

Building Prosperity in Rural Maine

by Sheila Jans

Aurelle Collin was a farmer who lived his whole life in the small community of Lille in the St. John Valley of northern Maine. His insightful words “*On a tous les talents du monde dans chaque village*” (every village has all the talents of the world), reminds us that we have essentially everything we need—that we can build wealth from within using the inherent assets of our communities. These important concepts form the foundation for cultural and creative economic development efforts taking place in the St. John Valley today.

The St. John Valley is at the northernmost tip of Maine bordering the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick and Québec. Commonly called “the Valley,” the region is home to approximately 14,000 people, mostly of French heritage. The Valley is renowned for its distinct culture and beautiful landscape; however, like other rural areas in the United States, it faces serious challenges, such as a decline of traditional industries, outmigration, aging population, and lack of diverse entrepreneurialism. It also experiences restrictive commercial growth as a result of being situated on an international border.

These are very real challenges that affect prosperity in the St. John Valley. The quest is to find and apply insightful and creative solutions to tackle them. Project Cultivate, a multiphase creative economic development initiative, tries to respond to this call to action. The project is about cultivating creative thinkers, supporting great ideas, and helping build a prosperous region, with a more diverse and sustainable economy, through culture and place.¹

Emerging from over a decade of cultural development in the region, Project Cultivate was informed by efforts such as ethnographic studies by the National Park Service, an international assessment by the Quebec-Labrador Foundation, and initiatives such as the Voici the Valley Cultureway. Specifically, it grew directly from the St. John Valley Creative Economy Project, a two-year research initiative led by the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center.²

Research revealed many useful things, such as the region’s tendency for self-sabotage, territorialism, and a

limiting view of its place in the world. It also revealed the Valley’s deeply rooted history in an entrepreneurial and creative spirit, innumerable possibilities for diverse products and services, and that a strong sense of identity and connection to family and community are powerful factors that contribute to better places to live.

It is not an easy task to solve some of the region’s entrenched problems and to fully capitalize on its opportunities. Lack of leadership and infrastructure are age-old obstructions, along with a long list of other issues. Keeping this in mind, the goals of Project Cultivate are only a beginning that focus on four areas: (a) leadership and collaboration, (b) entrepreneurial support, (c) investment in creative assets, and (d) cultivating a creative mindset.

The aim is to identify and support leadership; build entrepreneurial networks and ways to collaborate effectively; offer targeted training and incubation; and provide an educational series for youth that focuses on creativity, entrepreneurialism, quality, and design. Other components include a microloan and grant delivery system as a catalyst for innovative and creative products and services, as well as programs that tap into the wisdom of our communities through apprenticeships, internships, and mentorships.

Creativity implies a vision for what is possible—something that we all possess. While there are many definitions of the term *creative economy*, Project Cultivate takes an inclusive approach, embracing the ingenuity of the people who live in the Valley and the variety of what the region offers. Specifically, however, the fundamental basis of its goals emanates from arts, cultural, and place-based assets and how these indigenous factors, which are routinely overlooked and marginalized, could be better leveraged as driving forces for more diverse and sustainable economic growth.

As with many development projects, Project Cultivate has not escaped funding challenges. Advancing it has been intermittent, but fortunately, aspects of its components appear in other efforts, such as a Aroostook County’s tourism strategy, Maine’s first cultural byway in the St. John Valley, and initial phases

of an international economic development initiative. It is hoped that components of Project Cultivate will also serve as a model for development for other rural areas.

Rural communities throughout Maine deserve thoughtful investment and strategic development. It is worth the effort to seek alternative approaches, span boundaries, and build an environment that fosters creativity, innovation, and daring. 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. Culture can be defined as who we are, shaping what we create and how we make our societies. Culture “may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group.” This quote is from page 1 of the following source: UNESCO. 1982. UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, World Conference on Cultural Policies, Mexico City, 26 July–6 August. http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico_en.pdf/mexico_en.pdf
2. The 2010 report *The St. John Valley Creative Economy Project, Strengthening our Communities and Economy Through Culture and Place* is available online at mcspolicycenter.umaine.edu.



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sector on cultural and economic development initiatives. She served on the New England Task Force for Culture and the Economy and the Governor’s Creative Economy Council.



Photo Credit: Daniel Picard.

View of the St. John River, the international border, taken from Edmundston, New Brunswick, toward Frenchville, Maine, illustrating the international setting of this region and the rural river valley landscape.