

# The Rosewater Foundation in Rural America

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## Recommended Citation

Johnson, Grace (2019) "The Rosewater Foundation in Rural America," *The Mall*: Vol. 3 , Article 15.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol3/iss1/15>

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## The Rosewater Foundation in Rural America

*Grace Johnson*

The city of Galesburg, Illinois grew out of “prairie grass and wildflowers,” it was settled on June 2, 1876, and today hosts 30,769 people. The city is home to many things: Knox College, the County Courthouse, good restaurants, an old and significant steam train engine, an abandoned strip mall, a giant prison, some great people, some crummy people, three grocery stores, and two hospitals. It just happens to be located 30 minutes away from my house and hometown. Galesburg is a secondary hometown for me; my parents work there. I was always in Galesburg with them because my actual hometown, Altona, has 500 people, and Galesburg is the nearest grocery store and hospital. I grew up in a rural community, and while I grew up I was able to better see separations in the school and community based on money. I saw Galesburg as more than just a place to shop as I started to drive. My parents told me where I would be safe in the town; I saw as local businesses struggled. Galesburg, Illinois, could have been the town that Kurt Vonnegut was envisioning. Allow me to introduce you to a modern-day Rosewater County and show you how Galesburg fell into poverty.

“We love apple pie, baseball games—we’re just kinda cheesy Midwesterners,” said Galesburg local Jackie Cummins (Broughton). The small, rural towns of the Midwest are similar because they struggle, they have bad and good sides, they have crummy education, and they have a few Elliot Rosewaters who give back to the community. In November of 1835, Thomas Simmons purchased the land for the future Knox College, a college that would go on to host the 5th Lincoln and Douglas debate, a college that still stands with beautiful brick buildings adorned with white wooden framed glass windows. Across from the main campus of Knox sits our county courthouse in grey and formidable stone, and whose construction started in 1885. My mom works there today and has for 13 years. There are steady and reliable jobs in Galesburg, and these jobs can prompt citizens to better themselves. Elliot promoted education and personal growth, which he brought to Rosewater County; the railroad brought these same qualities to Galesburg in the 1970s.

The railroad came to Galesburg in the mid 1850s and brought life to the town. In 1970, “the Burlington Northern Railroad Company merged with

7 other companies” and formed the “largest railroad in the United States in terms of mileage operated”; this ran through Galesburg, and growing up, I have seen how the railroad has been part of the city ever since (History of the Galesburg Railroad Museum). I was stopped by train after train in my youth, but as annoying as that was, the railroad has been a major source of jobs for the community. In Galesburg, the railroad holds the same importance as the saw mill of Rosewater and employs many. I have a friend whose father is an employee for BNSF, and the railroad has helped put his family in college and provide them with a home. The railroad employees need good training and an education to work in the railroad, and the Galesburg high schools partner with the local community college to provide 16 free credits per year to those in need in the community (Galesburg Promise). This program, called the Galesburg Promise, reminds me of the ideals of Elliot Rosewater. Just like Elliot, Galesburg is still trying to help the low-income families and their children in the community. How did this town come into a situation where families needed the excessive amount of financial aid?

First, one of our two factories left in the 1950s. This was one of many brickyards that spread over my county and brought jobs to many during the war. You can see the bricks from the factory across the world if you visited Chicago, IL; Deadwood, SD; Bombay, India; streets of Paris; or Panama City, Panama for the Panama Canal. The brickyard and company Purington Pavers officially closed in 1974, and today the land is owned by some of the folks of Galesburg (Purington Brickyards). The community was changed by the loss of the factory, but the main cause of poverty in Galesburg came about in September 2006. The Maytag Factory had been in Galesburg from before the 1970s and was another example of how Galesburg and Rosewater are connected. If the saw mill were to shut down in Rosewater County, there would be no work for the people of the town, and the Maytag factory was almost that big a part of our city. I remember the mayhem that came to the town when it closed. In the prime days of the factory, “it buzzed with the work activity of nearly 5,000 people.” While this does not put a large dent in the roughly 31,000 citizens of Galesburg, the closure did thrust those 5,000 people out of work and into poverty. The factory was “the size of over 40 football fields packed together,” and after it closed, our middle-sized Midwestern town became just another town in the Rust Belt of America (Broughton).

Galesburg became a dying fossil of the olden days. The closure left the “Noah Rosewaters” of my town with, “damn little work for him anywhere,” and many went elsewhere to find work in other towns (Vonnegut 42). Today, the old factory is a crumbling pile of a building that sits on the edge of town. The loading doors are what I notice most when I go past. It was such a big factory and all the loading doors are just sitting closed, and I

look at them like one looks at windows painted shut, knowing they won't open again.

