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A Fading Farm Town Seeks Salvation in an Unlikely Spot—the Local Bar

Pomeroy lost its high school, grocery stores and many of its young people, but music fans still flocked to Byron's bar. Then came the order to vacate.

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POMEROY, Iowa—What's left of this tiny town's crumbling Main Street was dark and empty, just as it has been for years. Rain pelted the row of boarded-up buildings, all of them vacant except for one, where a sliver of light peeked out from a doorway.

Inside Byron's bar, the evening's last singer wandered into a crowd with his guitar and led them in a mournful rendition of the John Prine ballad, "Paradise," about a town that has been razed and abandoned. Everyone knew the words:

*And daddy, won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County?
Down by the Green River where Paradise lay
Well, I'm sorry, my son, but you're too late in asking
Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away.*

The song choice was no accident. Pomeroy, population 520, is clinging to life while communities just like it vanish from the American landscape. The fading farm town is at risk of dying unless Byron's can hold on.

For nearly 30 years, Byron's has been the town's lifeblood, an unlikely rollicking hub for blues, folk and rock bands from across the country and the droves of fans who trek here to see them.

Like hundreds of withering farm towns across the heartland, Pomeroy has seen an exodus for decades as family farms consolidated, fewer workers were needed, and young people left for jobs or college. Pomeroy has lost its high school, grocery stores, car dealership and nearly half its population.

In January, town leaders said the run-down building that houses Byron's was no longer safe and that its owner, a 71-year-old Deadhead named Byron Stuart, needed to vacate.

That launched Stuart and his supporters on a quest to find a new home, in the hopes of saving the bar, and in doing so, Pomeroy.



For years, Byron's has been the lifeblood of Pomeroy, population 520.

“Byron's is the heart of the town right now, so we want to keep him here,” said Pomeroy Mayor Cindy Loots.

In 2020, the Census Bureau found more than 500 towns nationwide had fallen to fewer than 500 residents in the preceding decade. Of Iowa's more than 900 towns, almost three-fourths have lost people since 2000. Most are very small: 90% have fewer than 5,000 residents and 70% have fewer than 1,000. Like many rural areas, Calhoun County in northwest Iowa, where Pomeroy is situated, sees more deaths than births each year. It has been that way for at least 20 years.

Generations ago, around the turn of the 20th century, Pomeroy was a bustling way station along the Illinois Central Railroad for farmers shipping crops or cattle to Chicago.

At its heyday in 1900, some 910 people lived here. Pomeroy served as a hub for the even smaller farming communities around it.

The town's website wistfully recalls Pomeroy's glory days. Among its 50 businesses, there were two banks, two barber shops, several beauty parlors, men's and women's clothing stores, a hotel, schools, and even a Kaleidoscope shop.

There are 23 businesses left in Pomeroy's ZIP Code, according to census figures. All but seven have fewer than five workers. Main Street's banks, laundromat and movie theater are long gone. The high school, which once churned out state championship basketball teams, closed about a decade ago.

"It seems like gradually people just left," said Stuart, the bar owner.



Byron Stuart bought the bar in 1995 for \$17,000 at auction.

Like others here, Stuart was raised on a corn and soybean farm just outside of town. After high school, he, too, left Pomeroy to attend Iowa State University in Ames and fell in love with live music after seeing the Allman Brothers Band in concert. Right after college, in 1975, his father suffered a heart attack, and Stuart returned home to care for him and the family farm.

By then, the vibrant Main Street that Stuart grew up with was already disappearing as more shops closed. But he dreamed of opening his own place where bands passing between cities could play on an off night. He bought the bar in 1995 for \$17,000 at auction.

People began driving to Byron's from the small communities scattered out among the cornfields and soybean farms. Nationally known rock acts like Todd Snider, Canned Heat and the Bottle Rockets were soon playing his bar, and Stuart was booking musicians months in advance.

Byron's established itself as a friendly place that drew a diverse crowd. Several years after he opened it, Stuart came out as gay. His longtime partner works as a janitor at a community college in Fort Dodge, about 30 miles away.

Bands play in a small area in the back. The bar is blanketed with Grateful Dead and concert memorabilia Stuart collected over the years. Some nights, there might be 10 customers

watching and drinking \$3.00 cans of Busch Light; other nights, 50. Stuart and his regulars call Byron's a "listening room." There's no talking when someone is performing. Stuart serves bags of popcorn and frozen pizzas.



