

Rural Resilience

Trials and triumphs of bucolic entrepreneurship



Airydale Retreat near Allensville, Pa., offers a camping experience with accommodations that are more luxurious. Co-owner Matt Zook says the property's glamping business model was born out of necessity.

Photo courtesy of Airydale Retreat

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WHEN ASKED to name a retail store off the top of your head, you'd probably think of one of the big box giants we all frequent, such as Walmart. It's hard to imagine that a chain like that was started by one man, Sam Walton, as one store in Rogers, Arkansas. Yet it grew to become the retail mammoth it is today.

The fact is that nearly every business starts with an entrepreneur who experiences both rewards and challenges along the way.

Rural entrepreneurs often require an extra measure of grit, as working outside an urban environment means being distanced from large pools of customers and resources and needing unique solutions to counter that.

Check out these first-hand stories of trials and triumphs from some of our Raystown Lake Region business owners.

CHASING THE VISION

Every business begins with a dream or vision, and a well-crafted business vision should be the compass that guides how a company will grow. The vision can even shift over time. For example, the original vision for Airydale Retreat, 10272 Big Valley Pike, Mill Creek, Pa., was just to make a vacation rental. But that vision developed and changed out of necessity - and discovery.

Airydale Retreat, airydaleretreat.com,

was born after co-owner Matt Zook's grandparents had to sell most of their farm. The family decided to turn what property they had left into a vacation rental. That was when they discovered glamping online.

Glamping is camping with accommodations and amenities that are a bit more luxurious than your typical campsite. The vision for Airydale Retreat evolved into encouraging all kinds of people to enjoy the outdoors - some who may never before have considered camping. Zook said that glamping serves as a middle ground for those who are intrigued by the rugged outdoor camping experience, but who don't want to compromise modern amenities.

Airydale Retreat allows visitors to experience nature without needing a bunch of camping gear or struggling to set up camp. When glamping at Airydale, you'll have your own private bathroom, campfire area for cooking delicious meals, a comfy bed, and the serenity of nature to rejuvenate your soul.

Some business visions evolve based on the needs of the community. Whether it is groceries, hardware, hunting licenses, catering etc., Cassville Country Store in Cassville, Pa., provides it all because the rural area where they're located limits convenient access to these items.

Along the way, while serving as the area's general store, Cassville Country Store evolved into a genuine gathering place. The store made

a dining area expansion in 2011, but there are still three small tables in the retail space that could be filled with more shelves. Co-owner Betsy Whitsel said that adding the retail shelves would be the right decision on paper, but a group of "regulars" sits at those tables almost every morning and have done so since the store opened in 2009. Removing the tables would mean an end to a tradition that has lasted 15 years. So Whitsel says they're staying.

Most locals understand this store isn't just a business, it's a community hub. Whitsel said she's learned that embracing your local community is one of the best ways to help grow your business, especially in a rural area. Giving back helps get your name out there and builds good will. Things like hiring locals, making donations to local groups and causes or even something as simple as choosing tradition over money are all ways Cassville Country Store has chosen to thrive. Folks can visit the store at 360 Seminary St, Cassville, and find out the store's latest info on Facebook.

RURAL HARDSHIPS

Operating any business comes with its fair share of struggles. What each business will deal with is unique to them, but there may be trends based on industry and location. Some typical issues that rural entrepreneurs face are access to capital and labor and proximity to customers.

Lincoln Caverns' President and General Manager Ann Dunlavy says she deals with proximity issues. The closest interstate to



Lincoln Caverns & Whisper Rocks President and General Manager Ann Dunlavy says the business's rural proximity presents advertising challenges that require creative thinking.

Photo courtesy of Lincoln Caverns

Lincoln Caverns, 7703 William Penn Hwy, Huntingdon, Pa., and online at lincolncaverns.com, is Interstate 99 and, even from the nearest exit, they are 20 minutes away. This distance has presented challenges to advertising along major highways. Though they operate from late March through early December, their main operating season is the summer. This is because a large part of their visitors are brought in by Raystown Lake. When there is less traffic to the lake, there is less traffic to the caverns.

