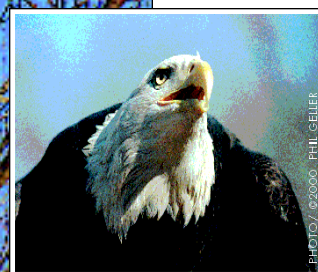


## communityprofile



*The Bald Eagle has made a great comeback at the Squaw Creek Wildlife Refuge which is just 25 miles north of St. Joseph. More than 200 of the birds spend time at the refuge during the winter.*



**Comeback City** Nearly brought down by a flood and industrial decline in the early 1990s, St. Joseph, Missouri's residents refused to throw in the towel. They brought the city roaring back as an All America City.

*By Eileen Lockwood*

In July of 1993 St. Joseph was on its knees. Or, more accurately, knee-deep in floodwater. Seventeen straight days of rain had transformed the bordering Missouri River into a ravenous monster. Low-lying areas were inundated.

Adding hardship to injury, the worst flood in decades took out the water company itself. The 70,000 residents of

St. Joseph, the fifth largest city in Missouri, spent five days taking sponge baths and cooking with bottled water.

Then two large employers announced they would close, annihilating jobs for 1,700 workers.

You'd think these sledgehammer punches would kayo a community already trying to cope with downtown decay and other problems common to once-prosperous, mid-sized American

cities. Not so. This sturdy river city had seen too much glory to let it all slide down a riverbank.

A hundred thousand pioneers had stopped here on their way west, stocking up for the long trip. Their needs created a bonanza for everyone from gunsmiths to wagon makers. Though interrupted briefly by bitter Civil-War-era raids and riots, the outfitters' colossal

## ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI

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**POPULATION:** 69,622

**CLIMATE:**

Annual rainfall: 34.5 inches

Annual snowfall: 21 inches

Average High/Low Temperatures:

January: 25°/18°, July: 88°/68°

Days of sunshine: 213

**TRANSPORTATION**

**AIRPORTS:** Kansas City

International Airport, Rosecrans Memorial Airport (private)

**BUS:** City Bus Service, Greyhound and Jefferson Lines

**INTERSTATES:** Interstate 29 north to

Omaha (138 miles) and south to

Kansas City, Missouri (50 miles);

Interstate 35 north to Des Moines

(177 miles) and Minneapolis (440

miles); I-29 connects to I-35 to

Oklahoma City (389 miles). I-35

connection in Kansas City goes to

I-70 east to St. Louis (250 miles)

and west to Denver (565 miles).

**COST OF LIVING**

Indexed at 94.1 (100 is average)

Median home price: \$69,900

Median Household Income:

\$32,453



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prosperity became a springboard for later wholesalers, meatpackers, bankers, and factory owners churning out products from awnings and welding machines to writing tablets and Aunt Jemima pancake mix. From golden coffers came funds for grand public and commercial buildings (at least 50 are now on the National Register), a 26-mile parkway system linking one end of the city to the other, and a fairytale park dotted with ponds, hanging gardens, a Greek-style amphitheater, and a castle-like recreation center.

The wealthy moguls themselves built dozens of showcase mansions. "It's probably one of the best collections of Victorian architecture in Missouri, outside of St. Louis and Kansas City," says Greg Sekula, the city's historic preservation planner. But "Victorian" only begins to describe the architecture. A ride through the four national historic districts where most

of the homes are clustered is an excursion through architectural history.

The St. Joseph Museum occupies a white Gothic Revival castle built by a hardware baron. Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival homes have been restored as bed and breakfasts. You can spot buildings of Grand Italianate Victorian, Second Empire, American Foursquare, and other revival styles like Tudor, Colonial, Victorian, and Medieval.

**Quick rebound**

Less than a month after the 1993 flood, with the same spunky resolve that had turned a primitive 1820s trading post into a thriving commercial center, St. Josephites celebrated the city's 150th birthday with an arts and heritage festival attended by 50,000 people.

Four years later, in 1997, city leaders were proudly staking signposts

along Interstate 29 announcing St. Joseph's selection as an All America City.

Judges for the All America City designation raved about the community's success in mustering forces to recover from effects of the flood, according to Karen Graves, a citizen volunteer active in the All America application process.

