

The world next door: A new phenomenon in the heartland

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [July 28, 2009](#) issue

There is a new phenomenon in the heartland. As far as I know, it is little observed and has not yet been named. I will call it rural cosmopolitanism.

I grew up in northwestern Oklahoma, roughly ten miles from the southwestern border of Kansas. About 20,000 souls live in Liberal, Kansas, the region's largest town. The nearest city of even moderate size is Amarillo, Texas, population 174,000, and it is 150 miles away. So Liberal is the center of cultural and commercial life for a vast expanse of rural citizens cast, like broadly sown seed, across stretches of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado and New Mexico.

To get a picture of the heartland of which Liberal is the heart, you need to imagine flat and dry. This is the epicenter of the historic Dust Bowl. There are no forests. There are no grasses or (nonirrigated) crops more than waist-high. There is no visible air pollution. Highways lie like plumbines, perfectly straight for mile after mile. Once outside, you can see from horizon to horizon in all directions. Here, as someone has said, you can watch your dog run away all day long.

Urban dwellers typically react to the place with aversion. But as a son of this land, I can see its enigmatic beauty. Sky dominates. It's blue from the ankles up to infinity. Clouds tower like mountains untethered from the ground. At night the moon and stars float as close and invitingly as festively lighted ships harbored in the front yard.

What is harder to convey about the scene is that Liberal is also the site of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity. While I was growing up the citizenry of Liberal was overwhelmingly Euro-American, peopled with few exceptions by descendants of German, Irish and English immigrants. But that began to change in the 1970s, when National Beef Packing opened a huge food-processing plant (in less euphemistic terms, a slaughterhouse) on the outskirts of town. In a repetition of an old American story, the thousands of jobs National Beef brought to Liberal were jobs few

established white citizens wanted to take. So workers streaming from Mexico grasped what was, to them, an opportunity. With an immigrant workforce mobilized, other industries happy to enjoy the cheap labor and low taxes settled in Liberal.

Today the population of Liberal is less than half Caucasian. It is 43 percent Hispanic. Four percent of the population is African-American. Nearly three percent declare themselves to be of Vietnamese and other Asian ancestry.

That last statistic explains the wondrous sight I beheld on my most recent visit back home: Chua Phuoc-Tanh, the Buddhist temple of Liberal. As brightly colored as the McDonald's just down the street, it is a small house with yellow walls and orange trim. Ivory-white lotus-blossom statuary tops the immaculate orange brickwork at the courtyard's gate. Serpentine figures representing Naga the snake king ascend each side of the front roofline, converging on the *dharmachakra* (the eight-spoked wheel of the law) that rests at its peak.

Of course, communications technology has for several decades exposed Liberal residents to global religious and ethnic pluralism. What is different now is that the diversity is literally present. In barely the blink of an eye, a town that was almost exclusively Protestant is 29 percent Roman Catholic. Bilingual (English and Spanish) signs front countless stores and restaurants. And then there's that Buddhist temple.

What makes rural cosmopolitanism significant for all of us, and not just for the minute portion of the American population who are country dwellers, is this: small-town pluralism is not identical to urban or suburban pluralism. In metropolitan areas, it is entirely possible to conduct daily routines in the bubble of an ethnically (and economically) homogenous neighborhood. Each city neighborhood, for example, has its own McDonald's and its own high school. But Liberal has only one McDonald's and only one high school. Of course, much of Liberal's everyday life operates on ethnically and religiously parallel tracks. But compared to life in an urban area, those parallel tracks necessarily run much closer to one another. And frequently, intentionally or unintentionally, the tracks intersect.

I hope Liberal's churches are helping its ethnically Anglo citizenry to gracefully negotiate the inconveniences and the sometimes frightening changes that accompany diversification. I hope even more that Liberal's Christians are acquiring eyes to see the opportunities that same diversification brings, and are receptive to its extraordinary possibilities. If that is at all the case, then the rest of us will soon have much to learn from our small-town kin in the faith.