

Entrepreneurial Community of the Month

Sparta, North Carolina

Location:	Alleghany County, northwest North Carolina
Population:	Sparta: 2,000 Alleghany County: 11,000
County Profile:	Go to commerce.state.nc.us , click on NC Statistics at left then County Profiles at left; click on Alleghany in northwest corner

Small Town Triumphs through Tourism, Technology and Teapots

In rural Sparta, N.C., Patrick Woodie's mother worked at the local sewing factory for 42 years. In a wave of change, it closed in the 1990s, leaving Woodie's mother and many others jobless. But like the Blue Ridge Mountains surrounding it, Sparta stood strong. Local leaders banded together and acquired resources to open a business development center serving Sparta and surrounding Alleghany County.

The center is housed in the old sewing building, and Woodie's mother was one of the first volunteers in the door.

"Coming to terms with our historical transition from a manufacturing base to something else was a hard process," said Woodie, former executive director of Alleghany County's Blue Ridge Development Center and currently with the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, Inc. "But our response was to focus on the assets of our community."

Located at the midpoint of America's most visited national park – the Blue Ridge Parkway – Sparta's potential for tourism dollars is just beginning to be tapped. New residents are also realizing the beauty and business opportunities offered by this small town tucked away in the northwest corner of the state.

Withstanding challenges, Sparta forges ahead to shape its own destiny by creating new opportunities for citizens and visitors.

Woodie said, "Three to four years ago most of main street Sparta was vacant. Now, you would not see an empty building."

Shaped by History and Geography

The easternmost mountainous county, Alleghany has been isolated by a lack of transportation. Seventy miles northwest of Winston Salem, Sparta has 2,000 residents with just 11,000 countywide.

"We are historically a very agricultural area, with manufacturing coming here in the 1940s and 1950s," Woodie said. "Agriculture transitioned to be a supplemental income for people who took factory jobs, mostly in the textile and apparel industries."

Up through the late 1990s, "things were booming," Woodie added, noting that the economy was strong and unemployment was low.

Then, as it did throughout the country, the bottom fell out and large companies migrated to locations with a cheaper labor force, leaving small towns like Sparta with sharp job losses.

“Beginning in the middle of 2000, we lost one-third of our total workforce in 18 months,” Woodie said. “That was painful and much like stories in other rural American counties.”

But unlike much of rural America, rather than continue to court big business, Sparta diversified and chose to focus on community assets – its natural resources base and an increasingly educated community with a need for technology support.

Keys to Success: High Elevation, High Technology

An area rich in natural beauty, Sparta sits on one of the country’s most popular scenic byways and national park, the Blue Ridge Parkway. Stretching almost 500 miles along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Blue Ridge Parkway was designed as a recreational motor road, linking the Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah national parks. According to the National Park Service, it is the most visited unit of America's National Park System, consistently attracting about 20 million people each year.

And that translates into millions of dollars for small Sparta.

“Tourism has been a central part of the community since the 1940s,” Woodie said. “It’s part of the ‘snowbird trail’ from Michigan to Florida.”

Alleghany County is also home to plenty of fishing and canoeing on the New River, thought to be one of the oldest rivers in North America.

Businesses catering to tourists in the County include restaurants, retail clothing and gift stores, campgrounds and about 75 unique bed and breakfasts or vacation rentals.

Tourism dollars for the county have increased almost 10 percent in 2004 and 2005, which was the 17th highest increase among 100 counties. Annual travel expenditures are \$16.82 million, resulting in \$3.43 million annual payroll and 180 employees.

The beauty of the mountains isn’t only for visitors to behold. Sparta and Alleghany County officials have seen an increase in people choosing to move to the area for its appealing quality of life. At first, the county saw mostly retirees relocating, but now there’s an increase in all ages of new residents.

To take advantage of natural resource assets and provide business support for entrepreneurs, the Blue Ridge Business Development Center (BDC) was formed in 2002. The Center makes good use of the low ceilings and wood floors in the old sewing plant, which is not suitable for other manufacturing businesses.

With a diversity of funding sources, including state, federal and private grants, the Center functions as a one-stop-shop for businesses, sharing space with a local community college.

Not your typical incubator, the Center leases office space and provides business counseling and training. But it also provides high tech support at competitive prices with a staff that includes web developers, graphic designers, video professionals, technology specialists and software and application professionals. Tenants of the BDC, as well as the broader community, can take advantage of these high tech services in their own hometown.

And many businesses and individuals do take advantage of this resource. Countywide, government entities, the hospital, school systems and many private businesses use the BDC.

“In creating the Center, we realized that we had a need for technology services and simply did not have any local businesses providing those services,” Woodie said. “All revenues for tech support were going outside of our county, and we wanted to change that.”

Along with creating 12 new jobs and providing a bevy of business services, the BDC building also contains the A. Anderson Huber Cyber Campus, a satellite campus of both Wilkes Community College and Appalachian State University. A visitor is likely to see high school students taking advanced colleges courses alongside college students.

“Our greatest export is our young people,” Woodie said. “We are trying to develop choices for our students to stay here to be educated and then come back to find professional positions.”

Teatime in Sparta

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Alleghany County’s economic upturn is the opening of the Sparta Teapot Museum.

“This is an amazing project, and easily misunderstood,” Woodie said.

Most residents agree that the museum, that will display 6,000 teapots worth more than \$5 million, will only add tourist appeal and contribute to economic and community development.

“There have been 10 to 15 new businesses that have opened up because they knew that the teapot museum was coming,” Woodie said.

Supporters say the museum compliments the Blue Ridge Music Center and other nearby cultural attractions.

Woodie said the museum ended up in Sparta by happenstance: Owned by a couple living in Los Angeles, the teapot collection found its way to Sparta via a local artist who knew the couple and suggested they visit the town to scope out its potential to house their wares. In the spring of 2003, the couple visited Sparta, and three months later they decided to bring their collection to Sparta.

“The collection is really comprehensive – all things teapot,” Woodie said.

Also a tenant in the BDC, the Teapot Museum is slated to open in mid-2008.

Woodie himself is a testament to the desire of residents in this rural town to reverse economic woes.

“I’ve always felt drawn to public service,” Woodie said. “I also believe that each of us have a responsibility to make that ‘place’ that we choose to occupy better than we found it.”

Woodie continues to work for positive change in rural North Carolina at the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, Inc., promoting economic development in 85 rural counties.

“The greatest lesson for me,” Woodie said, “has been understanding that Sparta and all these rural counties are no longer isolated communities. We are connected to the world and to global economics. We must be comprehensive in thinking about economic development.”

For more information on...

- ... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to www.ruraleship.org
- ... the town of Sparta, go to www.sparta-nc.com/chamber/sparta.html
- ... the Blue Ridge Economic Development Center, go to www.blueridgebdc.org
- ... the Sparta Teapot Museum, go to www.spartateapotmuseum.org
- ... the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, go to www.ncruralcenter.org
- ... The Blue Ridge Parkway, go to www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm