularly in the younger generations, that are willing to maybe start something going here. Maybe a cooperative spirit. I think the cooperative spirit is pretty strong in the millennial generation.

Eric Leitzen (18:36): But yeah, the bike trail is a wonderful way to keep those towns together and to get them working together as well for the benefit of everybody. And I'd like to see Hokah joined with that and join that network and become part of that.

Olivia Obritsch (19:26): So, here we are today. A vibrant and unique community reaping the benefits of tourism, but what lies in the future for Lanesboro?

Robin Krom (19:36): I hope it is still like it is today in the respect that we are a community that is mystical. It's a community that wraps its arms around you. I hope we never lose that ability to do that.

Julie Kiehne (19:53): The crystal ball and the thought of what it means for Lanesboro. I have always hoped for more development of the Riverside area.

Julie Kiehne (20:03): So, now as I walk along that area, I see our city sheds and I think that whole river area could be so well-developed. Again, just further the next step for Lanesboro.

Nora Sampson (20:17): I would like to see probably something other than little boutiques and cafes. We have the theater and we have the arts, but I don't know. I'd like something more than that.

Jennifer Hungerholt (20:31): I would like to see all the buildings downtown maintained, fixed up so that they're in good shape. There's a few that really aren't in good shape and could use some work and I'd like to see all of that done. That would be where I'd like to start.

Olivia Obritsch (20:51): These are discussions that are currently being heard in Lanesboro. much of this discussion stems from the Lanesboro concept plan. The process of creating the concept plan began in early 2016 and was completed in about six months. That said, the concept plan was designed to act as a guide for Lanesboro for decades to come by offering many suggestions for improvements deemed most important by the community and by a nationally recognized rural town planner, Randall Arms.

Olivia Obritsch (21:25): So, as the future looms ahead with signs of impending change, Lanesboro stands ready to greet it. After all we've done it before.

Glen Nyenhuis (21:33): That's about it. And it's going to keep changing and that's good.

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