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Midwestern cities

An antidote to blight

Jun 11th 2015, 17:18 BY V.V.B | GALENA



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DEINDUSTRIALISATION, globalisation and technological advance have wreaked havoc in many cities in the Midwest. In Galena, a small town on the border of Iowa and Illinois, this disruption happened 150 years ago. The thriving lead-mining centre and Mississippi-river steamboat hub was then one of America's most important industrial cities. French settlers took over lead mines created by Native Americans, issuing the first leases in 1822. By the mid-19th century the town produced 85% of the nation's lead and was bigger than Chicago. Industrialists built grand mansions and even miners lived in decent cottages. But the civil war changed everything, says Daryl Watson, a local historian. Zinc supplanted lead and railways trumped steamboats. With its impressive railway hub, Chicago swiftly surpassed Galena to become the biggest city in the region.

In the last few decades, and in particular between 2000 and 2010, quite a few Midwestern cities have become notorious for post-industrial blight, but Galena hit this existential snag much earlier. How it managed to pull itself back from the brink offers a valuable lesson of how to make the most of a city's assets to its neighbours.

About Democracy in America

Thoughts and opinions on America's kinetic brand of politics. The blog is named after Alexis de Tocqueville's study of American politics and society

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In its heyday in the 19th century Galena boasted 12,000 inhabitants; today the city counts just 3,500. But visitors will find a lovingly restored historical centre surrounded by a verdant, hilly landscape. More than 80% of the city's downtown buildings are on the National Register for Historic Places. Thanks to restrictions on electric signs, the Main Street looks like a well-preserved European city, with pretty cast-iron signs for quaint antiques and crafts shops. Tourism and a booming second-homes market now sustain Galena, which has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Midwest, alongside Chicago and Springfield (home of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum), the Gateway Arch in St Louis and the Mall of America in Bloomington. Around 1.2m visitors come every year, mostly between late May and late October.

To keep the crowds coming, the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation in Galena has made big efforts to help preserve its scenic landscape, which includes Native American burial mounds and plenty of scenic trails for hiking and biking. The city has invested in a sewage system that can accommodate 60,000 people, and prepares hospitals for a boom in medical emergencies during the peak tourist season.



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Local farmers quibble that the land is meant to be used, not presented as if it was a museum. But Galena's economic future clearly lies in restoring and preserving its natural and architectural past. So many were nervous when a train loaded with crude oil derailed south of Galena in March, setting fire to five of the train's 103 cars and sending plumes of black smoke over the area. Thankfully nobody was hurt, and the environmental damage was limited by the fact that the Mississippi river was frozen, which preserved it from contamination. But conservationists are still cleaning the mess up. Trains may have undone this industrial metropolis before, but locals are keen to ensure they don't do so again.



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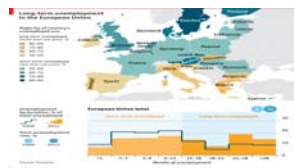
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