

About Inglis

By Margaret Marschall
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When the last train whistle pierced the quiet of Inglis more than a decade ago, it could have signaled the end of an era. The railroad had played a pivotal role in the growth of the little village in the heart of Manitoba's Asessippi Parkland, since the first tracks were laid in 1922. Instead, that final whistle marked an exciting new beginning. You see, what the people of Inglis knew, and what people from all over the world are now discovering, is that this closely-knit community has a lot to offer.

While a strong agriculture sector continues to be the glue that binds the community together, earning Inglis past accolades as "Barley Capital of Manitoba", the area's tourism industry is growing at a steady pace. Outdoor enthusiasts flock to Inglis for its proximity to Asessippi Provincial Park and Lake of the Prairies. And, the Asessippi Ski Area and Winter Park, named "Canada's Best New Attraction in 2000", is the biggest private sector employer within the Rural Municipality of Shellmouth-Boulton, generating at least 100 jobs every season. That's a significant number, considering the approximate population of the R.M. is not quite 1,000.

"When the ski hill started up, everyone saw the potential for Inglis to grow," says local businessman Corey LeClerc, owner of the Prairie Grill restaurant. It didn't take much to convince LeClerc, a native of Richmond B.C., and his wife Sandra, born and raised in Inglis, to move to the area and establish their restaurant.

"We were here on holidays in December of '99, and the former owner said we should buy the place. I'd always wanted to run my own restaurant, and I knew I'd never have that opportunity in Vancouver," he says.

With Inglis only a five-minute drive away from the ski hill, entrepreneurs in the surrounding area immediately recognized an opportunity to accommodate tourists. Bed and Breakfast establishments began springing up in and around town. Long-time Inglis residents, proprietors Rick and Karen Goraluk purchased a vacant building on Main Street six years ago, intending to turn it into a guesthouse. They carried through with their plan, even though many people questioned their logic.

"A lot of people said we were crazy," says Karen. "Who wants to stay in Inglis?"

The Little Village Inn opened its doors to the public on the tail end of the first ski season and has been booked regularly ever since. Inglis has become a skiing, fishing, hunting, getaway "destination", she adds. "People love staying here. They like the open space. The quiet. The peacefulness."

The community hall in Inglis has long been the hub for social activities - the place where friends and neighbours gather to mark the special events in their lives. However, the cost of operating and maintaining the building was

becoming too much for the village of 200 to bear. Fortunately, the Inglis and District Community Club (IDCC) saw a unique opportunity to make the hall self-sustaining. According to IDCC President Tammy Fingas, the club embarked on a mission to raise funds to renovate the facility, so that it could accommodate large groups of travelers wanting to stay in Inglis. Countless hours of volunteer work, and \$90,000 later, the refurbishment of the hall - washroom renovations with the addition of showers, a fire system upgrade, and newly-added wheelchair accessibility - is now complete. For a reasonable \$10 per person, groups of up to one hundred are able to book the hall for overnight visits.

The ski hill is not the only attraction to capture the interest of visitors to Inglis. This summer, the community will celebrate the completed restoration of its historic grain elevators. Although the village's five grain elevators no longer serve their original purpose - as grain storage and handling facilities - the prairie giants have been restored for a significant cause. Designated a provincial and national historic site, the last original row of grain elevators stands as a reminder of a time when similar wooden structures dominated the Canadian prairie landscape. Since restoration work on the elevators began 7 years ago, history buffs from as far away as Australia, Europe and Japan have visited Inglis for a glimpse into Canada's agricultural past. Project Manager Allan Sawchuk says the elevators draw an estimated 3,500 tourists each year. He adds that the publicity the elevators have received and the ensuing feedback from the public have been "unreal". In fact, he says, "We've been recognized as one of the 10 most successful restoration sites in Manitoba." Even the path forged by the old railroad tracks has been preserved. It is now the Crocus section of the Trans Canada Trail, connecting the elevators to other points of interest in the picturesque Parkland region.

Inglis' growth as a community can be attributed to the heartfelt efforts of local residents, who work tirelessly to sustain and promote the economic advantages of living and working in the village. An example of one hardworking committee is the Inglis and Area Business Group, formed three years ago, with the objective to "beautify and promote" the Village of Inglis. The business group, consisting of 18 members, has made many improvements to Main Street. In addition to purchasing flower planters and benches, and fixing up sidewalks, it commissioned hometown artist Linda Sonnenberg Jackson to paint a colorful mural on the façade of the town's skating rink. The mural depicts three of Inglis' main attractions: Asessippi Ski Hill, the village's historic row of grain elevators and Lake of the Prairies. Inglis' location, two miles east of Highway 83 between Russell and Roblin, has not always been obvious to passing motorists. So the business group has erected various directional signs - one at the access to the ski hill - and advertising billboards along Hwy 83 and Secondary Highway 366 leading to town. The Internet and the World Wide Web have proven to be valuable tools in recruiting tourists and potential residents to Inglis. Through its creation of www.inglismanitoba.com bumper stickers, the business group is helping residents spread the word about their town, everywhere they go.

"We try our best to promote our area, and show off what we have to the rest of the world," says Rick Goraluk, Chairman of the Inglis and Area Business Group. "Our heart is in our community and the surrounding area. Nothing will ever change that."

And word is getting out. Mechanic Peter Cindric, owner/operator of Inglis Country Service, the village's gas station and garage, moved to Inglis from Winnipeg this June, after becoming entranced with the area during a spring-break ski trip.

"There's just something in the air here," he says. "It's an atmosphere of peacefulness."

Cindric adds that the absence of business licensing fees and no business taxes influenced his decision to buy the garage. It's only been a couple of months since the certified aircraft and automotive mechanic opened his garage, supplying locals and tourists with everything from parts and fuel, to camping gear and sporting equipment. But already he describes the experience as being "overwhelmingly great." In fact, he says keeping up with the demand has been his greatest challenge.

When Cindric hired fellow Inglis newcomer Trisha Lee to help out at the garage, he also provided her with the floor space she needed to promote her all natural "Secrets from the Garden" skincare line. The result has been unexpectedly successful business collaboration. Lee was seeking to simplify her life, when she and her partner Steve Nelham moved to Inglis from Hamilton a couple of years ago.

"I don't miss the smog, traffic and cost associated with living in a big city," she says. "Inglis is a beautiful town. It's quiet and friendly."

As she spruces up the interior of the garage with a fresh coat of paint, Lee, a former wireless technologies marketing specialist, is using her business know-how to create a niche market for her organically derived products. She imports the fine quality ingredients she uses in her soaps and lotions, from countries around the globe; yet her prices, reflecting the local economy, are reasonably low. Not surprisingly, her tough-on-grease Farmer's Soap has been an instant seller.

"Here, marketing is all about cultivating relationships," Lee observes. "It's about creating customer loyalty."

At present, Inglis boasts 36 businesses on its website including the garage, a grocery store, two hair salons, restaurant, hotel, Credit Union, automotive repair and welding shops and several Bed and Breakfasts. Pretty impressive for a little village. If the spirit of this community stays strong, and all indications are it will, then Inglis has the potential to keep on growing.

"It's exciting to see a small town like ours sustain what we have," says Karen Goraluk. "And not fade away like too many small communities in rural Manitoba."