

**SPECIAL REPORT CLARKSDALE**

**DELTA BLUES  
MUSEUM**

# The Future Looks Bright

Residents Pulling Together  
for Positive Change



By GRETA SHARP

Undeniably, Clarksdale is deeply rooted in agriculture and the city is known for its popular and growing tourism sector. In fact, USA Today 2019 Readers' Choice Awards named it the fourth Best Historic Small Town. However, the city's focus is broadening to include a number of large companies, and bringing it to what some are calling a tipping point for this Delta community.

After several years of businesses closing and people losing jobs, Clarksdale is celebrating four significant economic development projects in two years. "I have never seen so much economic activity in one community in

such a short time in my lifetime," says Jon Levingston, executive director, Clarksdale/Coahoma County Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Development Authority of Coahoma County.

It began in March 2018 when MAP of Easton announced an expansion of operations at the Clarksdale plant, adding forty jobs. Levingston said the project received significant financial support from the Mississippi Development Authority in cooperation with the City of Clarksdale.

In December 2018, the Silicon Valley high-tech outsourcing company PeopleShores selected Clarksdale for its new center. It plans







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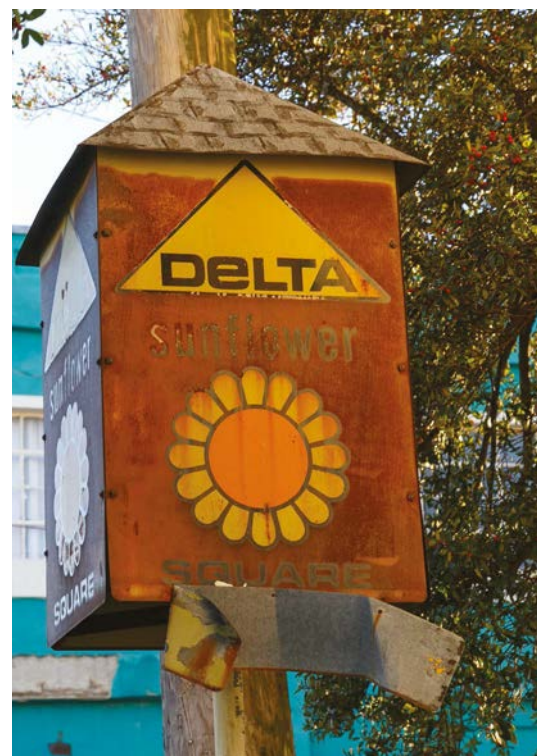
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to scale up to 200 employees specializing in the development of robotic processing automation software for large corporations. "This is one of the most significant economic development projects in this part of the state in the last thirty years," Levingston says.

The Chicago-area steel company Image Industries relocated to the former Metso Minerals 142,500- square-foot facility in Clarksdale and currently employs fifty-two people. "The company's owners are outstanding individuals and they have scaled up their employment faster than we imagined," Levingston said. "We are so grateful to the Delta Strong program of Delta Council for introducing us to the owners and we are equally grateful to the State of Mississippi for providing significant financial support for this project."

Additionally, homegrown industry leader Saf-T-Cart plans to expand its current 150,000 square foot facility by an additional 30,000 square feet and add twenty-five employees. Levingston said support from the state through the Mississippi Development Authority and the local county government, as well as the Walker family, aided the project.

The rapid rate of Clarksdale's economic growth has shown that the local work force is capable and competent, as well as trainable. "As these projects ramp up, the



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SafTCart	98
KBH Corporation	94
Molded Acoustical Products	80
Drumheller Packaging	80

\*Figures are approximate  
compiled by the Clarksdale Chamber of Commerce  
Employment figures as of December 2019



Livingston



Luckett

economic impact for Clarksdale and this area will be significant, and will begin to address and arrest depopulation,” Livingston explains.

He credits support and cooperation from every level of community and state government, as well as Delta State University, Coahoma Community College, the Mississippi Development Authority and the Delta Strong program. “We have had a great team effort on all these projects,” Livingston says.

Those cooperative activities also benefit the tourism industry. Former Mayor Bill Luckett, one of the owners of Ground Zero Blues Club, sees new businesses springing up around town, especially now that there is music seven nights a week.

Executive Director of the Coahoma County Tourism Commission Bubba O’Keefe said the year ended on increased numbers and in 2020 he’s looking to expand Clarksdale’s international exposure. Locally he points to the Delta Blues





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**Ground Zero Blues Club**

Museum, Ground Zero, accommodations and restaurants. "My job is to bring people to Clarksdale and to let people know Clarksdale has these things," he explains. "You can spend two days here; it's not just a pass-through." The tourism commission created a walking tour phone app to show visitors what Clarksdale has to offer.

And people are responding. "Buses are coming and people are showing up big time," says Luckett of Ground Zero. "Our numbers have been fairly good this year, even in slow months. Stories of where people are from and what brought them here abound." Recently he said four separate tour buses showed up in five days, bringing separate groups from Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland. "They absolutely loved it," he says. "They had a ball. The Blues is huge in Scandinavia, especially Norway."