To St. Joseph's economic credit, new companies were coming to town, partly because of a developing 343-acre commercial park. Unemployment had plummeted from 12 to 4 percent. And, says Graves, "A city loathe to pass taxes had actually voted in two increases."

The new tax revenue paid for a Convention and Visitors Bureau, which has boosted tourism several times over and attracted more and more regional conferences. There was also money for library expansion pro-

OPPOSITE, St. Joseph is nestled on the bluffs of the Missouri River which were mentioned by Lewis and Clark as they traveled the area in 1804. I- 229 creates a loop along the river and the downtown area. BELOW, A terra cotta gypsy detail from the Motter House in downtown St. Joseph. The house burned in the mid 1990s, but many other homes in St. Joseph have similar details. RIGHT, A residence in the Hall Street Historic District. These homes are a significant collection of Victorian and other styles of architecture. BELOW RT., Hundreds of thousands of Canada geese make a stop at Squaw Creek Wildlife Refuge.



jects, including a new branch building.

The downtown area had been spruced up and more revival efforts would be forthcoming. In the meantime, a public/private partnership was achieving real success in revitalizing a 50-block area populated by seven of St. Joseph's unusual museums, including the Pony Express Museum and the Jesse James Home.

"The 1990s partnership was pretty innovative," says Graves, "because we worked with residents and business owners to find ways for them to feel pride and get them to start reinvesting in the neighborhood."

The All America City judges also praised the special coalition of schools and businesses which cooperated in a Partnership in Education program in which company executives agreed to hire only employees

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## ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI

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who completed their high school educations.

The medical community played a role in the city's rejuvenation as well.

Heartland Regional Medical Center had taken the lead in promoting good health with the Healthy Communities for the Midwestern Four Corners project. The plan included partnerships to provide dental and medical screenings for low-income schoolchildren, free adult health screenings, and support groups for those with various chronic diseases.

The generosity of St. Joseph residents also impressed the judges. St. Joseph is second in the nation in per capita United Way giving.

Also impressive was the continuation of Trails West!, the annual festival that provided much-needed diversion from 1993 flood woes. The festival has become an annual event, attended by thousands of people from St. Joseph and nearby towns. It's still held on that same third weekend of every August. And freely flowing contributions from dozens of local businesses have kept this extravaganza free to the public.

At the festival, local and nationally known musical groups from rock to symphony perform almost continuously. Juried-in craftspeople and fine artists sell their work. Cowboy poets spin yarns. Historic characters come to life, staging old-time melodramas and roaming tree-shaded festival grounds in front of the 1920s City Hall, a gem of Italianate architecture itself. And thousands of "junior citizens" work on arts projects in a special children's tent.

### Driving tour

Approaching St. Joseph from the south on the I-229 spur from I-29, you view a panorama of the old city perched above the river — striking church spires and domes, squared-off turn-of-the-20th-

century commercial buildings and, most impressive of all, the 1873 Buchanan County Court-house with four classic brick wings fanning out from a shining center dome. Venerable trees and lush greenery fill out the picture.

Just off I-29 on the eastern side of town you'll find yourself in the heart of the "new" St. Joseph — proliferating subdivisions of attractive modern homes and a district of thriving businesses from florists to Wal-Marts. There's even a mini golf course that's won awards for fine landscaping.

Further north on smaller highways is Squaw Creek Wildlife Refuge, a nature lover's paradise where the spectacular bald eagle has made quite a comeback, and where, in late fall, thousands of migrating Canada geese blacken the lake and deafen visitors with their honking.

Dr. Edward Kammerer says all of the above, along with a manageable population level, played a deciding role in his decision to come to St. Joseph in 1998. He accepted a position with Specialists of Internal Medicine, one of the city's 17 medical clinics. "This is as big a town as I would ever live in," says the Wyoming native. "I looked all over my home state, my wife's home state of Wisconsin, and at opportunities at Mayo (in Rochester, Minnesota) where I was doing my residency."

### One-hospital show

Location quality was important, but hospital quality was Kammerer's main reason for coming here. "I looked around for places that I thought had a promising future, and this hospital is about the best I found," he explains. "Most hospitals in other towns are downsizing these days, but Heartland is one of the few that is building. They have a good niche in the market."

