

## Erica Alexander: "Nocona, Texas... Home Away From Home"

Nocona, Texas is a small rural community of 3,033 in population. It is a part of Montague County that consists: Nocona, Saint Jo, Bowie, Montague, Forrestburg, Spanish Fort, and Ringold. Montague holds the county seat, due to the fact many years ago the county seat had to be at least within a day's ride on horseback. Montague is centrally located in Montague County making it possible for riders to reach the court house within the same day. Overall, the county itself is 90% rural with only approximately 20,000 residents in the county, as compared to just over 1,000,000 in Travis

County where Austin is located; or even 67,000 in Walker County. Nocona is located within 6 miles south of the Red River which is the border for Texas and Oklahoma state lines, creating the region "Texhoma". Nocona was established as the last stop in Texas for cowboys running cattle in the Chisholm Trail before crossing the Red River into Oklahoma.

The people of Nocona are very proud, and know the history of their community like the back of their hand. I was educated on the history of the town nearly every day, and feel fairly confident I could be quizzed about "nearly" anything. The pride of Nocona fills the entire town, its' people, the streets, buildings, and even people who are staying a while feel welcomed as one of their own. Every sign reads a name that relates to the history of the city in some form, and every business has "Nocona this or Nocona that". Nocona has that small town feel to it, where people recognize your vehicle and wave, or the next time they see you they mention they saw you going to the lake (this happened to me within the first week). The same people go to the same gas station, and create a friendly relationship with the clerk. Some customers can walk in to their favorite restaurant and the waitress already



knows what they will order. Small characteristics like this will make a small town kid miss home.

I interned with the Nocona Economic Development Center (EDC). The nocona.org website has a definition by James Yohe (my director) is, "One main focus of the two NEDC Boards is to help Nocona remain a place where people feel at home. Somewhere where we know our neighbors, visit with friends and share with family. There is no desire to outgrow our sense of community. No headlong rush to become another Frisco, Austin, or Dallas/Fort Worth. NEDC is looking not at size, but at important community aspects like quality of life, jobs, education, and others". This organization wants the community to grow and generate money, while they tell their story to keep tourists coming back for more small town hospitality. However, they are not looking in to busting at the seams with a population increase.

Mr. Yohe wanted me to not only become familiar with the town but the county as well. I met people from all over, and had a really hard time remembering who was who at first.

I was able to work half of my internship collecting material to organize a business plan. The business plan was for the future sight of the Montague County Vineyard and Heritage Museum. It was very difficult putting together a business plan of someone else's vision and including multiple businesses into one plan. I had a really hard time with this, and now know that a business plan is not my cup of tea. However, if that were presented to me again in the future I would take another shot at trying, maybe from a different angle. I should have contacted more resources that I failed to reach out to the first time, but honestly did not think to e-mail some professors to ask for recommendations. The business plan is intended to describe how the Vineyard and Winery will use profits to help support the Heritage



Museum. The Vineyard has vines that are still producing, and have been on site since the late 30s as a research station for Texas A & M. The vineyard will tell the history of the T.V. Munson operation (that possibly helped save the French wine industry), and hopefully how it can be used as a research/ experiment station for other local vineyards and wineries. The Heritage Museum will be used to tell the story about how early settlers came to this region of Texas. It will explain what were they like, clothing they wore, where they originated, how they survived, the work they did, and what kind of education they received just to mention a few. Also, this will show how Nocona had a unique Italian heritage as early settlers.

The second half of my internship, I worked on creating a model for a potential Montague County Boot Co. & Nokona Baseball Glove Tour. This is to show the town's niche in today's leather industry, and how their products are hand-made in the U.S. A proposal was written to recommend ideas on how to make this an efficient, memorable, self-guided tour for both factories to have a combined museum available to tourists on the weekends. Both factories are too small to

allow safe flow of traffic that tourists would create, and could be very hazardous for small children to be around operating machines. This would allow the factories to have one separate museum that guests could safely tour, but still get the full effect of gloves and boots being handmade. The self-guided tour will allow guests to take their time and watch the videos that will be provided instructing them on how the machinery is operated and what part of the glove or boot it is preparing. There will also be opportunities for guests to learn how these factories play a large role in the history of Nocona, and how they are still able to operate in a small town to this day. There will be activities that adults and children can interact with, and hopefully will be able to acquire an understanding about the products to take back with them, making this a memory they will keep with them forever.

A small 3D model was constructed out of foam board and pictures to demonstrate the museum features. There were two separate rooms for each tour. Guests would be able to choose which tour they would like to experience, and could buy a packaged deal if they wanted to tour both.

After the tours they will be able to experience the retail shop, and buy their first Nokona baseball glove (or one to replace their old one), and nice pair of Larry Mahan boots! This will also hopefully increase the sales of both products. Nokona has a small retail store located at their factory and sell online; whereas the Larry Mahans are only sold in Cavendar western stores.

Working here in Nocona made me understand that my research in Agritourism has many different fields that can be explored. The winery and vineyard has huge potential in the Agritourism industry, but so does the boot and glove tour. Working for the EDC has made me realize my agricultural degree holds many possibilities for future endeavors. The world is one large ball of agriculture, and I cannot wait to dive into it (one step at a time though).

Going from the classroom to an actual job through an internship was comfortable. I did get stressed at times, when I felt that I was not completing the business plan to the desired specifications. I had taken business courses before, and have completed sample business plans just nothing as large as this one. Like I mentioned early I would probably cringe at the thought of doing another business plan, but I would not turn it away and would attempt to do my best. I never turn down the ability to learn more especially to learn from my mistakes.

To be honest there were not any negative aspects of this internship experience. I was able to bring so much back with me professionally and personally. This trip triggered something inside that I knew the next path I should take. I met amazing people, and grew from this experience. Yes, it was hard to adjust at first being cooped up in a hotel room not knowing what to do, but that made me get out and explore. I found so many peaceful places, went down back



roads, and enjoyed the lake probably more than some of the locals. I left finding a piece of myself that could have gone missing for a long while. I was able to travel to new destinations while I was here, and see a part of Texas that I would have never experienced.

Being from a small town, I saw one of their biggest challenges, and I am guilty of making that challenge harder for small communities. When your child turns 18 they move, either to another larger community, a job in the city, or off to college far, far away from home. After they get their degree do they come back home? Most likely not. I face this every time I talk with my parents. The most responses they get, “There is nothing there for me to do”, “All the jobs are hours away”, “How is my degree going to make me successful there”. I would love to someday move back home and have a family there, but what am I going to do? It is hard for small communities to find ways to bring back their younger generations to work and make a decent income where they will be happy and want to remain in their hometown.



I saw this happening in Nocona. Some will have the option to run their family business in the future. Is that what they really want to do and if so why did they feel the need to go to college? Opportunities!! To see what else was out there, and possibly how they could advance their family business.

Overall, this internship opened up many doors full of opportunities that I will not think twice about this time. I miss living in a small town, and this small gem was just what I needed. Nocona, Texas reminded me of how neighborly everyone can be, and even if you are not family they treat you as if you were their own. I am proud to say I have gained a new family and many friends that I can call and visit in Nocona. I will someday move back to a small community, and out of the city!!

*For more information regarding the Texas Rural Internship program, please contact Cheryl L. Hudec at [clh003@shsu.edu](mailto:clh003@shsu.edu) or by phone at 936-294-4380*