

Case Study 1: Tupelo and Haven Acres, Mississippi

Tupelo is situated in North-East Mississippi, between Memphis, Tennessee and Birmingham, Alabama. It has a population of around 36,000, and serves Lee County, which, including Tupelo, has a total population of 83,000. Tupelo was the first city to be electrified by the Tennessee Valley Authority, and President Roosevelt even came to visit in 1935. By the early 20th century, the town hosted many cotton textile mills, which provided jobs for residents of the mostly-rural area. Tupelo also served as a regional transportation hub due to its location at a railroad intersection.

Tupelo

What the situation was

Tupelo was once one of the poorest parts of the poorest state in the US, a Mississippi of which William Faulkner wrote: *'The past isn't over; it isn't even past.'*

In 1936, Tupelo suffered a major natural disaster when a tornado levelled 48 blocks and over 200 homes, killing at least 216 people and injuring more than 700. The death toll was likely higher, as official numbers only included the names of white residents.³ Among the survivors was Elvis Presley, then a baby.

In 1940, the average family income in Tupelo was a quarter of the national average, and there were high levels of functional illiteracy. Eighty percent of the county population was engaged in agriculture, but cotton, the main crop, had been declining for 40 years. The region had neither natural beauty nor natural resources upon which to build its future.

What it became

Lee County is now among the most prosperous in the South-Eastern United States, with a diverse

local economy that has remained remarkably stable.⁴ As well as a large furniture manufacturing industry – Tupelo is known as the upholstery capital of the world – the town is host to a large healthcare sector, the headquarters of two banks with approximately \$22 billion in assets between them, a fabric industry, and a Toyota manufacturing plant. Tupelo's Northeast Mississippi Medical Center is the largest non-metropolitan hospital in the nation, and the town hosts satellite campuses of the University of Mississippi, Itawamba Community College, and the Mississippi University for Women. More recently, despite being *'not an especially pretty town'*,⁵ it has developed a tourism industry based on its two main attractions, the Elvis Presley birthplace and Natchez Trace, a scenic forest trail.

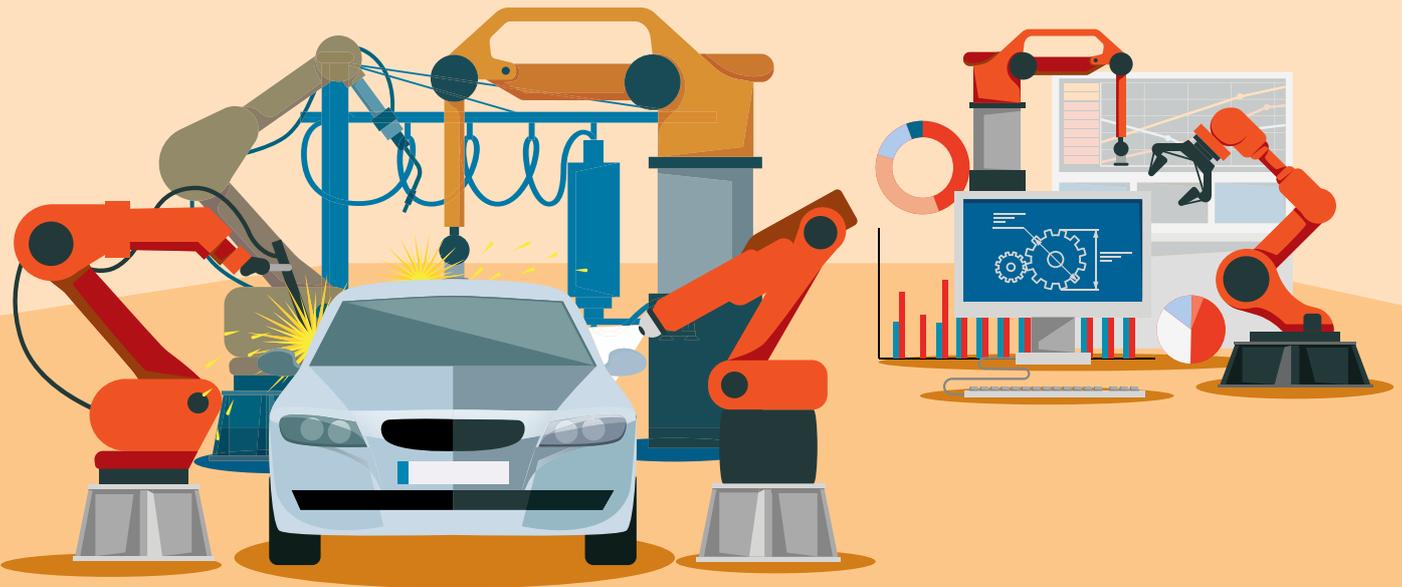
The 'Tupelo Story' is the subject of numerous books, studies and articles, detailing the town's remarkable experience in bringing new businesses to the area over many decades.

Tupelo has some of the best public schools anywhere, with high school graduation rates that are not only among the highest in Mississippi, but are 18 percentage points better than the national average. A full 98% of the town's school-aged children attend public schools. Half of the town's primary schools have national blue-ribbon

4 A Town Transformed, Vanderbilt Business, Fall 2008.

5 Better Together: Restoring the American Community, Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen, Simon and Schuster, 2004

3 10 Deadliest Tornadoes in US History, Time Magazine, May 21, 2013



status, and Tupelo High School has received a US Department of Education's Excellence in Education Award twice.⁶

As well as a whole raft of other awards, Tupelo has been named a National Civic League All-America City five times, in 1967, 1989, 1999, 2011 and 2015.⁷ This award is given annually to 10 communities in the US, to recognise communities whose citizens work together to identify and tackle community-wide challenges and achieve uncommon results.

