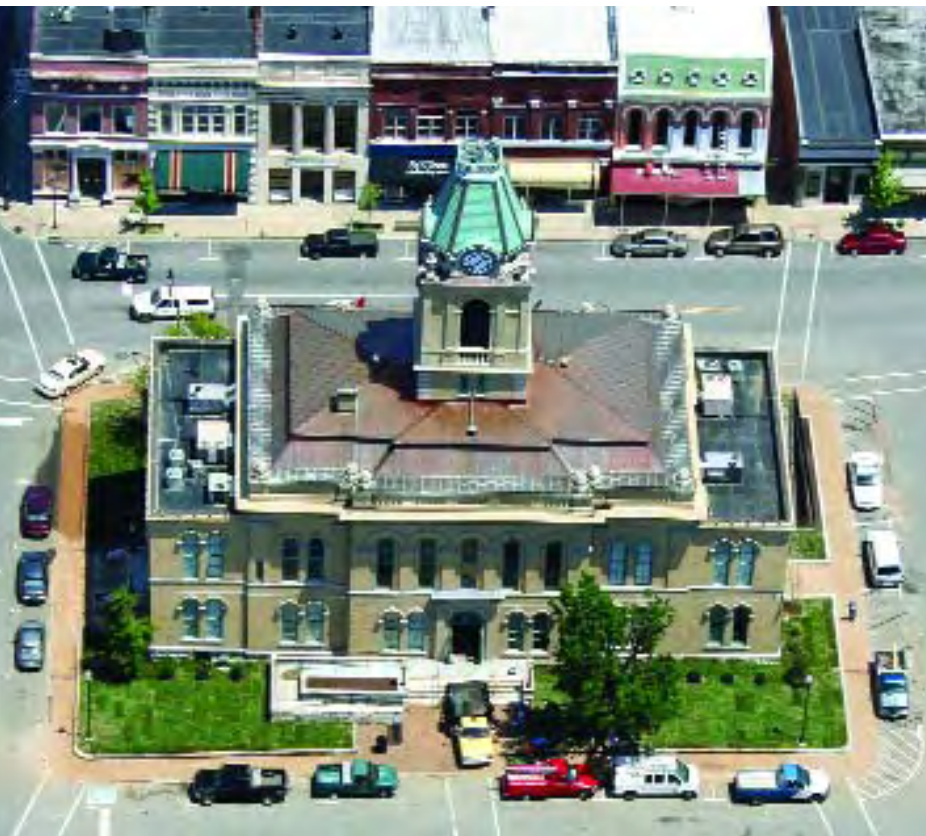


# Robertson County

BY CANDACE MOONSHOWER



(above)  
Newly Renovated  
Courthouse

(far right)  
Chairs on  
the Square

(middle right)  
Historic  
Cross Plains

If asked to define the South, no doubt people around the United States and the world would list tobacco and whiskey as just a few of the iconic images that come to mind. And Robertson County, located on the Highland Rim of the Cumberland Basin, exemplifies this like no other county in the state. From its history of whiskey production to its status as the dark-fired tobacco capital of the world, Robertson County offers up the best of an historic rural heritage coupled with a burgeoning new industrial base.

Robertson County has 10 municipalities: Springfield, Greenbrier, White House, Cross Plains, Orlinda, Adams, Cedar Hill, Coopertown, Ridgetop and Millersville. In addition, the city of Portland in Sumner County provides utilities to a large industrial park on the Robertson County side of the line; White House is located partially in Sumner County; and Millersville straddles Davidson and Robertson county lines. Springfield serves as the county seat.

Of these municipalities, at least half have historic town centers reminiscent of the heyday of small town American life. The other half of the 10 municipalities are newer and would like to create town centers. Recently, questions regarding ways to preserve the agricultural nature of the county while growing town centers and accommodating industrial growth were addressed in a “Visioning Workshop” hosted by the American Institute of Architects’ (AIA) “AIA 150 Blueprint for America,” a grant program celebrating the 150th anniversary of AIA.

