



Vol. 8: Welcome to Collinwood

BY REBECCA BAUER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY SCARLATI

A cool, fall air softly blows a few golden leaves off the mostly barren trees – a reminder of the approaching winter. We're on the last leg of our 100-mile journey down Nashville's prized portion of the Natchez Trace Parkway. Just 13 miles north of the Alabama state line, we enter the charming town of Collinwood, population 1,024.

Main Street stretches all but two blocks. The two-story buildings show wear and bear half-empty storefronts. Closed factories and a declining economy have made their mark. But there is also a sense of renewal. A restored train depot with a library, a fabulous coffee house/art emporium called the Dragonfly and community festivities.

We enter the Wayne County Welcome Center – a special spot like the warm hearth in the corner of an old house. Its rustic look contrasts with the neighboring Victorian cottages. Inside are two large rooms with vaulted ceilings and exposed beams. We haven't yet noticed these features before being enthusiastically greeted by Dorothee McGrath, who utters a great "Welcome!" and points to coffee and teacakes.

She is Star Volunteer of the Year for Wayne County. In November, she will have humbly accepted the award from Governor Bredesen. Volunteer Coordinator of the Wayne County Welcome Center, City of Collinwood Commissioner, Director of the RC & D (Rural Conservation and Development for five counties) and

an active member of the Natchez Trace Compact and Chamber of Commerce – McGrath is a busy woman.

So what is so special about the Welcome Center?

“This is all volunteer and donation supported,” she says. Collinwood is a gateway to Tennessee tourism. City backing and state grants made it possible to build the bones of this building, which opened in 2006; but it’s been the hard work of volunteers that has revealed its heart and soul.

“When people come through here they see this beautiful place and they remark how marvelous it is, and to have fresh baked cookies and coffee,” McGrath says. And no one leaves without signing the guestbook, complete with room for the all-important comment and opportunity to make a donation.

She gives us the rundown of their evolution: Sidewalks put in, walls painted, blinds hung, furniture placed. Outside is a four cedar-post kiosk with a map and brochures, a wheel turning over a wishing well, and beautiful landscaping – everything done by helping hands and paid for by gracious donors from all over the world.

“We’ve grown leaps and bounds in four years,” she boasts. Over 50,000 people representing every continent except Antarctica have walked through the door so far. Push pins on a large map mark their origins.

The county’s century-old history is captured and preserved as artifacts in display cases. A beautiful apothecary cabinet stands at one end with small drawers lining the lower half and a glass case on top

with a mirrored back, housing everything from old drugstore bottles to local artisan crafts. Hand-made quilts line the angled ceiling walls, and a video continuously showcases the town’s commerce.

On the wall hangs a 50’s fashion poster for the movie “Natchez Trace.” It reads, “Lloyd Royal presents the true story of John Murrell, Ruler of the Lusty wilderness trail.” The original screenplay with its worn russet pages is encased in glass. They’ve tried to locate the movie, but with no luck.

“The volunteers have been exemplary, so hospitable; they will go out of their way to make someone feel welcome,” says McGrath. Their stories are like something out of Andy Griffith’s fictional town of Mayberry. Such as the time a group of bicycle riders came in looking for the showers they heard about. It was toward closing time and the two volunteers on duty, Mary and Walter, were on their way to Bible study. They told the visitors, “No problem, if you need the showers, we’ll wait.” The cyclists cleaned up and decided to follow Mary and Walter to Bible study.

Then, there’s the time a group came in looking for RV parking. Allan, another volunteer, ended up taking them to his house, where the campers parked for the night. He and his wife Peggy made breakfast for them in the morning.

“For a town that doesn’t have much going on, it has this welcome center,” McGrath muses. She admits her take-charge attitude earned her the coordinator position. “I’m bossy,” she jokes in her energetic voice. “It’s kind of my baby, and it keeps me out of mischief!”

The daughter of a coal miner, McGrath grew up in Montana and Washington before marrying and moving south. Settling in Atlanta, she was a businesswoman and the mother of three sons. After losing her husband of nearly 45 years, she moved to Collinwood, near her oldest son and daughter-in-law. It has all happened at the right time in her life, she claims. “It’s perfect for me.”

This secret gem of a place is proof that any town can put themselves on the map and make a difference.

“We’re here not just for visitors to remember this town, but for them to remember Tennessee.” Dorothee McGrath smiles and affirms, “It can be done!”

Rebecca Bauer and Anthony Scarlati are publishers of NashvilleTraceJournal.com, an artistic and historic portrayal of the people and places along the 100 miles of the Natchez Trace in Tennessee.

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