Luckett said Clarksdale's sister city of Notodden, Norway, hosts a large Blues festival the first week of August that draws many local musicians, who then return to Clarksdale for the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival the next weekend.

Clarksdale is filling up more of its weekends with festivals, says Luckett. Twenty years ago, there was the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival, but then the Juke Joint Festival appeared followed by others. The latest, he said, is the Deep Blues Festival. "It's gotten to be a huge one, too," Luckett says. "There are probably six

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O'Keefe



Ritter

or eight pretty good-sized festivals.”

Is a trip to Clarksdale complete without visiting the Delta Blues Museum? Director Shelley Ritter said the museum is entering its 41st year and has completed two installations in the permanent exhibit. The museum is very popular with international visitors.

“We get more international support than local or national,” says Ritter.

In January, the documentary 40 Years of the Delta Blues Museum, by local filmmaker Coop Cooper and aided by a Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area grant, will be shown at the Clarksdale Film and Music Festival. It will also be included in the Oxford Film Festival in March, says Ritter.

Delta Blues Museum Arts and Education alum Christone “Kingfish” Ingram received a Grammy nomination for Best Traditional Blues Album for his debut album, Kingfish. “We’re really psyched

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Clarksdale White House

about that," she says. "The album's really awesome."

Madge and Chilly Billy Howell are knee-deep in the tourism business with The Clarksdale White House, Delta Bohemian Guest House and Delta Bohemian Tours. "We never thought we would find ourselves in these particular businesses," says Madge, explaining that they evolved to fit local needs and contribute to the creative economy.

As Chilly Billy tours visitors around the area on regional identity tours, he attempts to put it into a larger, more understandable context. "I tell folks they may see a few vacant buildings, but there are people buying those buildings, there are crews working all the time," he says. And those tourists make recommendations to other friends who then visit, creating what he calls a spider web of connectivity. "They see the area in a totally different way after one of his tours," says Madge Howell.

As the entire region can benefit from increased tourism, O'Keefe wants to share the wealth, building relationships and making recommendations on where people should go and stay next. "We want to be a partner with those towns," he says. "To



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Howell



Howell

work with each other, to understand what we're all involved in and how each festival, each restaurant, each venue, each museum can better see the whole picture, how we can work together."

Chilly Billy Howell encourages tourists to explore the larger Delta experience, and how the regional identity unites the Delta. "Don't just enjoy Clarksdale," he tells them. "Go to Cleveland. Go to Greenville."

Yazoo Pass, located in the heart of downtown, sees a number of visitors. General Manager Jack Bobo estimates that ninety-five percent of Clarksdale's tourists come through Yazoo Pass' doors at some time during their stay. "Clarksdale has more tourists than most small Delta



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**Bobo**



**Jennings**

towns," he says. "We market to those people. We sell a lot of espresso. Our espresso comes from California and it's super good. Especially Europeans tell us it's the best espresso they've had since they've come into the country."

The restaurant and its twenty employees serve as a de facto tourism office, making recommendations on what to do and see during a visit. "We don't mean to be, but we are," says Bobo. "We also recommend other restaurants. We want people to enjoy all of Clarksdale."

Madge Howell also welcomes guests with maps, menus and recommendations, then sets them off to explore the friendly town. "We just want folks here and we want them happy," she explains. This even

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includes making recommendations for other accommodations. "We are all trying to survive. In spite of all that, we want folks here happy. We are all connected in a unique way here; we all feel that way about each other. We're all encouraging of one another."

Tourism may be Clarksdale's strength, but ag remains its mainstay. "Tourism doesn't hold a candle to agriculture, but tourism has just been a wonderful thing," Luckett says.

"We are a quirky, authentic, real Delta town trying to find its way," says Madge Howell. She feels new businesses need to embrace and involve locals to ensure their survival. "That's what gives it real life is having the locals engaged."

And this is a town of local businesses meeting needs of local people. The Red River Federal Credit Union celebrated a major milestone last year when it reached \$1 billion in assets, says Vickie Bryan, vice president of operations. In 2020, the strategic plan includes service enhancements and membership growth.

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Its 2019 projects included a food drive for the Clarksdale Care Station, a visit to an elementary school to explain credit union services and an employee sock drive for Coahoma Opportunities.

Monica Jennings is the executive director of Flowers Manor Retirement Community, which serves both independent residents living in cottages and apartments and personal care residents. "If I can get people to come out here and give it a chance, I have never had anyone leave because they didn't like it," she says.

Residents enjoy bingo, worship services and exercise classes. "Our most faithful volunteers are the Mennonites," says Jennings. "They come once a month to sing. They're great volunteers and their voices are beautiful."

Flowers Manor recently welcomed back a favorite cook to the delight of the residents. A new maintenance man joined the staff last summer. "I don't have a lot of turnover," Jennings said of the 16 employees. "The only turnover is when someone retires. We see a lot of death. It's very difficult. You get attached. You have to have a heart to work here. I am blessed that all my employees have that heart."

The community's \$700,000 capital campaign was 92 percent complete in mid-December, reported Jennings. The funding allowed her to update Flowers Manor with new furniture, fresh paint inside and out, and a new fence around the property. **DBJ**

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