An angular facade lends a modern feel

to Heartland Regional Medical Center (HRMC), and the services provided in the facility lend substance to its vaulted lobby. HRMC was named a top 100 hospital in the US in heart and orthopedic care by HCIA-Sachs, the country's largest independent health-care information firm. HRMC offers a full spectrum of services. Only transplants, severe burns, and the most critical neonatal cases are absent from its roster of services.

HRMC's economic importance also cannot be underestimated, as it is northwest Missouri's largest employer, with a staff of 2,200. It's 158-acre complex draws patients from a population of 285,000 in a 21-county area including eastern Kansas and parts of southeastern Nebraska and southern Iowa.

Last month, hospital executives announced \$80 million worth of additional construction — a new tower with 80 additional beds, an urgent care center, extra floors for an adjacent medical plaza, and a rehab facility for cardiac and pulmonary patients.

For Kammerer, the state-of-the-art facility is a source of pride. "We have equipment that is mostly found only in universities," he boasts. "In fact, when I came here Heartland had a PET scanner that was one of a very few in the whole country."

As of last March, Heartland ranked second in the number of admissions among the top 25 acute-care hospitals in the northwestern Missouri and Kansas City region, according to a report in the *Kansas City Business Journal*. First-ranked Saint Luke's Hospital, in Kansas City, has traditionally siphoned off some St. Joseph patients, especially heart surgery candidates. Some of this trend was reversed when HRMC inaugurated its own cardiac program in 1991.

## ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI

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By the same token, competition may be rising for Heartland from some of the smaller rural hospitals in the region. A few of these have begun to develop specialty services, not unlike Heartland's earlier efforts to draw more patients from Kansas City hospitals.

For Heartland, it's a kind of double-edged sword. Acting as an area big brother, it has tried to promote better health and maintain economic vitality throughout the region by partnering with the smaller hospitals which now are the source of this looming competition. One way out of this uncomfortable brier patch, according to a recent report from Heartland's board president, is to continue developing other sub-specialty services and to emphasize that patients often need a greater variety of specialty treatment than any one, smaller health-care facility can provide.

### Golden-era culture

Although it may be a big fish in the health-care pond, St. Joseph, a city of 70,000, obviously can't be everything to everyone. Fortunately for those addicted to fine dining, high-end shopping, major league baseball and football, and almost continuous cultural events, metropolitan Kansas City, Missouri is an hour's drive south.

This proximity was a persuasive factor when Dr. Robert LacKamp was deciding on his major career move in 1979. For a radiologist, Heartland was "a dream world," he says, "because you could practice the full-breadth of your specialty."

But the nearness of Kansas City made the job look even better. "I can enjoy a big city without actually living in it," he adds.

Ditto for his wife, Janet, but she has also been happily surprised by the level of culture in St. Joseph. She's found a

vocal outlet in the top-rated Community Chorus, plus many other social and volunteer organizations. "One of the big pluses is that a city this size has a good symphony and a marvelous art museum," she says.

The Albrecht-Kemper Art Museum tripled its size with a 1994 expansion of the exquisite mansion housing it since the 1930s. "I think of St. Joseph as a two-frontier city," says Terry Oldham, the museum's director. Thundering hoofs of mail riders and Civil War marauders created a rough-hewn foundation, but golden-era wealth brought a finer culture. That's why, he says, "a fine arts component is also part of the big picture."

The art museum's kaleidoscopic mix of 3,000 works is, in a way, a tribute to determined women who were members of the St. Joseph Art League in 1915. They raised funds to pay for their first acquisition, a William Merritt Chase painting, "Venetian Balcony," by displaying it in a local department store and charging admission to view it. Although the museum frequently revolves its huge collection these days, Chase's work has its own special place where it is always on display.

The museum recently began opening its Garden Room to the public for weekly luncheons. Hobby chefs, including some physicians' wives, are the cooks. Oldham is also encouraging amateur physician artists to display their work at the museum's frequent member shows.

