

CHAPTER 5: NOTES FROM JEFFERSON COUNTY – ANALYSIS

The Crossroads

At the Kansas border on Rte. 77 in the midst of flowing fields of green, a welcome sign invites travelers to the Cornhusker State. It sits on the side of a two-lane highway, across from a hundred-year old clapboard church with a lopsided steeple and peeling white paint. In old-fashioned block lettering the sign shouts, “NEBRASKA...THE GOOD LIFE.” An old pickup will chug by or a combine will occasionally rumble down the pavement, but usually the only sound is the wind gusting through the aisles of rustling ears. This is Great Plains country, big sky Country, and visitors don’t have to work too hard to imagine a line of covered wagons trundling across the horizon in the distance -- at least until they see the wind turbines, that is.

Conjuring images of Wellsian space invaders, 44 windmills tower 422 feet into the skyline outside Diller, Nebraska. While they are certainly a striking feature, the turbines also seem to fit right in, as their languid rotations mirror the slow way of life in the local villages nearby. And this isn’t the only major energy infrastructure in the area: the area is also home to a transfer station for the TransCanada Keystone oil pipeline and will be the future ending point of the Keystone XL extension -- a project approved by the Trump administration in November, 2017. The unlikely Jefferson County, whose population sat just above 7,000 at the time of the 2015 Census, has somehow become a very important hub of Midwest energy.

Steele City

A dilapidated brick schoolhouse sits on a hilltop near the highway; its windows busted and boarded, the swing set out front coated in rust. A small clump of houses tucked behind scrub and trees overlook a rolling landscape interlaced with electricity lines. Down a dusty stretch of

one-lane road, a series of huge metal coils surrounded by chain-link fence topped with razor wire emanate a throbbing bass hum that can be heard from a distance when the wind blows just right.

The church in town was closed years ago, as was the grocery store, the bank, and the schoolhouse. The only signs of life these days are the few solitary residents, the local post office, and the Salty Dog Saloon -- the sole business in Steele City. The bar's proprietor, Margo D'Angelo, still remembers when the town used to be a community, before the Union Pacific railroad pulled its Steele City stop and the workers moved away.

"The population was right around a hundred, and we still had a gas station in town. We had a cement ready mix business in town. We had a grocery store, of course the post office is still here. There was quite a few more homes and people living here. As time has gone by we've lost a lot of homes and people. Once the railroad left a lot of the jobs went with it, and places closed down."

After the railroad and its workers packed up and left, Steele City fell into pattern of decay. Older residents died, their children moved on, businesses closed and the population fell from over 100 to its present state of "about 50 on a good day," according to D'Angelo. However, in 2008 the local population received some surprisingly good news when President Bush approved a new project to build 2,147 miles of crude-oil pipeline from Alberta, Canada, to a new transfer station in Steele City. The pipeline, which would transport around 600,000 barrels' worth of oil a day through the area seemed like the tonic the local economy needed to begin to rebuild.

"It doubled the business. They stayed around in campers, and even if they weren't staying here in town they'd come in after work and drink and eat...Anytime there's a work crew that comes through town it'll make the difference in putting a new roof on or putting in central air unit, increase your employee's pay, so that always increases. Out of town people always tip a lot better, so that increase their wages."

The Salty Dog gained a new crop of regulars as workers from around the state and beyond began to frequent the bar during the station's construction. Pipeline crews started camping out in the park behind the saloon or staying in local hotels in neighboring Fairbury. The stores and restaurants in Diller nearby got a boost from the influx of shoppers and patrons, and the Nebraska welders union represented hometown workers for the build. Even the local residents received benefits from the construction as TransCanada made payments to any landowner whose property would need to be dug into to bury the pipeline.

