

Krum, Texas: A Pleasant Place To Live
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Krum, Texas- Granted it's a small place with an unlikely name.

And granted too, it's a place most people encounter only as a road sign on the shoulder of Interstate 35, northbound, just beyond Denton. A lot of folks never even see the sign.

But Krum, Texas, is another kind of place as well-the kind of place that fed-up city dwellers are seeking out in more increasing numbers. It's one of those thousands of small towns and villages which U.S. census officials say this decade's urban Americans are suddenly beginning to move back to.

Like many of those other rural communities, Krum is authentic Smalltown, USA. Never been anything else. And now, as always, it's surrounded by authentic Rural America. Begins right there at the edge of town, one step past the "Pop. 454" sign.

For folks tired of the hassle of traffic and crowds in, let's say, Dallas, Krum extended the prospect of almost palpable serenity. That's a large part of what drew 29 year old David Bell to Krum to start his fledgling car repair business.

"I've traveled all over the United States," says Bell, "and I've found Texas has more to offer-scenically, economically, in peace of mind and friends and things like that-than almost any place else. And this right here, for me right now, is the best place in Texas. I may spend my life here."

Bell puts particular emphasis on the "peace of mind" aspect of his new hometown. He can break off work anytime he chooses and walk down to nearby Hickory Creek to think about it all. He can work late into the night, if he chooses, and know there's no problem about coming in on time the next morning. Part of all this owes to his being his own employer, of course; part of it, however, owes to his choosing a small town as the place for his self-employment.

Bell's firm, Axolotl Ltd, would appear to be an unlikely venture, even for cosmopolitan, high rolling Dallas. It's a 2-man company (Bell and his partner, Rick Dirks) specializing in European car restoration. Along with this more exotic work, though the pair take more routine mechanic work on more routine autos than the 1935 Bentley that's now in their shop.

Bell got into the car repair business and into his shop just outside Krum on S.H. 156, through what would have to be called the backdoor:

"I was doing graduate work in zoology at North Texas (State University in Denton)," he explains. "I was seeing, or beginning to see, what the job situation would be like when I finished. It didn't look good, and I couldn't see the prospect for making much money.

"What's more, I wasn't sure I'd wind up doing something I really liked. I've always done mechanic work, off and on, in various dealerships. I'd always liked it and returned to it. You can guess the rest."

Bell quit his grad program at NTSU and moved into quarters near Krum. He turned the vacant dairy shed at his place into a garage, then turned part of the farmhouse into a jewelry-making shop where his wife Jan fashions rings.

He envisions a thriving car repair business for himself in the next few years; his wife envisions a sort of artists' commune at the farm by that time, too. Together, the Bells represent a new breed of young American couples seeking new ways to cultivate the nation's rural environment.

"I see great things," says Bell, "and I don't know if I can make them all happen. But I'm happy trying. I like it out here. Out here, you've got trees- like one of my professors used to say-

trees that 'sing and dance' for you in the fall. Trees with character. The people are nicer, it's cheaper to live-why, I can't think of any place in the county that could give me the advantages I've got here."

"Something else, too," volunteers partner Rick Dirks, a NTSU graduate-degree holder who's as hooked on country living as Bell, "right over there, there are some of the more spectacular sunsets you'll see anywhere."

Dirks motions out over the cattle-dotted countryside toward the western horizon. "Sometimes we just sit here and watch and take it all in. You can't do that very well in a city."

An hour or so later, one of those spectacular sunsets is just beginning to take shape. Its bright golden glare is spilling across the storefronts of downtown Krum. The stores aren't many, but they number more than they did several years so.

Business is coming back to Krum. Some of it is in antique shops aimed at city types out for a week-end spin; some of it is aimed at non-city folk shopping for more mundane things like nails and aspirin and dog food and cigarettes. A new café is expected to open on Krum's on-stop sign main street pretty soon, and a new drugstore is already in business.

That drugstore's operator, 25 year old Ernest Ferguson, is just now smiling up into the brilliant sunshine as he hoists his daughter Ashley up onto his shoulders.

"There's nothing to do here," he grins, "so if you want a quiet little town, this is it. But Denton's not far, about 10 minutes, and Dallas is just down the road. So it's not bad being here. It's a good place for a first store.

Ferguson spent two years working for a chain drugstore in Arlington before coming to Krum. He says he made the decision to move because he was offered a "very good deal" on the opening of a drugstore in Krum, which hadn't had one for several years. And, he says, the idea of coming to a small town wasn't alarming-he grew up in Buffalo and went to school in the small Oklahoma college town of Weatherford. His wife Kathy, an advertising executive in Fort Worth, is also from Buffalo.

Ferguson's new City Drug carries everything from veterinary supplies to citizens band radios to skin lotion to cold tablets. Ferguson handles prescriptions but he says working as a pharmacist in a town without a doctor is posing a few problems:" We're trying to get a doctor up here how," he ways. "But Denton's so close, that's where people go."

Young Ashley Ferguson rumples her daddy's hair as he talks. He pauses to wave at a car driving past, then returns to his reflections about his future: "If I can make a go of the store, I'M willing to stay here the rest of my life. I'm used to small towns, and that's no real problem. I'm my own boss here, and that's nice. I'm optimistic."

Optimism is what got Krum started in the first place. Named for the engineer who piloted the first train through the community on New Year's Day, 1886, the town enjoyed notable prosperity as a grain center in decades past. Mrs. Della Davis, a lifetime resident who's pulling a town history for the American Bicentennial next year, says the turn of the century found Krum boasting four flour mills, five cotton gins, four churches, five newspapers and a population of about 550.

But over the next half-century, Krum was victimized by the great American urban migration. Businesses disappeared as young people left town for the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth. Krum's population, which hit a maximum of 750 in 1940, had fallen to less than half that by 1960. The town's main street, once comfortably busy, was all but closed.

Then came the tentative beginnings of the back-to-the country movement which census officials are not reporting across the nation at large. The major metro centers, once magnets for

smalltown folks wanting to start their climb toward the American Dream, are being increasingly perceived as bogs of pollution and social unrest, experts say.

Meanwhile, America's small towns are taking up the slack. Many are quite like Krum, and many of the increasing number of welcome new faces are quite like those of car mechanic David Bell and pharmacist Ernest Ferguson.

"Out her, for me, it's the little things," Bell sums up. "Like, at the local store, say I don't have my money along-I can bring it later. At the post office, I forgot my stamps- I can find 'em next day in my box. ,

"you know, it's little things like that, things you wouldn't find in New York or other cities very often. And, like Rick says, it's the sunsets. The trees that sing and dance. "It's all those things."