Similarly to Lincoln Caverns, Cassville Country Store also faces the winter "off" season when lake traffic is much lower. They also deal with the price of goods limiting what they can provide to their community. For example, they aren't able to take advantage of cost savings from buying in bulk as chain stores can. The absence of these aggregate discounts has always played a factor in their finances, but in the past several years inflation has driven costs even higher.



Photo by Cyrus Simmons

Betsy Whitsel, co-owner of Cassville Country Store, says that meeting the local community's needs and giving back are keys to her store, restaurant and catering business's success.

SUCCESS THROUGH INNOVATION

Innovating is an important part of any business, but for rural businesses it is even more crucial. Serving smaller communities and being farther from urban areas can mean less revenue opportunities. Keeping on top of trends and keeping things fresh is how many entrepreneurs find new customers and bring back old ones. For example, they might introduce new technology to the formula or host new events to help draw attention.

J.M. Boswell's Handmade Pipes, with store and smoking lounge locations at 6481 William Penn Hwy, Alexandria, Pa., and the flagship at 586 Lincoln Way East, Chambersburg, Pa., is an example of how utilizing technology has boosted growth. The first Boswell's Pipes location was opened by J.M. Boswell in Chambersburg back in 1980, before the internet was even born. When the internet went public, there was only a handful of older pipe makers in the U.S. who were hesitant to involve themselves with it. J.M. Boswell was the only full-time professional pipe maker at that time. He took a dying art and embraced the internet by having a long-time customer build a website for Boswell Pipes in 1997, becoming the first pipe maker on the World Wide Web, offering personal one-on-one customer service along with his hand-crafted tobacco pipes. General Manager Rachel Boswell, who grew up in the business, said that through the many new builds and updates of their website they have now spread their name and product worldwide. "Our success through the years has been our family all working side by side now up to 3 generations strong," she said.

Airydale Retreat has also used technology to make glamping with them easier. In the past, booking a campsite used to be done exclusively in person or over the phone. The self-booking tool Airydale implemented has made things more efficient. Now people just go through Airydale Retreat's website and book sites on their own. This removes having to wait to make a booking, limits how often people need to be available to help customers, and overall makes the booking process easier for guests. Another thing Airydale Retreat says it does well is helping



Photo by Cyrus Simmons

Above: General Manager Rachel Boswell and J.M. Boswell said their decision to take business sales online early allowed them to greatly expand their reach and offer their custom handmade pipes worldwide.

build up other businesses. On their website they have an attractions section that refers people to different restaurants, attractions and outdoor activities in the region. Not only does this help increase business for others in the area, but it helps people potentially interested in booking with Airydale Retreat feel good that there are plenty of things to do while in the area.

Cassville Country Store has leaned into providing unique experiences in the area and also stocking various types of wares that folks in Cassville need. During the winter season they do cooking events to help people get out - like kettle soup cookoffs and chicken barbeques. They hide Easter eggs for children throughout the store at Easter and host car cruise-ins for people to show off their special vehicles. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they performed porch deliveries and a 1950s-themed tailgate featuring waitresses dressed like carhops taking orders for people at their vehicles. Keeping fresh events coming has certainly served Cassville Country Store well.

Lincoln Caverns does a variety of different educational events to keep people coming to the caves. Events like T-Rex Tuesdays and Saturday Saturdays highlight some of the big caving features, fossils and bats. On Wednesday nights during the summer, they also host Blacklight Adventures to experience the caverns in a whole new way. They also hold Kids Cave Kamps throughout the summer full of crafts, activities, learning and more. And throughout the year they hold different events for Girl, Boy and Cub Scouts to earn patches, belt loops and merit badges.

For those running a business or dreaming of owning one someday, it's comforting to know that despite the challenges, grit and creativity go a long way to boost the bottom line. The common thread shared is that success doesn't happen overnight. What's important is being able to do something you truly enjoy every day.