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## Suddenly Hip

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The Comeback

WELCOME  
TO  
**TRAVELERS REST**  
Established 1808

# Suddenly Hip

BY M. LINDA LEE



## A RESTAURANT RENAISSANCE, STREET REDESIGN AND WALKING TRAIL HAVE MADE TRAVELERS REST A POPULAR DESTINATION

**H**uddled in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the city of Travelers Rest is teeming with cyclists, outdoors enthusiasts, foodies and Furman students.

A decade ago, there was little to merit more than a quick stop in this once-sleepy burg just four miles north of Furman University.

As its name suggests, Travelers Rest was a place where 19th-century settlers in Conestoga wagons would stop before heading west over the Blue Ridge Mountains. Drovers from Kentucky and Tennessee, likewise, rambled through the town on their way to markets in South Carolina with their herds of cattle, sheep and hogs.

“TR,” (population 5,053) as it’s known to locals, now boasts a landscaped Main Street (US-276) that’s chock-a-block with independently owned restaurants, shops, a brewery and even a wine-tasting room. The town has been

heralded as one of America’s coolest small towns and was recently ranked fourth on *USA Today*’s list of “Readers’ Choice 10 Best Southern Small Towns.”

The transformation took flight in 2006, when the city council finalized a \$4.5 million conceptual master plan to beautify Main Street. Three years later, the city began installing new lighting, green spaces, on-street parking and landscaping. City fathers also approved the narrowing of US-276—now Main Street—where it passes through the

town’s center. “The idea,” says Travelers Rest City Administrator Dianna Gracely, “was to stimulate private investment by improving the public spaces. Today, TR is like a park that just happens to have a Main Street running through it.”

While the city was spiffing up its streetscape, the Greenville Health System Swamp Rabbit Trail was being completed, creating a perfect storm of revitalization. The project, which converted an abandoned rail bed to a walkway connecting Greenville and Travelers Rest, sees more than half-a-

Vegetables and plants aren’t the only thing sold at the Travelers Rest Farmers Market. Crafts and artwork are offered most Saturday mornings.





## The Comeback



million users each year, according to a four-year economic impact study led by Julian Reed, an associate professor of health sciences at Furman.

The dolled-up Main Street was ripe for restaurant development, and Gracely credits **Joyce McCarrell '74** and her sister, Nancy, as pioneers in kicking off TR's dining renaissance. What began as an idea for a snack bar catering to riders on the Swamp Rabbit Trail blossomed into a full-service restaurant and gift shop.

"The speed with which the restaurant took off surprised us," says McCarrell. Perhaps

it shouldn't have. Their Café at Williams Hardware opened in 2008 as the city was improving Main Street and the first mile of the Swamp Rabbit Trail was being paved in TR. The café drew people to the town, where they saw the possibilities for other businesses. "People just kept adding the pieces," McCarrell says.

"It's the people who make this town great," says Mayor Wayne McCall, referring, in part, to the many locally owned businesses that now call downtown TR home, like Upcountry Provisions, a bakery and restaurant just off Main Street on State Park



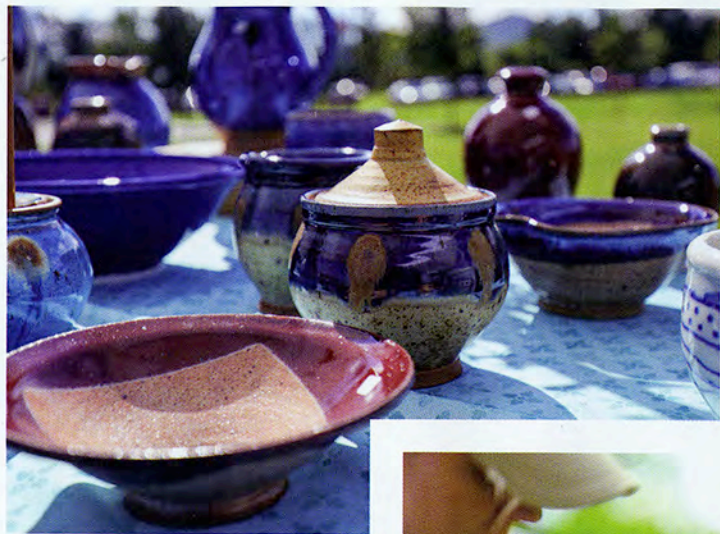
**DOWNTOWN PIONEER** Joyce McCarrell '74 and her sister, Nancy, opened Café at Williams Hardware in 2008. The effort helped to kick start a restaurant renaissance that flourishes today.

**"IT'S THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THIS TOWN GREAT."**

**-MAYOR WAYNE MCCALL**



## The Comeback



Road. **Cheryl Kraus '09** put her business administration degree to good use when she and her husband, Steve, fermented the idea for a bakery. Realizing TR's potential, the couple launched Upcountry Provisions in 2012.

"When I was at Furman, TR was nothing more than a place to pass through on your way to somewhere else," Cheryl says. "I see the city with new eyes now. As a business owner and a mother of two, TR offers me a lifestyle."

**Ivan Mathena '08** also made a mark on the nascent restaurant scene. In 2013, he opened the bar Shortfield's and went on to help launch Whistle Stop at the American Café as general manager. During that time, he saw what made the city tick. "In two to three years, Travelers Rest became a town I wouldn't have recognized when I was at Furman," says Mathena. "There's a real organic feel to TR today."

The completion of Trailblazer Park in 2014 contribut-



ed another piece to the city's revival and created an ideal site for the Travelers Rest Farmers Market. Bob Chance, a professor of art at Furman, sells his pottery at the market every other Saturday, alongside as many as 80 vendors. "It's fun to be in the middle of all that magic on Saturday morning," Chance says. "People come to the market and end up becoming engaged in the town."

When **Evan Rutter '06** established The Tasting Room on Main Street in 2015—recently relocated to a larger space behind Farmhouse Tacos—he took a chance on TR. Walking through town on the Swamp Rabbit Trail, he saw the success of the Swamp Rabbit Brewery as an indication that people were seeking craft spirits.

"I saw the town growing and wanted to get in on the ground floor," explains the certified sommelier whose love for wine was sparked in his senior year during his time in New Zealand as part





**Evan Rutter '06** parlayed his interest in wine into a successful business venture. He is the owner of the Tasting Room, a boutique wine shop, bar and venue that specializes in artisan wines and craft beers.



## The Comeback



of Furman's Australearn program. "I hope we're adding a note of sophistication and culture to TR."

From eateries like Leopard Forest Coffeehouse, Sidewall Pizza and Farmhouse Tacos to the Swamp Rabbit Trail and free concerts and movies in Trailblazer Park, TR resonates with students these days. As Dianna Gracely puts it, "We want TR to be the students' hometown while they're on campus."

This spring, Furman students decorated the city with a vibrant mural outside Farmhouse Tacos. Designed

by Greenville artist Emily Clanton and painted by Furman students as part of a May Experience class titled Art and Community Engagement, the mural depicts a TR scene populated with bicycles and farm-fresh vegetables against the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

For all its hip appeal, the city remains a jumping-off point for outdoor recreation, lying as it does at the foot of the mountains just over the North Carolina line. "Travelers Rest today is what it always was," says Gracely, "only more cool." ●