“The AIA, partnered with Cumberland Region Tomorrow, chose Robertson County for a pilot program involving a two-day workshop, open to the citizens of the county,” says Margot Fosnes, executive director of the Springfield-Robertson County Chamber of Commerce. The workshops took place in late April 2007; the topics covered were “Preserving Open Rural Space” and “Renewing Historic Town Centers.” During the two days of workshops, more than

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SPRINGFIELD/ROBERTSON COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



150 people were involved in activities that included education and brainstorming. "This is a testament to the level of interest the citizens of Robertson County have in the future of their community," Fosnes says.

"Folks who came to the workshop were a wonderful cross section," Fosnes says. "The majority of people that attended expressed the same general feeling about what they want for our county—to maintain the agricultural landscape and encourage growth around existing towns." Fosnes acknowledges that maintaining that balance is a tough proposition, especially given the current dilemma of farmers who own hundreds or thousands of acres



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and who might be tempted to sell the land to developers. "It's a hard call," Fosnes says. "A farmer working all his life on family land has just that—his land. How do we give an incentive to the farmer to *not* develop?"

Springfield's historic town center, with its beautifully restored Main Street and Public Square featuring a 125-year-old courthouse, is a wonderful example of a small-town downtown that serves the community and brings people there as a destination. "We recently underwent a \$4 million renovation of our courthouse that was built in 1879," says Howard Bradley, Robertson County's mayor. "The courthouse is the centerpiece of Springfield's historic town center, along

with some stores and churches that have also been restored." The "Old Post Office" building, originally built in 1915, now houses the Robertson County History Museum. The 40-year-old library is set to undergo an expansion, too, with the addition of 20,000 square feet of space.

New businesses, such as Sandy Ramsey's Burdett's Tea Shop, offer fresh new fare but add a nostalgic feel to downtown. Burdett's, which opened six years ago, is famous for homemade scones, soups, quiches and freshly prepared sandwiches. Ramsey, a resident of Springfield for over 30 years, attended the Visioning Workshop and found it informative. She welcomes new growth but with a caveat. "We have such a treasure here," she says, "and we must be thoughtful and careful as we grow to make sure that what we add enhances what is already here."

Fosnes and the Chamber are hopeful that the result of the workshop will be a plan that will have broad appeal. The AIA will soon submit a report, and Cumberland Region Tomorrow will continue to work with the Chamber toward the ultimate goal of providing a comprehensive growth plan for Robertson County.

Robertson County is one of the largest agricultural counties in Tennessee. According to Mayor Bradley, the net value of agriculture production for the county each year exceeds \$70 million. "Agriculture is very diversified here," he says. "Tobacco is the leading cash crop, but corn, wheat, soybeans and beef cattle are right up there, too."

Tourism is on the agenda for community leaders in Robertson County and, in keeping with its agrarian history, Robertson officials are utilizing the farms, orchards and vineyards as part of a campaign to increase the number of visitors that come to the county as a leisure destination. On the rise in Tennessee is "agritourism"—a term used to describe the active recruiting of tourists or travelers to an area primarily engaged in agriculture and farming. Robertson County is no exception. Farms such as Honeysuckle Hill, Riverside Farms, AppleWood Farm & Orchard, and Adams Garden offer fruit and vegetable picking, tours, sales of regional farm goods and entertainment.

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At Honeysuckle Hill Farm in Coopertown, Jeff Alsup offers educational tours in the spring and fall for school groups. "We talk to kids about all the activities that take place on a working farm like Honeysuckle Hill, including beekeeping, pumpkin growing and orchard operations, with fun and interactive activities," Alsup says. New features include entertainment, a corn maze, pig races, a vortex tunnel, a barrel train, a nature trail and a grain center.

Alsup is invested in growing agritourism in both Robertson County and in Tennessee. He is the treasurer of the new Tennessee Agritourism Association ([www.visittnfarms.com](http://www.visittnfarms.com)). The Department of Agriculture helped form the association in November 2006 to encourage and develop

the potential of Tennessee farms to host those visitors interested in the state's agricultural heritage. "Our goal," says Alsup, "is to make Tennessee the premier agritourism state in the country."

