**For Release Week of June 24, 2024**

**All Things Nebraska**

*By Paul Hammel, Retired Senior Reporter for Nebraska Examiner*

**Hope replaces homelessness on streets of Whiteclay after beer stores closed**

Over nearly 20 years, I lost track of how many times I was required to drive to Whiteclay to report on a protest about the beer stores there.

Those four stores sold up to 3.5 million cans of beer a year, and were the liquor stores of choice for the adjacent Pine Ridge Indian Reservation right across the Nebraska-South Dakota border.

Alcoholism is a horrible problem on the reservation – which annually ranks as one of the poorest areas in the country – even though alcohol sales and possession are banned there. So there was a steady stream of cars into Whiteclay, just two miles away.

The dusty, unincorporated village of about a dozen permanent residents became known as “The Skid Row of the Plains” for its beer sales, and the ever-present “street people,” who would lounge along the highway that ran through town, openly drinking, urinating and worse as they drank.

It was a real black eye for the State of Nebraska. Few steps were taken to clean up the place, despite years of protest marches, led by Native American activists like Frank LaMere, Russell Means and Tom Poor Bear along with the Nebraskans for Peace. Various proposals by state lawmakers came and went.

But a recent visit showed some progress and glimmers of hope.

In 2017, the Nebraska Liquor Commission ruled that alcohol should not be sold in the unincorporated town, 23 miles from the nearest sheriff’s office, because of a lack of local law enforcement to monitor it.

Now, the street people are gone, as are the empty beer cans, smell of urine and panhandling, and the occasional fight and even death among the vagrants.

In their place is a constant flow of vehicles from the Oglala Lakota reservation, bearing customers seeking groceries, ranch supplies and other goods sold at Whiteclay’s supermarket, Abe’s Store, and two “Dollar” stores.

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There’s a new tax preparation business, as well as a “makerspace,” where local artisans and crafters can use high-tech quilting machines, leather-working tools and bead-working supplies to produce items for sale.

The Whiteclay Makerspace has its own retail store, as well as a website, where beautiful star quilts, jewelry and artwork are sold, supplementing the incomes of those in the area.

More importantly, the Makerspace has transformed a former liquor store into a facility of hope – “art over alcohol,” they call it.

Down the road, shoppers in the parking lot of the Whiteclay Grocery say it’s nice that you can visit and buy groceries without being panhandled or harassed. Same for those walking into the local ranch supply store, Abe’s, a place that has a wonderful, sweet smell of livestock feed and leather.

Has the closing of Whiteclay’s beer outlets solved the problems on the nearby reservation? No.

The flow of alcohol has shifted from stores in Whiteclay to homes and vehicle trunks on the reservation, where “bootleggers” sell bottles of vodka or water bottles mixed with liquor and even rubbing alcohol.

The scourge of drugs, mostly methamphetamines, have grown in recent years, but Sheridan County Sheriff Jeff Brewer recently told the Nebraska Examiner that his calls for service in Whiteclay for disturbances and fights are way down.

And predictions that the roadway between the reservation and Rushville, the next nearest town to sell alcohol, would become a “highway of death” haven’t materialized, the sheriff said.

The nursing home in Whiteclay expanded a couple of years back, bringing some good jobs and a home for aging members of the reservation. And a tribal development group still hopes to establish a wellness center in the village.

But problems on the reservation remain – unemployment, high rates of suicide among youth, substance abuse, poor housing.

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A national NPR interviewer once asked me what is the solution? The question caught me by surprise (I’m a reporter, not a policy maker), and finally I responded that I wasn’t sure.

Better jobs and education would help, I offered, as would a reduction in substance abuse.

Overall, it’s a region that needs “hope” that the future will bring better times.

Native Americans in that region still travel “a hard road,” but the closing of the Whiteclay beer stores has helped.

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*Paul Hammel has covered the Nebraska state government and the state for decades. He retired in April as senior contributor with the Nebraska Examiner. He was previously with the Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln Journal Star and Omaha Sun.  A native of Ralston, Nebraska, he loves traveling and writing about the state.*