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Lyons: 'One of the coolest towns ...'

By Lisa Marshall, Camera Staff Writer
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Editor's note: The Camera's look at local downtowns began July 24. (Visit dailycamera.com to see last week's entry on Boulder.)

Today, we look at Lyons, no longer just a drive-through on the way to Rocky Mountain National Park.

LYONS — Place a call to the Lyons Chamber of Commerce these days and you'll be greeted by a cheerful recorded voice proclaiming, without a hint of exaggeration, that "You have just reached one of the coolest towns in the Front Range."

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Not long ago, that would have been a bit of a stretch.

In the 1970s, the quiet mountain burg at Boulder County's northernmost edge was known best for its giant carpet outlet stores and rumbling stone quarries. In the '80s, it was an antiquer's dream — with more than 11 stores — but to most everyone else, it was a nondescript wide spot in the road on the way to Rocky Mountain National Park. In the early '90s, its town center consisted mostly of a dumpy vacant lot, a rowdy biker bar, lots of vacancy signs, and a few funky shops that had survived the recession of the '80s.

"There was nothing to do here at all," recalls Heather Duffy, 42, who moved away seven years ago and came back this weekend for the three-day Rockygrass bluegrass festival. "You'd drive through town and you wouldn't even stop. Why would you?"

"It's amazing how much it's changed."

Fast forward to July 2005, and Lyons is anything but sleepy. The 1.5-square-mile town is known nationwide as a mecca for bluegrass and blues music, with three wildly popular festivals, a large

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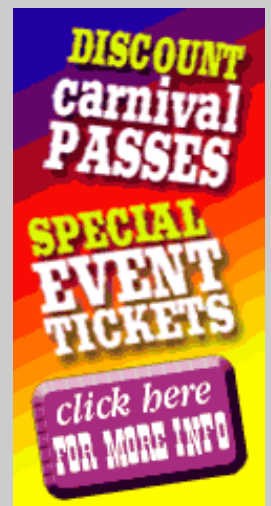


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contingent of local musicians who pick in cafes and cozy halls year-round, and regular free concerts in a newly revamped downtown park.

It's home to one of the most successful microbreweries in the country, a Harley-Davidson shop gaining national notoriety among bikers and a bustling new whitewater park. Even the old biker bar, now known as the Outlaw Saloon, has undergone a radical face lift and has a new family menu.

Since 1994, according to local government officials, sales tax revenues have doubled, from \$186,700 to \$367,000, and in the past year alone, hits on the town's Web site have spiked by 87 percent.

Nicholas Angelo, who moved to town in 1985 and opened Nicholas Angelo Fine Art on Main Street in 1995, has watched the changes occur before his eyes.

"Lyons has gone from being a very funky, stone-mining town with a very, very small downtown to being the pearl of Boulder County," Angelo says.

And so far, locals say, it has done it without losing its soul.

Within the two-block stretch known as the downtown business district, visitors find an eclectic mix of businesses hard to rival in their uniqueness: a 1920s-era soda fountain, an antique pinball game parlor, a consignment store where local artists sell their wares, a place to paint your own pottery or bead your own jewelry, and a shop that carries hand-crafted bamboo fishing rods.

Cyclists gather at the Barking Dog Cafe, where they can check their e-mail at a free computer or sip a decaf latte and plan their ride at a sun-soaked table outside. Across the street at the Gateway Cafe (once featured on the TV Food Network), foodies with discriminating palates come from across the Front Range to dine on Japanese baked mussels with miso sauce or grass-fed grilled lamb.

Notably absent are storefront windows adorned with "Lyons" T-shirts or kitschy souvenirs.

"People just aren't attracted to leather tomahawks," says Lyons Chamber of Commerce President Dale Katechis. "That's not what they are looking for."

The 36-year-old father of three (soon to be four) opened Oskar Blues Grill and Brewery nine years ago, on the spot of a lumberyard turned vacant lot in the middle of town. What was once an eyesore is now a hub for live blues and bluegrass music, once named by Rolling Stone magazine as "the hottest place to be on a Saturday night" in Colorado.

But Katechis says he didn't set out to create a tourist draw.

"We wanted to create something that me and my family and the Lyons residents could be proud of, and if that translated to passers-by or folks from



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other areas coming in, so be it," he says.

In many ways, locals say, the town's rebirth has come not from a concerted top-down government effort, but rather from individual artists and business owners who had a passion and followed it, and who are reaping the rewards.

And of course, there was the bluegrass.

Many point to the 1994 arrival of Planet Bluegrass on a 19-acre parcel just west of downtown as the turning point for Lyons. The lush cliffside venue now hosts three major festivals, including this weekend's Rockygrass — which draws roughly 3,500 people — the Folks Festival in August, and the Festival of the Mabon in September.

"That made a huge difference in Lyons," Angelo says.

But with any huge transition come growing pains, and area merchants concede that Lyons may be in for some.

Unlike other downtown districts around Boulder County, which have invested millions in new sidewalks and fancy street signs, and have passed zoning laws to get vendors to make their storefronts look more uniform, Lyons hasn't taken that step yet.

The sidewalks are crumbling and slanted. The shop signs vary from sleek and artsy to rusty and '70s-esque.

The town government is working with the business district and the planning commission to develop a downtown improvement plan that would include streetscape improvements and changes in the zoning codes to "make it more presentable," said Lyons town Administrator Gary Cinnamon. "It's in the baby stages now. I don't know how long it would be before we complete it."

But not everybody is happy about the proposed changes.

"I love my signs, man. I want all the signs in town to be the same like I want a hole in my head," Angelo says.

"Why would you want to be like every one of those other towns when what you have now gives you the individuality that is Lyons?"

"If it's not broke, don't fix it."

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