

A Slice of Pie in the Arkansas Delta with Beth Wiedower

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I catch Beth Wiedower, Director of the Arkansas Delta Rural Heritage Development Initiative (RHDI), on her cell phone after several days of missed emails and phone calls. It is worth the wait. She is talking somewhat breathlessly in a slow drawl about a meeting she has just come from. It dawns on me as we talk that she is in the middle of a long and, for her, familiar drive back to Helena, Arkansas, the base of the RHDI offices.¹ Helena is a small rural city on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi River with a population of about 15,000 people (if you include West Helena in the count).

“If I didn’t talk on the phone in the car, I’d never get this job done,” she says. The Arkansas Delta is a long and narrow strip of land that snakes along the Mississippi River on Arkansas’s eastern border and includes fifteen counties. This region is 280 miles long from top to bottom, a five hour trip if you drive straight through with no stops and no detours. You get the impression that Ms. Wiedower always makes stops and never drives straight through. An approach she’d like visitors to take as well.

As Director of the RHDI, it is Ms. Wiedower’s job to promote and preserve the Arkansas Delta’s heritage, building on its natural, cultural, and historic assets as a means of regional economic development. The hallmark of the heritage-based economic development approach is tourism, but it is by no means a single strategy. The RHDI is implementing a multifaceted approach to regional economic development that includes heritage tourism



Beth Wiedower next to an interpretive marker on the “Arkansas Delta Music Trail: *Sounds from the Soil & Soul*”

¹ The RHDI office has recently moved and is now located in West Memphis, Arkansas.

development, along with local entrepreneurship and business development, historic building preservation and reuse, education and advocacy, and regional branding and marketing.

Heritage-based economic development is a passion for Ms. Wiedower, who received her Master's Degree in Historic Preservation at the University of South Carolina and also studied in England. But, at 33 years old, she is not caught up in yesterday's approach to history. "I love saving old buildings," says Ms. Wiedower, "but the work is all in vain if there is no viable reuse."

Ms. Wiedower is a native Arkansan, raised in Little Rock. She spent time working on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, followed by graduate studies in South Carolina before moving to Helena. She says she wasn't looking for a job in Arkansas. She had planned to stay on the east coast. But, she was approached by the State Historic Preservation Office in Little Rock, where she had previously worked as an intern. When she read the job description for the RHDI field staff position, she felt like it was written for her.

"It was karma," she says.

The Arkansas Delta was selected in 2005, along with a region in Central Kentucky, by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to pilot a heritage-based economic development approach as a viable strategy for the preservation and revitalization of rural regions. Central Kentucky was chosen as a "hot" rural market because it was growing rapidly and facing development issues such as urban sprawl from nearby Louisville and Lexington. The Arkansas Delta was selected as a "cold" market, characterized by disinvestment and blight. As Ms. Wiedower explains it, the economy of eastern Arkansas has been in decline for almost half a century due to the mechanization and consolidation of agriculture and family farming, loss of African-American populations who migrated to urban areas for better opportunities, systemic disinvestment, and youth outmigration.

I apologize to Ms. Wiedower. I am not familiar with the Arkansas Delta. Could she tell me something about it? She laughs. She is not offended. Not many people are familiar with it, she concedes, but interest in the area and national recognition are growing.

"We hired consultants to help us brand the region," she says. "You know what they found? The Arkansas Delta didn't have a bad reputation. But, it didn't have a good one either. It had no reputation at all."

"No identity is better than a negative one. Because we can define it—a positive identity—for ourselves," says Ms. Wiedower.

The Arkansas Delta is mostly rural with small towns, cotton farms, rice fields, and forests. There are several ports along the Mississippi, Arkansas and White Rivers and many historically significant sites, buildings, and landscapes. The region has a rich music heritage (blues, gospel, country and rock n' roll), along with a unique regional cuisine, culture, and arts and crafts. West Memphis, just across the

Mississippi River from Memphis, Tennessee, and Jonesboro, home to Arkansas State University, are the nearest urban centers.

Ms. Wiedower describes the Arkansas Delta with the love of a native, even though she was raised in Little Rock. When she talks about the Arkansas Delta, you can almost feel the moist breeze blowing off the Mississippi River. You can smell the home-cooked tamales. Hear the delicate songs of wild birds in the rice fields mixed in with the blues of revitalized juke joints. See the serene and flat countryside. You can sense the excitement of a rural region coming into its own after half a century of economic decay and population loss.