Nationally known rock acts have come from far and wide to play at Byron's bar.

He schedules shows for Sunday nights on the early side, starting at 5:30 and ending around 8:30. Acts can get back on the road—there hasn't been a hotel in Pomeroy for as long as anyone can remember—and the baby boomers can get home at a reasonable hour.

"Byron has brought something to this area that otherwise would not exist at all," said Rae Danneman, 42, who left Pomeroy in high school but returns for shows. "I can't tell you how many bands I've seen here that would say during their set, 'Man, there's something special about this place.'"

Danneman now lives in Des Moines, two hours away, but on a night in late July, she was back home for the final show before Byron's was set to close. Her 75-year-old father, Luther, was with her. Between drags on a cigarette outside, the retired factory worker recalled how he had been coming to Byron's for nearly 30 years. After living in Ames, he moved back to Pomeroy because he missed its smallness.

Byron's faithful, including musicians who have played there, held fundraising concerts and launched a GoFundMe page. They raised \$118,000.

Paradoxically, space in a town filled with vacant buildings was tight. There weren't many options for a new location.

In addition to dilapidated structures on Main Street, the city needs to either refurbish or tear down dozens of vacant homes, said Loots, the mayor. One of Pomeroy's largest employers, the NEW Cooperative, which operates a towering livestock feed mill and grain storage facility for farmers to buy and sell grain, told her it needed the city's help in finding more housing for workers.



Pomeroy, like many farm towns, is struggling to survive.

“If something doesn't change here, we will die,” said Loots, who happens to be Stuart's distant cousin and is now in her second term as mayor.

David Peters, a professor of agricultural and rural policy at Iowa State University, said one of the main problems hurting small Midwestern towns isn't so much a lack of jobs as a lack of people to fill them. If there's no workforce, Peters said, companies won't move in, people can't start new businesses or expand existing ones, and communities are left in stasis.

That can tear at the social fabric of these places. Surveys conducted over two decades by Peters for the Iowa Small Towns Project run by Iowa State bear that out. In 1994, 76% of survey respondents in Pomeroy said that when something in town needed to get done, the whole community helped. In 2014, the number had dropped to 37%.

Over the same period, 91% initially reported that they could find someone to talk to if they wanted to socialize. Two decades later, only 69% said the same.

Peters also noticed something else: There were some Iowa towns that were able to thrive even as they shrank.

The “shrink smart” places, as Peters termed them, had empowered younger residents—typically more open to change—to take leadership roles in government and local foundations. They also invested in businesses and projects that are draws for younger residents and families, like fitness and community centers.

“For these towns to survive, it really hinges on people coming together and trying to figure out creative solutions,” he said.



Patrons packed Byron’s and door prizes were given away as the bar prepared to close its doors.

Two scholars who worked with Peters—Ilona Matysiak, a sociologist with the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Poland, and Marian Krzyzowski, a retired researcher from the University of Michigan—spent time in 2021 and 2022 studying aging populations in small Iowa towns. The pair searched for things to do when they weren’t working. Krzyzowski had read about Byron’s. One Sunday, they drove the roughly 95 miles to Pomeroy to see for themselves.

“We were greeted at the door by Byron. It was a unique, family atmosphere, and we felt accepted immediately,” said Krzyzowski.

They were so taken, they kept coming back every month.

Using the money supporters raised, Stuart made a \$100,000 offer to the city to buy a little-used, free-standing metal building a block away that occasionally hosts community events. The city decided to let Byron’s use the building while officials considered the offer. Some people, noting that the building was constructed 50 years ago with donations from the community, didn’t feel it should be sold to a business.

On Sept. 9, the city council voted 3-2 to approve the sale. Stuart posted a message on Facebook, saying a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He could stay in Pomeroy.

The following Sunday night, he held his first show in the new venue since the sale. At the front of the community hall, an Omaha blues band called Lou DeLuca and the Delta 88s played a few sets, Grateful Dead tapestries draped behind them. Customers sat at folding tables, drinking their own beers until Stuart can transfer his liquor license.

Stuart smiled the whole night. His bar survived. People showed up as usual. The whir of an electric guitar drifted once more toward Main Street.



Byron Stuart embraced a friend before the last live show at the bar's original venue.

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