

After a “perfect day” in his hometown

Celebrating the transformation of Shenandoah

by CHUCK OFFENBURGER

It’s always great to come home. And it’s especially good doing so now if you’re hometown happens to be Shenandoah.

My wife Carla Offenburger and I were back in town August 11-12, primarily to take part in the fun around the 85th birthday party of KMA radio. The party was a great time, and rest of our visit turned into what I can only say is the perfect day in Shenandoah – stay overnight in the new Shenandoah Inn & Suites, get a piece of Mary Peterson’s lemon coconut pie at The Sanctuary and drink a chocolate malt at the soda fountain at George Jay Drug Co.



Here are four views of the new Shenandoah Inn & Suites, and the landscaped parking lot across the street, located at the corner of Sheridan Avenue and Elm Street in the heart of downtown Shenandoah. Junior Taylor drove by as these photos were being taken and yelled, “Looks like it’s been there forever, doesn’t it? Great project for our town!”

The hotel is the envy of economic development officials all over the Midwest. Most of them were shocked a couple years ago when Gregg Connell, executive director of the Shenandoah Chamber & Industry Association, started telling them that the City of Shenandoah, SCIA and other entities were talking with developers about building a new hotel in the heart of the business district. They saw it as an opportunity to 1) fill the need for nice hotel rooms in the community, 2) find a way to replace two downtown buildings lost in the fire that destroyed the former location of the Valley News Today, and 3) addressing the problem of other badly deteriorating downtown buildings in the block just east of where the fire occurred.

But, many skeptics said, what town with population under 7,000 has built a new downtown hotel in the last 20 years? Who would take such a gamble?

“We were a little reluctant at first, too,” said Percilla Lattin, who became a partner in the development with her husband Paul. “We’d never built downtown before in a small town, and nobody else had that we knew of, either. But the more we studied the situation in Shenandoah, the more sense it made to us. I think now it’s wound up being a win-win situation for all of us.”

So, it’s going well after about four months of operating? “We’re doing good, actually great,” Percilla said. “Weekends have been fantastic for us, and the weekdays are building all the time.”

The Lattins are Nebraska natives who now live on an acreage south of Farragut. They previously developed two other motels, both of them operating as America’s Best Value Inns, one of them at the interchange of Interstate Highway 29 and Iowa Highway 2 between Nebraska City and Percival, and the other in Percilla’s hometown of Broken Bow, Nebraska.

Carla and I will tell you, based on our experience staying at the Shenandoah Inn & Suites, that this 42-room, \$2.2-million hotel project is a perfect fit for what the community needs. It is not overbuilt and thus too expensive. It is nicely-decorated, very clean and in the location every alumnus of Shenandoah will want to stay – right downtown.



Shenandoah's streetscape, now fully mature, is gorgeous, featuring lots of flowers and lots of the school color – maroon. There is also original art and fascinating historical plaques weaved into the streetscape, like the mosaics herald the Everly Brothers and Shenandoah's "Radio City" history on these two lightpoles. And the "Iowa Walk Of Fame" has a steady stream of visitors walking all over the business district, reading the plaques that tell the fame and home towns of notable lowans, like advice columnists Ann Landers and Abigail ("Dear Abby") Van Buren, who were Sioux City natives.

We rolled into town about 8 p.m. on a Wednesday night, parked in the nicely-landscaped lot that is now accented with the dome from the cupola of the building that once held Leadox Corner Drug and, get this – we never used our car again until we were leaving Shenandoah at the end of our activities on Thursday. That's because we were able to walk everywhere we wanted to go – KMA, the Depot Deli, The Sanctuary, several other mainstreet businesses and the Dennis Lloyd Memorial Park taking shape where the old Evening Sentinel was once located. Carla reports that "between me and our friends Joyce and Allen Hall, from Malvern, we spent \$300 shopping in downtown Shenandoah."

At the continental breakfast Thursday morning at the hotel, we struck up a conversation with another couple, Gale and Lorrie Zellweger, of Scranton, which is only 15 miles away from where we live in Greene County. The Zellwegers told us they'd checked in at

the hotel Wednesday afternoon while passing through the area on a leisurely trip.

“We’d heard from some friends about the new hotel downtown, so we decided to give it a try,” Lorrie Zellweger said. “We wound up walking all over the downtown area, too, ate at two restaurants, went shopping and had a great time. The heck of it is that normally if we’re stopping overnight in a community, we’ll just check into a motel out on the highway on the edge of town – and we won’t experience anything else in the town except that one little part of it. Because we were staying right downtown in Shenandoah, we feel like we really got a good feel for what the town is like. We’ll be back.”

The hotel fits so well that you find yourself thinking it surely must have been planned 10 years ago as the centerpiece for Shenandoah’s fantastic downtown streetscape project. With the garden beauty, art, history and community information built into that streetscape, it really is one of the nicest anywhere.

There was a lot of planning in it, but there was also a lot of serendipity. Who could have imagined that a disastrous fire could wind up having a positive impact on the heart of a small town’s business district?

Leadership, investment, vision and boldness have really made it all happen in my hometown. I’m intensely proud of Shenandoah.

I believe that Earl May, founder of both KMA radio and the seed & nursery business that still carries his name, and his friendly competitor Henry Field, founder of KFNF radio and his own nursery, gave all of us in KMAland a unique and enduring heritage.