Historically though, the only common bond across the region, outside of agriculture, was its two National Scenic Byways, Great River Road and Crowley's Ridge Parkway, which stretch across ten states including Arkansas. Scenic Byways are nationally recognized motor routes selected for their historic, natural, and cultural significance and interest to tourists. The Arkansas Delta Byways region (the 15 counties defined as such because of their connections to one or both of the National Scenic Byways) has received and leveraged more than \$19 million over the past 11 years to maintain the byways and develop visitor experiences along the routes. These investments cannot reverse the economic decline of the region alone. Arkansas Delta Byways is now a lead partner in the RHDl effort to preserve and revitalize the communities and economy of the rural region.

"Our consultants visited with people all up and down the region. People in Blytheville really didn't think they had anything in common with the folks in Helena or Lake Village when we started out." (Blytheville is one of the northern most towns in the Arkansas Delta region, with Lake Village at the southern tip and Helena at the midway point in between.) The consultants also felt a somewhat negative attitude among residents. When asked what would attract visitors to the region, many responded with "Why would anyone want to come here?" But, the exercise did unveil one common theme across the region. The land.

"We're tied to the land," explains Ms. Wiedower. "Our income is tied to the land. Our traditions. It comes out in our food and our music. Our religion. The land can be very generous – bountiful as in crop yields. But, it can also be very cruel, as with floods and droughts. It's a precarious relationship between the people and the land." Out of these conversations was born a regional brand, "Arkansas Delta: *Soil & Soul*."



The RHDl knew that it did not want to brand itself, since its role was to coordinate regional partners and projects, but the initiative was instrumental in establishing the brand. "Arkansas Delta: *Soil & Soul*" was quickly embraced by the region, according to Ms. Wiedower. Now, several Chambers of Commerce, realtors and bankers, among other businesses use the "Arkansas Delta: *Soil & Soul*" logo. They participate in programs and projects led by the RHDl and Arkansas Delta Byways. Gradually, the

negative attitudes have started to shift to a sense of pride in the Arkansas Delta. Not with every person, but a slow, person by person, town by town sort of shift. And with this growing mindset shift come new economic development endeavors.

Heritage tourism development, as one of the most tangible aspects of heritage-based economic development, was an important early focus. With the support of the RHDl, the Arkansas Delta Byways region has developed a system of heritage trails. Trails currently in development include the Arkansas Delta African American Heritage Trail, Birding the Byways, and the Arkansas Delta Music Trail: Sounds from the Soil & Soul.

The Arkansas Delta Music Trail: Sounds from the Soil & Soul features artists such as Louis Jordan, Sonny Boy Williamson, Albert King, and Johnny Cash. A CD/DVD has been developed to introduce visitors and locals to the rich and unique music heritage of the region. Music festivals abound: the Arkansas Blues and Heritage Festival (formerly the King Biscuit Blues Festival), Warfield Music Festival, and Delta Family Gospel Festival in Helena, Osceola's Heritage Musicfest, Blues on Broadway in West Memphis, and Monticello's Rhythm and Roots Festival. The breadth and authenticity of the Arkansas Delta Music Trail appears to be due, in part, to the RHDl's tireless efforts to include all sites, artists and events. For example, a small grassroots effort to promote and honor Louis Jordan by locals in his hometown of Brinkley has led to preservation and interpretive efforts with the goal of adding a new site to the trail. This type of inclusiveness makes the initiative richer and stronger. It also takes time, an understanding of all the region's assets, and the ability to corral their collective power.

"The buy-in is happening organically," says Ms. Wiedower. "Local residents are becoming more aware of the economic impact of visitors. Plus, we have been successful in securing financial incentives to encourage and support heritage-based economic development activities." Awareness campaigns and hospitality classes are helping. "It's important that everyone in the region recognize this effort... from the convenience store clerk to the local bank president."