In the early days, Robertson County was known worldwide for its fine whiskey, with over 75 distilleries in operation in the county. The whiskey era boomed from shortly after the Civil War until the Prohibition years of the early twentieth century. Nowadays, whiskey production is being replaced by wineries. Chateau

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**Honeysuckle Hill Farm**

Ross, in Orlinda, is a small, private winery and vineyard just six miles from the Kentucky state line and 40 miles north of Nashville off I-65. Sumner Crest Winery in Portland opened in 1997 and offers a variety of wines, including some regional ones with names such as Portland Strawberry Blush, Orlinda Gold, Robertson King and Sumner Queen.

In Adams, the Bell Witch is a tourist attraction with huge potential for commercial development, though it hasn't happened yet, says Fosnes. In the early 1800s, John Bell settled in Robertson County and quickly established himself in the community. His lasting claim to fame, however, is the Bell Witch—paranormal disturbances that were witnessed by Bell and others. To this day, the mystique surrounding the Bell Witch draws people into Adams from all over the world. "The Bell Witch Cave is owned by a private individual," Fosnes says, "so it is not available at all times for tours, but it could be a huge attraction." There are some tours available for the Bell Witch Cave, a replica of the Bell cabin, as well as canoeing at the Bell Witch Cave farm. Annual events that draw the crowds are the Spirit Play on the grounds of the Bell School, the Bell Witch Bluegrass Festival, and the Tennessee-Kentucky Threshermen's Show.

"Chairs on the Square" is a fairly new event touted as "Tennessee's largest chair sale." Held the third weekend in May in conjunction with The Hinkle Chair Co., "Chairs on the Square" is an arts, crafts and entertainment festival with a charitable element—donated chairs are sold with the monies going to a designated charity. Each of the five high schools in Robertson County receives a chair to decorate with school themes, and then these are auctioned off, as well as Hinkle rockers signed by local celebrities.

Industry is on the rise in Robertson County these days, too, with several large companies calling the county home. "We are the home of the Hinkle Chair Company, since 1834," Mayor Bradley says, "a compa-

ny owned by the fifth generation of the same family." The original Hinkles in the area were, appropriately, farmers, but they supplemented the family coffers by making and selling ladder back chairs. Nowadays, production is almost 100% rocking chairs. The Hinkle Chair Co. produces about 2,500 chairs a day and employs more than 200 people. Cracker Barrel and Lowe's Home Improvement stores carry the Hinkle rocking chairs exclusively.

Electrolux Home Products manufactures Frigidaire stoves. The company, which produced 2.6 million stoves last year, employs 3,500 people. NorthCrest Medical Center in Springfield, a state-of-the-art facility built in 1995, employs 650 people. Federated Department Stores, now known as Macy's, has a distribution center in the TN-KY Industrial Park, which will employ 500 people. Other large employers in the county include Wal-Mart (retail), UNARCO Material Storage (steel storage racks), Collins & Aikman (insulated and acoustical products), SAIA-Burgess (automotive actuators), and Martinrea FABCO Automotive Structures (automotive stamping), to name a few. The Robertson County School system, with its 10 elementary schools, six middle schools and five senior high schools, is a large employer as well.

In June 2007, a new manufacturer moved into Robertson County. Bath Fitter's manufacturing group for its United States operations, previously in Madison, Tenn., moved into the former site of the All American Homes of Tennessee plant in Springfield, Tenn. Bath Fitter, North America's leading manufacturer and installer of acrylic bath, shower and wall systems, purchased and renovated the old plant. "We outgrew our facility and went looking for land and building space that could accommodate our operations and projected growth," says Mike Zumbrunnen, plant manager. "The deal was in the works for about 16 months, and we're excited about the move."

