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The First 10 Years -- Solomon Valley Highway 24 Heritage Alliance

by Leo E. Oliva

[...as presented by Oliva at the annual meeting on January 16, 2010.]

THE late Michael Crichton, in his book *Timeline* (1999), wrote these words: "If you don't know history, you don't know anything. You're a leaf that doesn't know it's part of a tree." I think these are words to live by.

Ten years ago in 2000, thanks to the efforts of Joan Nothorn and Faye Minium, with a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council, I was asked to prepare three presentations about the heritage of the Solomon Valley, the result of which was the creation of this organization: the Solomon Valley Highway 24 Heritage Alliance, Inc., a nonprofit corporation embracing 24 communities along Highway 24 and the Solomon Valley. Most such organizations do not last ten years, let alone accomplish what this little group has done. I am honored to have been a part of the spark that started this and to be here today to review what we have done. I suspect today that most of what I told you 10 years ago was wrong, but that's o.k. because nobody paid much attention anyway.

It began in Glasco on May 6, 2000, with my first presentation. In addition to historic preservation and community development, we hoped to stimulate tourism. I said: "If there is anything we can do to draw people off Interstate 70 to travel along Highway 24 between Colby on the west and 81-I35 north of Salina on the east, all communities along this route will benefit. Tourism is the best possible source of increased income, with the least destruction to natural resources. If one or two percent of tourists could be induced to leave the interstate and spend some time along the route, the result would be millions of dollars per year." Even with all we have done in ten years, I don't think we have achieved this. Has what we have done helped? We don't know, but we can say what we have done hasn't done any harm. I think the admonition, "First, do no harm," is a sound principle for all organizations.

At that first meeting I talked about our common heritage, our rural, agricultural heritage, the development of small towns that served agriculture, the transformation of agriculture, population decrease, and decline of rural communities. I talked about the historic resources we have to attract tourists, stating, "We have a common heritage, a rural and agricultural heritage, and we have resources for tourism—historic sites, museums, festivals, and accommodations—so the next step is to decide to organize and promote the heritage of the Solomon Valley. I hope you will do so." I planned to expand on that for the second program. There was a lot of enthusiasm among those attending, and that enthusiasm is the reason we are still here ten years later.

The second program at Stockton on July 11, 2000, was titled "Selling the Heritage of the Solomon Valley," during which I told you much more than I know about promoting tourism. "The greatest tourism demand in this country today, according to the experts who collect the information and evaluate such things, is for short trips that offer high value and provide something different, including opportunities to learn about history (that's our heritage) and nature (that's our land). [Later our motto became "Stories of Land of Man of Nature."] The communities along the Solomon Valley and Highway 24 can meet this growing demand by offering an opportunity to experience scenic, natural, historic, cultural, and recreational sites and activities."

I looked at several topics related to tourism, including economic development, preservation and conservation, community identity and pride, learning about our heritage,, organizing local support, development of attractions, interpretation, and promotion. As I recall not everyone went to sleep. I think a look at our membership shows this message never reached the people we needed to reach. We have very few business members, only a few motels and no restaurants, only a few museums and historic sites, very few of the businesses and institutions that would benefit most from expanded tourism. In looking at what SV24 has done, I was pushing the wrong buttons. We talked about heritage tours but have gone other directions. We have printed many brochures and erected 24 kiosks, which have done no harm, but it is impossible to measure the results. I feel bad that one of our historic sites, Cottonwood Ranch, has been closed because of state budget problems and small number of visitors. If historic tourism has been one of our goals, we have fallen short in my opinion.

It should be noted, too, that membership has been a major problem for this organization, as it is for most organizations. We know in most organizations a few people do most of the work, and that is the way it always will be. But membership support is critical for survival when that first core group with the enthusiasm is replaced over time. I think it is true of this and many organizations that, if you removed a dozen people who make things go, the organization would fail and cease to exist. This organization has been extremely fortunate to have that core of leadership, and I am honored to have been a part of this group, for my part in getting it started with three presentations. No other organization to which I belong has accomplished as many things.

My third presentation at Nicodemus on November 16, 2000, looked at "Sustaining the Heritage of the Solomon Valley." I said "I think the two most important parts of sustaining the heritage are historic preservation and economic development, and these two things go together and contribute to another major objective: heritage tourism." That hasn't happened either. I talked about the importance of having an organization for whatever project is undertaken, and I used the historic Thomas Barn northeast of Woodston as an example, and also an example of what can happen to a resource (a fire caused by lightning destroyed the barn). The board of the barn organization closed its books and donated the \$10,000 remaining to help the start of the Solomon Valley Hwy 24 Heritage Alliance, which was formed and continues today.

I did three more public programs to help spread the word of the new Alliance and encourage participation, at Beloit, Morland, and Osborne, all in April 2001. Very few people showed up. And here we are 10 years later. We do not know if we have done much for tourism (other than do no harm), so what have we done to preserve our heritage and resources and become more aware of our rich cultural heritage? We have taken a turn from economic development and tourism to our culture and the arts, which is admirable. It may not do much for economic development, but it may keep us sane as we survive against the odds. Here the record is most impressive, as you can see from President Nothern's handouts (summarized here).

Annual meetings with programs
Kansas Humanities Council grants
Kansas Arts Commission grants

Continental Harmony grant and Greg Sanders "Solomon Valley Anthology," a suite for bands (which, so far as I know, no body performs)
24 Kiosks along the Solomon Valley Highway 24 Corridor
Annual Heritage Alliance Brochure with Historic Sites, Attractions & Calendar of Events
Color brochure of the Solomon Valley-Highway 24
Internet access to the Solomon Valley: <hwy24.org>
Book: Weaving the Common Threads of the Solomon Valley Fabric, compiled by Von Rothenberger
Book: The History of US Highway 24, compiled by Joyce Sullentrop
Quarterly Newsletter: The Solomon Valley Anthology
Writing workshops
Call for Voices (5 contests)
Museum workshops
Public programs on many topics
The Official Kansas Getaway Guide 2009-2010
TravelKS.com
Kansas Sampler Festival
Advertising in Travel Kansas, Kansas Traveler, Rite-Way Kansas-Nebraska
Sunflower Journeys TV Series
Rural Kansas Tourism Initiative
Complementary Exhibit: History of US 24 with Smithsonian Journey Stories
Support Kansas Barn Alliance Conferences
Tour Bus: The Solomon Valley Explorer

By any account, this is an impressive list, and we should be patting ourselves on the back for what has been done. Does this have anything to do with what I talked about 10 years ago? Probably not. We have found our own directions to pursue, and we have done them well. Have these many things made the 24 communities more viable today than they were 10 years ago? Probably not. Do people in these communities care? I would guess that 90% of the people in the Solomon Valley do not know this organization exists. Even so, we have survived and done good things.

And for those few who have been involved, this has been a grand experience. We have accomplished many things, have set new goals to pursue, and have a better understanding of who we are. I said when we started a decade ago that we not only wanted to show people in other places that we are not dead yet in the Solomon Valley but we wanted to convince ourselves that we are not dead yet. As long as we keep struggling, we know we are not dead. But population decline continues, loss of resources continues, and the challenges are greater every year. None of us knows what the future will be, but looking back it has been an exciting 10 years.

The Solomon Valley Highway 24 Heritage Alliance has kept us out of trouble, and we have done no harm. Perhaps we have learned enough about our history that we know we are a leaf that is part of a tree. That's good enough for me. The great British economist John Maynard Keynes said, "In the end we are all dead." Until then we will keep busy. It has been an interesting decade, and I wish you all good things in the next 10 years.