How it happened

Locals point to two starting points for the Tupelo Story. First, the 1936 tornado marked a turning point of sorts, and brought the community together to rebuild. Second, a newspaper editor called George McLean bought the almost-bankrupt local Daily Journal, and focused it on promoting Tupelo and the surrounding area.

McLean realised that the fortunes of the town and its surrounding rural area were closely intertwined.

6 Ibid. The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program recognises schools for overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps. See <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/index.html>

7 National Civic League

His first initiative was to persuade Tupelo leaders and business owners to join forces with farm cropping families to figure out why the families remained poor despite their hard work. Crop farming requires farmers to take out large loans at planting time, then live frugally until harvest. They were risk averse, and spent little. The Tupelo group discovered that dairy and poultry farmers had a different production cycle, producing milk and eggs daily and selling them every week, providing income all year. The group launched an effort to help convert the crop farmers into dairy and poultry farmers. Community resources were pooled, bringing artificial insemination (and a prize bull from Europe) to the region long before such innovation was common in the US. The effort produced \$2 million in new income for the region over the next few years. Farm families did better, and because they now had more money to spend, so did everyone in town.⁸

Rural Community Development Councils were established, which then fostered widely distributed local leadership. Neighbourhood groups of 10 to 12 families were set up, drawing virtually the whole community in. Monthly meetings combined discussions of farming techniques and plans for local improvement with sociable meals and

8 *Hand in Hand: Community and Economic Development in Tupelo*. Aspen Institute, 1999.

group singing. In addition to sharing knowledge to improve farm productivity, members joined in projects to fix up their communities, painting churches and schools and cleaning up public spaces. Each rural development council was paired with a town civic club.

Meanwhile, the group of community and business leaders in Tupelo became the Community Development Foundation (CDF)⁹, which has maintained a relentless focus on local economic and education development. Early on, civic leaders agreed that a strong system of public education would be critical to the area's development. One of the CDF's first initiatives was to build childcare centres to give parents the opportunity to take literacy classes. Local leaders pledged to send their children to public schools. One of the nation's first private foundations was established to raise money for the schools.

Just as it does today, the CDF coordinated council, business, and educational bodies to attract its first industry in 1947. Sixty years later, in February 2007, Toyota announced that it would build its eighth North American assembly plant in Tupelo to produce the Prius. The opportunity to reap other benefits of Toyota's presence is not lost on local leaders. As the preface to the Tupelo City Council's 2025 comprehensive plan, 'Tupelo: The Story Continues' puts it:

“The CDF demonstrated that it, and the community it represents, belong at the cutting edge of the 21st century economy... one of the critical themes of competitiveness in that economy [is] clear: energy efficiency. We are now in position to learn how the most sophisticated manufacturer in the world uses its resources.”

9 See the CDF website for an extensive library of data – <http://www.cdfms.org/cdf/data-library>

Haven Acres

Haven Acres is an African-American neighbourhood on the south-west edge of Tupelo. The area developed in the 1960s as Tupelo's manufacturing industries grew.

What the situation was

Because of neglect from the county and the failure to build a community that cared for itself, Haven Acres gradually began to deteriorate. Youth gangs and drugs were prevalent. Residents were afraid to report crimes for fear of repercussions from gang members, and in any case police no longer always responded to calls for help. Evidence of neglect pervaded the neighbourhood, with dilapidated housing, overgrown lots, rubbish and 'For Sale' signs. Some residents conceded that the situation was hopeless. They could not sell their homes because no one wanted to move into the gang-infested neighbourhood, and the value of their property had sunk far below what they had originally paid.¹⁰

What it became

Local leaders have transformed a crime-riddled neighbourhood into a model for neighbourhood development. They have received numerous national awards for their grassroots leadership and partnerships between residents and the public sector.¹¹ The Haven Acres Neighbourhood Association became the model for all such organisations in Tupelo. Members visited other neighbourhoods and helped them organise their own groups. Today more than a dozen such groups exist across Tupelo.

10 Extraordinary Results in Ordinary Communities, Vaughn Grisham, Kettering Institute, 2010

11 James C. Howland Awards, National League of Cities, October 20th, 2003 – Gold Winner

How it happened

The residents of Haven Acres approached the mayor of Tupelo, Robert Hall, to ask for help to turn around their town. In the early 1990s, the neighbourhood was incorporated into Tupelo town limits, and the mayor asked the town's chief operating officer, Phil Sullivan, to make Haven Acres a priority.

In 1998, the Haven Acres Neighbourhood Association was formed, and began to clean up common areas and encourage residents to upgrade their properties. They held weekend clean-ups in which hundreds of volunteers came together to remove litter and other rubbish. The town provided garbage trucks for the first few weekends.

With the town and residents working hand-in-hand, significant improvements were made, beginning with the town working directly with the area's power company to have brighter street lights installed. Drainage ditches were cleaned, tree limbs hanging over street rights-of-way were

trimmed and an aggressive code enforcement programme was implemented. During a 24-month period, after adopting 'zero tolerance' for crimes, the neighbourhood saw an 86% reduction in crime.

They next turned their attention to building a community centre. The community raised \$100,000 and obtained a matching amount from the town. Phil Sullivan met with the leaders of a large number of organisations, including city departments, foundations, religious and civic groups, and personally took their leaders to Haven Acres. The community centre opened in 2003 and houses Head Start programs, a Boys and Girls Club, a senior citizens club and a neighbourhood police office. Mattie Mabry, who fundraised for many years for the centre, was appointed director of the Boys and Girls Club. She takes great pride that none of the children in her programme have been in trouble with the law.¹²

¹² Extraordinary Results in Ordinary Communities, Vaughn Grisham, Kettering Institute, 2010