However, the boon to the economy was not to last. Construction on the Steele City phase of the Keystone was completed in 2010, just two years after it was first announced. The new transfer station was almost entirely self-operating, and as such requires little to no regular maintenance or full-time local workers. The construction crews picked up and moved on after the project wrapped, and Steele City fell back into its old, quiet way of life. The benefits the project brought with it were just as fleeting and unsustainable as the oil that now coursed through its pipes. Eight years after its construction, the transfer station at the end of Romeo Road has become a permanent fixture in the landscape, a memory of two years' prosperity and a rallying point of hope for the Steele City community wishing for the XL extension's groundbreaking to begin.

Diller

The approach to Diller, Nebraska (population 260) is heralded by a sign just north of the Steele Flats Wind Farm -- about five miles from Steele City and the Keystone transfer station. The strip of street lights dotting the sidewalks and buildings on Main Street shine on a community center, fire station, telephone company, Opera House-turned-event space, tavern, meat locker, filling station, picnic pavilion, and an ever-busy church. A grain elevator greets visitors from the south and an elementary school and athletic field border Diller's northern border. The village may

be small, but events like the charity Shrimp Feed, the Diller Picnic and the various church events throughout the year have fostered a strong sense of community among the residents.

Head a few miles to the south of the town, past farmhouses and spindly pivot sprayers and you'll see a small sign that reads "CLASSIC DAIRY." A collection of outbuildings and barns, hulking machinery, and a farmhouse comprise the home of the Engelman family: Fourth generation dairy farmers and owners of one of the area's largest organizations. The Engelman's dairy has grown since its inception in the late-1800s from a small farm and milking operation to its present state of 1,100 heads of cattle, multiple barns, thousands of acres of cropland and its position as one of the county's largest milk producers.

"I like living in a small town, you know everybody and you feel safe. You can go out and not lock your doors every time, you can leave your keys in your vehicle, you wave to everyone on the road and they wave at you. The small schools are nice, you know the kids in the classes and know who their parents are...I like the small community living."

The area's population has remained fairly level, hovering around 250-300 residents since the 1960s. In recent years large-scale local operations like the Engelman's Classic Dairy have uplifted the economy and brought more jobs and opportunity to the area. The wind farm project also provides a lasting benefit to the landowners around Diller as any privately owned land that houses a turbine is paid a monthly stipend by the project's management company - making the operation a sustainable endeavor in both energy output and income for Diller's population.

"A lot of people our age and ages close to us I feel like have come back lately, maybe left for a few years but are now coming back to raise their families in a small town...I think it comes down to being what we know. We all know what small town life is like and how great it was for us to grow up here."

The Engelman's young son Preston, now 12-years-old, has lofty career goals for his grown-up self. His two aspirations at the moment are either to play professional baseball for the Kansas City Royals, or to take over the family farm when his father and mother decide to retire.

"I want to stay around and work on the farm because I think it would be cool since my great-great-great-grandpa owned the farm, then my great-great grandpa owned the farm, then my great-grandpa owned the farm, now my grandpa owns the farm, and one day my dad's gonna own the farm. I think it would be cool if I own the farm, and my kids can. Or else I want to be a professional baseball player, because I like baseball a lot."

Already Preston and his two sisters, Alli and Sidney, help out regularly on the farm: feeding and watering the calves, cleaning pens, raising pigs and show cattle, and working at general chores around the farm as needed. Even though most of their friends live closer to downtown, Preston says that life on the farm has benefits he wouldn't be able to enjoy if he lived in the village.

"In big cities I get cramped up...like today you can look out your window and see views that are beautiful, like the corn and everything on the farm, but in the city you just look out and there's a bunch of big houses. I just like living in the country...I can have my pigs. And you can't ride a four-wheeler in the city."

The Future

The future of the two towns, huddled close to together in the middle of vast rolling stillness, is inherently tied to the local residents' lives and their connections to the land around them. The economy and residents of Steele City put their hopes into Phase II of a project that will boost their economy for a year or two -- while some Diller residents like the Engelmans put their

faith into developing at home and reaping the rewards of sustainable energies like those the wind turbines provide. One town dying, one town thriving. Each continuing to live with the knowledge that even though the prairie wind will always barrel across the fields, one day the crude oil will cease to flow. Each continuing to wonder which community will still be there when that day comes to pass.