Local business development is another component of heritage-based economic development, with an emphasis on local foods, crafts, and arts. A microbrand, *Arkansas DeltaMade*, was designed to enhance the marketability of locally-made products. The Arkansas DeltaMade program goes beyond the brand, however, by offering technical assistance and fostering peer networking opportunities for its members. From BBQ and tamales to soy candles and heirloom quilts, Arkansas DeltaMade businesses and products represent the unique culture of the region. A spin-off project, Delta Cuisine – A Southern Kitchen Incubator, is being established to support food-based entrepreneurs and strengthen connections between farm and table.

Exploring value-added options for commodity crops such as rice, cotton, and soybeans is also an important aspect of both Arkansas DeltaMade and Delta Cuisine. Locally grown specialty rice is now



Arkansas DeltaMade
Marketplace

direct-marketed as an Arkansas DeltaMade product, and a local artist is exploring the production of rice-based papers and stationary.

Ms. Wiedower and the RHDl seem to have the uncanny gift of seeing opportunity in each of the Arkansas Delta's traditions. Take duck hunting, for example. The Arkansas Delta is famous as a landing spot for migrating ducks, and for two months each year (November and December) the region is flooded with duck hunters. Outfitters make their yearly income in these two critical months. The RHDl is working with local outfitters and entrepreneurs to add value to their seasonal businesses. Outfitters are encouraged to serve regional foods and products and provide information on attractions in the area. Recreational and retail opportunities for duck hunters' spouses and children are also promoted. What about the other ten months each year? The RHDl and partners are working to expand the Arkansas Delta's reputation for great bird watching.

"Bird watching is the most popular spectator sport in the country," explains Ms. Wiedower matter-of-factly. I wonder how she holds this fact along with methods for preserving historic buildings, direct-marketing locally-grown speciality rice, and the names of legendary bluesmen all in her mind at one time.

"Cabins and hunting lodges can be used year-round by birdwatchers," she continues. "Outfitters and suppliers can sell birdseed, binoculars and maps of the region when camoflauge and ammunition are out of season." The RHDl has partnered with Audubon Arkansas to develop a "Birding the Byways" heritage trail to encourage bird watching.

"It's hard to work across 15 counties," says Ms. Wiedower with characteristic bluntness. "One of our biggest accomplishments over the past four years is that we [RHDl] are viewed as serving the whole region." It is clear that one of the ways Ms. Wiedower has achieved this is by sheer dedication—and perhaps the ability to drive across the region on a regular basis, spending nights away from home and learning about each town, landmark, local story, and tradition.

Ms. Wiedower stops to reflect on the challenges of demonstrating the impacts of the RHDl's work in the Arkansas Delta.

"It's hard to measure the impact of our work in just a few years. We're talking about a mind shift over time. It's hard to convince people to pay \$5 for a bag of rice that is locally grown versus \$2 a bag at the nearest chain big box store. Or, that rehabilitating a historic storefront on Main Street is more energy efficient than throwing up a [new] metal building out along the highway." Still, Ms. Wiedower and the RHDl have come up with tangible measures of success, such as an increased number of visitors and the amount of tourism dollars spent in the region. Additional indicators include the number of small business members in the Arkansas DeltaMade program, the frequency with which "Arkansas Delta" is mentioned in local and statewide media, and a comparison of stakeholder interviews from 2006 and 2009.

Initial funding from the National Trust for Historic Preservation (secured through the grant by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) ended in 2009. However, as a testament to the RHDl's success, the initiative and partners have secured funding for two more years of operations from the National Scenic Byways program. The funds, routed through the Arkansas Delta Byways organization, are complemented by continued support from the National Trust and the State of Arkansas' State Historic Preservation Program.

Ms. Wiedower thinks that it is time to roll out the Arkansas Delta pilot initiative's achievements as a national model for the viability of heritage-based economic development. The RHDl is working with the National Trust to produce materials about the initiative's strategies and is pursuing further funding opportunities to continue its work into the future. Hot or cold market, heritage-based economic development is clearly making an impact in the Arkansas Delta.

"Heritage-based economic development is not the only answer for rural regions, but it is a slice of the pie," says Ms. Wiedower. You can be sure it's a delightful slice, if it comes from the Arkansas Delta.

For more information on...

... the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org

...the Arkansas Delta and the Rural Heritage Development Initiative, go to www.DeltaByways.com, www.arkansasdeltamade.com and www.arkansasdelta.org/