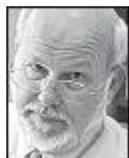


COLUMNIST

Walton heirs provide a script for small-town success

CHARLIE MITCHELL



Yes, we're talking about the heirs of Sam Walton, founder of Walmart – the mega-company that assorted interest groups and media types love to hate.

As it happens, the heirs are pretty good folks. Yes, they're worth more billions than they can possibly spend but laudably they don't use their wealth to buy politicians or make random donations. Instead, the Walton Family Foundation — like all quality philanthropic groups — makes investments. They expect a quality of life return in exchange for every dollar provided.

The Foundation's newest report, out last week, details a study of small American towns that have prospered. Any community that collectively desires to do better can use the report as a step-by-step guide, almost like a recipe.

The five towns were Findlay, Ohio; Brookings, S.D.; Jasper, Ind.; Ardmore, Okla.; and Oxford, right here in Mississippi.

Although there were differences from one of these fly-over towns to the next, the study's author, Walton Family Foundation Fellow Ross DeVol, extracted seven major attributes.

The seven, paraphrased, are:

- Access to higher education and research.
- Community colleges with strong workforce development.
- Understanding and support of entrepreneurs and early-stage capital.
- Multiple economic drivers.
- Manufacturing along with logistics and supply chain opportunities.
- Support for technical, technology and professional enterprises.
- Quality of place.

At the outset, note there's nothing here, at least directly, about natural climate or resources or other factors related to luck. Each one of these ingredients is attainable pretty much anywhere.

Let's focus on Oxford, which is home to the state's largest university. Not every town can have more than 20,000 students and world-class researchers. But just about every decent-sized town in Mississippi has a

community college or branch. And every town is able to recruit and support people with innovative energy.

Oxford has several examples. FNC is a software developer that filled the demand for the specialized needs of real estate appraisal. Merely an idea in 1995, the company sold for \$475 million in 2016. The new owner is planning to remain in Oxford to create an innovation center and employ 600 more people. Next Gear is another company less than 20 years old. The firm also develops specialized workflow software. It projects a need for 125 more employees. Morrow Creative, No Time 2 Cook and New Media Lab, LLC, are four more niche small business start-ups recording solid success.

Have any failed? Dozens, no doubt. The point is that the community adopted a posture welcoming informed risk-taking. Projects were not dismissed merely due to fear of failure.

Most Mississippians don't associate Oxford with manufacturing. Several years ago when one of the town's largest non-university employers, Whirlpool, shut down and moved a lot of jobs to, as it happens, another town in the study, Findlay, Ohio.

Oxford was resilient, though, and is one of few towns that came out of the 2008 economic crisis with more manufacturing jobs than before. Winchester makes ammunition north of the town and Borg-Warner produces vehicle throttles nearby in Water Valley. SMW Manufacturing, which makes components for large trucks, has taken over a former Caterpillar plant.

Tourism, too, illustrates the ingredient of diversity in economic drivers. The community markets itself — mostly centered on food, music and history — and in 2016 recorded a oneyear gain of 13.9 percent to \$156 million in spending by visitors. Tourism and food services account for more than 2,000 jobs, a number growing at an annual rate of 9.3 percent

Finally, there's this nebulous-sounding "quality of place" component. Let's say this: All is lost if a town's leaders think parks are nice when there's extra money, that traffic planning is optional, that high crime doesn't hurt anything, really, and that the quality of schools and health care is not important.

People are more mobile than ever and will go where they perceive opportunity for a good life. As proof, Oxford grew from 9,292 people in 1970 to 33,875 in 2016.

Some parting numbers: Nationally, job growth averaged 1.2 percent from 2011 to 2016. It was 4.4 percent in Oxford. Nationally, wage growth averaged 4.1 percent during the same time. It was 6.2 percent in Oxford.

Other Mississippi towns are prospering, too. What the report targeted to only five nationally confirms that community success is not happenstance. It is planned and intentional, not keyed to geography, demographics, natural resources or any of the standard excuses some towns list as their insurmountable obstacles. Yes, there are some pluses that come via location, but it's pretty clear the formula could work anywhere ... anywhere enough people want it to work.

CHARLIE MITCHELL is a Mississippi journalist.

Write to him at cmitchell43@yahoo.com.

"The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." Pablo Picasso Spanish painter, sculptor, printmaker, poet and playwright (1881-1973)