According to Zumbrunnen, the new plant began

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HONEYSUCKLE HILL FARM

hiring out of Springfield in January, receiving a tremendous response from people looking for work and excited about joining the growing enterprise. "Most of our current employees will move with us, but we are incorporating new employees, too," says Zumbrunnen. The plant currently employs 87 people, but plans to double that number within five years. Zumbrunnen says that the location, combined with the availability of a ready workforce, made Robertson County attractive as a potential site.

Robertson County Mayor Howard Bradley is proud of the great strides the county is making towards a bright future, but he admits there is still work to be done. "We have in excess of 20,000 people who commute into Davidson County to work each day. We'd like to grow more opportunities for those people here in Robertson County," he says. One of the current projects on the drawing board is higher education. "We have a need for college-educated people here," Bradley says. NorthCrest Medical Center, the City of Springfield and Robertson County are partnering to build a college adjacent to the hospital on a six-acre site that will allow for a building and ample parking. Volunteer State Community College and Austin Peay State University have agreed to work together to bring both a two-year and a four-year program to Springfield. "We're hoping to finalize the plan this

spring and begin construction," Bradley says, "with classes projected to begin in the fall of 2008."

From its early years, when it was known for tobacco, whiskey and the Bell Witch, Robertson County has developed into a diverse community offering historic riches and a small-town way of life that is also looking toward the future. Residents of the county are cautiously optimistic. "There is so much history in our county, and I'd like to see that remain in the forefront, but side by side with controlled growth," Ramsey says. Fosnes agrees, saying that residents want to maintain the agricultural landscape but enjoy the modern amenities attendant on new development.

"Our community has embraced historic preservation and what some folks call 'new urbanism'—where people live downtown, but in a 'small town' downtown, where they can walk to businesses, work or to dine or relax," Bradley says. "We're evaluating our county and how we live now with an eye on maintaining our rural heritage and developing more new urbanism."

With its leadership and community focused on the same goal, coupled with the diversity of the county's economy, it would seem that Robertson is well on its way to achieving that balance of growth and preservation for which so many other counties strive. **tn**

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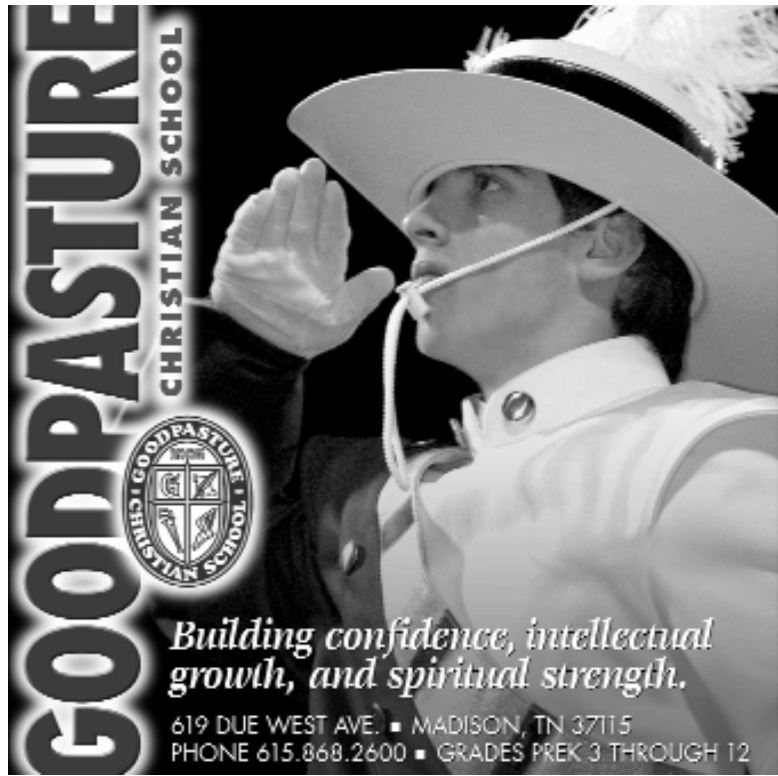

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