Dr. Carlos Moya and his wife, Carol, found their niche in another area — city beautification. A founding member of Friends of the Parks, Moya, a pathologist, raised thousands of dollars to beef up city coffers designated for park maintenance. But not before the Moyas had literally gotten their hands dirty, planting hundreds of flowers to beautify

the park area in front of City Hall, following up by donating more funds for a decorative fountain on the other side where drivers can enjoy it on a major thoroughfare into downtown.

Krug Park, once the scene of Babylon-like gardens, recaptures some of its magic with a month-long display of lights every Christmas. The rest of the year, one of 27 public parks, it's a huge green retreat for picnicking, jogging, biking, fishing, and up-close encounters with buffalo and other animals that roam parts of its acreage.

### Open arms

These more recent community efforts symbolize a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers. In years past, new arrivals often felt excluded from the city's tight social cocoon. But that has changed.

The Lackamps have noticed an increased acceptance of newcomers since they moved here more than 20 years ago. And the Kammerers have felt warmly received. "The first two weeks we were here, someone brought us food or cookies every day," says Kammerer.

The St. Joe housing scene is its own form of welcome. For newcomers, attractive homes come at equally attractive prices. Moving here two years ago from Kansas City, Oldham, the art museum director, quickly learned about home values. "Housing is excellent here," he says, "whether you want to buy an old Victorian place or a new one. My St. Joseph home cost 70 per cent of what the price would've been in the big city."

Probably St. Joseph's hardest struggle has been bringing back some of the thriving life the downtown area enjoyed before shoppers moved eastward to a new mall and a long strip of other businesses.

Members of a recently formed

## ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI

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Downtown Partnership know streets teeming with shoppers supporting three department stores and dozens of specialty shops will not be part of the scene again, but Becky Boerkircher, the executive director of the partnership, believes downtown will make a comeback with intriguing, one-of-a-kind boutiques offering custom stained glass treasures, home decorations, health foods, designer children's clothing, vintage books, bargain-priced bridal attire, and enough antiques to satisfy most avid seekers of glorious furniture and trinkets from the past.

The charismatic museums of St. Joseph also draw visitors to the historic areas of downtown. In the Pony Express Museum, life-size dioramas and actual mementos and photos inhabit the same stables where horses once waited for their riders to start out on the 1,961-mile run. The course took the intrepid riders and beasts through lonely prairies, snowy mountains, and parched desert, reaching Sacramento in a record 10 days. Although the legend endures, the Pony Express enterprise, begun in 1860, went bust only 18 months later.

At the Jesse James Home a few blocks away, the notorious outlaw's career came to an abrupt end when a henchman plugged him in 1881 to win reward money. It didn't work out that way. Bill Ford, nicknamed the "dirty little coward" in a later ditty, was tried for killing James in the showcase county courthouse, convicted, and then pardoned. The St. Joseph funeral establishment that made Jesse's burial arrangements is still in business 120 years later.

In the same vicinity, a former hotel called the Patee House is now a museum that draws visitors into re-created slices of St. Joseph's history. For example, there as a mockup of Dr. Walter Cronkite's dental office (Junior became the CBS

news icon), and the Pony Express partners had their offices in the building. But its major fame arises from the antics of John Patee, the colorful flimflam man who owned the hotel. He held a national lottery to unload his debt-ridden property, then, "miraculously," became the lucky winner himself.

The character of the city's founder, a genial fur trader named Joseph Robidoux, is reflected in St. Joseph's most charming museum, the restored row house where he lived and rented rooms to pioneers stopping to stock up on supplies. Robidoux Row, as it's known, with its picturesque gardens, is now the scene of small parties and receptions.

In spite of some brushes with marauders and outlaws, St. Joe never became a shoot-out capital of the west like Dodge City or Abilene. Still, there are lingering vestiges of the rough-and-ready 1800s era, such as old-time saddle makers, stores with western gear, and the Stetson Hat Factory.

Several years ago, a local craftsman produced a one-of-a-kind old-style rifle for the former president George Bush. Now word has leaked out that the favorite ranch hat of his son, George W. Bush, is a St. Joseph-made Stetson. Not one to let a publicity opportunity slip by, the Stetson manager immediately announced that the venerable company would soon design a new model named "El Presidente" based on the current-president Bush's style.

Yet one more claim to fame for the resilient city on the restless, muddy Missouri. ■

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