What does this plant closure have to do with our town? Why does this one plant make such a large impact? How does it turn Galesburg into an image of Rosewater County? Well, we are not close to other large town with factories, and families thrust into poverty cannot afford to pick up and move.

Of the towns near us there are Peoria, Illinois, a 45-minute drive, or Monmouth, Illinois, a town with little work; therefore, the solution is to try to scrape by in Galesburg. These limited choices leave many in low-paying jobs in the area, transforming our residents into the residents of Rosewater County. You can walk down our main street and see the fire station next to our historic church or the old barber shop next to our courthouse, which are not much different than Elliot's town. Here, Rosewater County is not an image but a reality. During his speech in the 2004 Democratic National Convention, President Obama spoke of the people of Galesburg. He talked about our insignificant town to the world because we may not be well known, but we are not alone:

And fellow Americans, Democrats, Republicans, independents, I say to you, tonight, we have more work to do...

... more work to do, for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now they're having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay 7 bucks an hour; more to do for the father I met who was losing his job and choking back the tears wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a month for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits that he counted on.

This is not a new story of a family struggling in Galesburg or the Midwest. Galesburg, much like Rosewater, is a community that is mostly safe and is a place where I could live, but it is not usually a place people can thrive, excel, or rise above the class they are born into, although it is no fault of their own. I know that it would be a great town if there were more people who lived there that possessed the drive that Elliot Rosewater had for his town, or even the money that Elliot had. More people who could help the babies born into poverty.

The Carl Sandburg Mall used to be where I played mini golf with my Dad when I was around the age of 5, and I think I was around that age when the mini golf closed. It's our local strip mall, and the mini golf is the first store I remember leaving and stores have been leaving ever since. "After Maytag left and more stores in Carl Sandburg Mall shut down, the tax burden shifted to residents, who've seen property taxes rise as the housing stock declines," further hurting our injured town (Broughton). The dogs outside the fire station in Rosewater were happy to greet people just like the dogs, cats, rabbits, and other animals when there was adopt-a-pet at the Carl Sandburg

Mall. My Dad and I found two of our dogs at the local mall on the third Saturday of the month. Cassie, the one of those two still alive, has become so old that she barks at everything in that same way that the dogs in the town of Rosewater howl at the fire siren.

Personally, my mom and I shop in a larger city more often than the local mall due to a lack of choice in our local strip mall, a decision that was reflected as I watched the lights slowly flicker out in the halls. The mall was shaped like a giant “X” with K-Mart, Sears, Bergner’s, and JC Penny’s at the four ends of the “X.” First a combined grocery and clothing store left, then Sears the appliance store, then Bergner’s went bankrupt, and JC Penny’s clothing closed this summer, but more importantly, all the small stores in-between, which were locally owned have gone; the mall is being leveled within the next few years. On the opposite side of town, a new strip mall opened.

I don’t know why, but Galesburg received a plethora of new stores including a Burger King and Kohls, along with clothing stores, restaurants, and cell phone outlets. The many new stores are doing well to improve the job market in the town, which can be seen as a way to help the families of those affected by the Maytag factory closure. Although the stores are a way to strengthen the economy of the town, all I can see are these new chain stores closing locally owned businesses in the historic, quaint downtown of Galesburg. The local pet store with the in-store family cat is being pushed out by PetSmart, a home owned appliance store is pushed out by Home Depot and a second larger hardware store, and local coffee shops are pushed out by two Starbucks. One of the first chop suey houses in this area of the Midwest retired due to lack of public interest as well as management, but the town welcomes a Burger King and a Culvers.

But don’t you understand, readers? Galesburg is still my home. I am home. I know that this has always been my home – the town of Galesburg, the Township of Galesburg, the County of Knox, and the State of Illinois (Vonnegut 43). The imaginary town of Rosewater and Rosewater County is embodied in not only Galesburg, Illinois but in all the Midwestern towns across the Rustbelt. Rosewater County is every empty brick factory with tiny, broken, glass window panes and with the weeds placing the modern building back into a time of prairies. Rosewater County is seen in every person working two part time jobs, struggling to put their children through school, giving their children enough money for sports equipment, or paying their rent. Elliot Rosewater is every person in every town that helps: run the local food pantries, the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Clubs, the Reading and Tutoring Programs, any volunteer coaches, or any volunteer firemen. Even the kids in our Rust Belt do just as Kurt Vonnegut wanted them to, “to be fruitful and multiply” (Vonnegut 275). While I just described a really sad and beat down town, it’s also lively and full of people who do their best to get by and be happy, and I wouldn’t have wanted to grow up anywhere else.

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