



Courtney Jerome

Downtown Clare has a new vibe, thanks to a new wave of entrepreneurs

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 2024





Courtney Jerome

Lacey Badelt is the owner of the boutique, Calla Lily Mercantile, within the historic 515 building in downtown Clare.



The small farming town of Clare is experiencing significant business growth thanks to a group of entrepreneurs working collaboratively to enhance the historic downtown district with boutiques, cafés and unique shops.

Centrally located in the heart of Michigan’s lower peninsula, Clare sits at the crossroads of U.S. 10 and U.S. 127 and is home to about 3,300 people.

Established as a lumbering town in 1870, the village encompasses less than three square miles dotted with family farms and Amish homesteads. The Irish were among the first to settle here, and in the early 20th century, the Purple Gang took up residency and left a colorful history in its wake.

Among the longest-operating businesses here are Johnston’s Elevator, founded in 1893 and

Hotel Doherty celebrates its centennial this year.

Photo: Dianna Stampfler

renamed in 1953; Doherty Hotel, celebrating its centennial this year; and Whitehouse Restaurant, which has been serving customers since 1935.

The new wave of locally owned businesses began 15 years ago when nine officers in the police department purchased the original 1896 Clare City Bakery, which was struggling to stay open. Renamed Cops & Doughnuts, the operation now has 10 locations around the state and is one of Clare's popular spots for locals and visitors seeking a sweet treat and a warm cup of coffee.

In August 2015, Amy Shindor opened Four Leaf Brewery, a three-barrel operation using a system from Psycho Brew out of Belding, Michigan. Beer Meister Steve Swaney uses Michigan grown hops and barley, along with locally sourced fruits and honey, to craft a variety of beers, including the flagship Lady Luck, a cherry wheat brew. Located in the former Davis Block building on McEwan Street, the brewery also offers wine, cocktails and a full pub menu, with streetside seating during the summer season.

Later that year, Clare native Morgan Waggener – who was just 19 years old at the time – opened the first of her four downtown businesses collectively known as The 500 District.

With a desire to remain in her hometown to be near family while helping her community prosper, she first opened Heart of Michigan Café, which was rebranded in July 2019 as 505 Café, offering an expanded lunch menu and handcrafted cocktails. Next came The Venue at 501, a two-story corner event space popular for weddings, reunions and other gatherings – one almost every other weekend.

In 2017, Waggener transformed the second story of her historic café building into two overnight suites, often used by bridal parties.

She also owns additional lodging properties a few blocks away. The latest addition to the

district is The Trap Door Speakeasy, tucked into a lower-level space below The Venue, a nod to Clare's rich prohibition heritage. Bartenders and servers dress the roaring '20's part, with themed music and intimate seating areas complete with red velvet, stone and antique wood finishes.

Photo: Courtney Jerome

Waggener's sister, Karly Hershberger, joined The 500 District team in December 2020, tapping her degree in business management from Northwood University to manage the financial and marketing aspects of the business. Waggener admits she's the dreamer, gathering ideas from her travels around the country and turning them into exciting and inspired spaces.

This creative mindset is shared by many of Clare's entrepreneurial business owners and is likely why they all work so well together.

"We can't operate without each other," Waggener says. "We all have our own little niche but together we are stronger."

On the northern edge of town, Tobacco Ranch is another unique wedding and event venue sitting on nearly 80 historic acres. The property, adjacent to Tobacco Creek, was owned nearly a century ago by former Purple Gang attorney Isaiah Leebove. He lived in a log home he built there for his wife, Enid, until he was gunned down at the Doherty Hotel on May 14, 1938, by his business partner and gangster associate Carl "Jack" Livingston.

The house and outbuildings sat abandoned for years and were later vandalized by people in search of bootlegging treasures and mob secrets. Jim Olson, who reportedly never lived in the house, sold the property to Leo and Glenna Beard in 1980. Jim Paetschow — who also owns Jim's Body Shop, Sound Productions and has developed local apartment complexes — acquired the historic site in December 2016 and began the daunting task of restoring it. Despite being a work in progress, Tobacco Ranch hosted its first wedding in the summer of 2017.

The facility currently boasts several areas for ceremonies, social gatherings and receptions—both inside and out — including two former cattle barns, a ballroom and landscaped grounds. The garage will ultimately hold a 16-person bunkhouse with a bridal suite on the upper level. The project list is endless and is expected to take considerable time and financial resources, but Paetschow notes he's prepared to do it right to preserve the integrity of the ranch.

Clare native Lacey Badelt, 38, claims she doesn't know much about fashion but step inside her quaint Calla Lily Mercantile (named

Photo: Dianna Stampfler

line the exposed brick walls.

after two of her three daughters) and you'll beg to differ. Trendy seasonal outfits—complete with footwear, hats, purses and accessories—

In addition to the mercantile, Badelt is the founder of the Wildflower & Wren Markets (named for her third daughter) a carefully curated pop-up type event featuring high-quality vintage, repurposed and handcrafted items, complete with food trucks and live music. Every vendor is hand selected and approved by Badelt to ensure that there is diversity within the offerings from furniture and housewares to clothes and accessories, and more.

The first 2024 market is scheduled for Sunday, April 21 (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.) at The Venue at 501. Other dates this year include Sunday, August 11 at Johnston's Elevator and Sunday, November 24 at Jay's Sporting Goods. Badelt also encourages local businesses to open up on these select Sundays, giving visitors even more shopping opportunities while they're in town.

"I love watching others experience happiness in something I created," says Badelt, who admits everything she does is driven by passion. "There's something really good here [in Clare] and I want to help keep the momentum going."

Eager to connect with fellow business owners, Badelt is also coordinating regular meetings and creating a safe environment for sharing ideas and collaborating on future events that benefit them all.

At Cardinal & Clover Collaborative, Christine Smith (another Clare native) restored and repurposed the former William H. Bicknell & Co. Department Store (which had housed a variety of other businesses over the years) into a micro shopping district. Upstairs there are still remnants of where seamstresses once worked their stations to outfit the townspeople and the pulley system where orders and payments were sent for processing. Opened in 2022, the 20,000-square-foot building is now a collection of 12 shops and businesses, each with distinct spaces and services including a hair salon, tattoo studio, boutiques, yoga studio, handmade jewelry store and more.

Photo: Courtney Jerome

Last year saw the addition of McEwan Street Fudge & Ice Cream Shop featuring premium hand-dipped ice cream and kettle fudge made on site. Local pharmacist and entrepreneur John Gross received a \$25,000 grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Match on Main program used to purchase gelato-making equipment for the shop.

Clare's iconic Ideal Theater reopened in March 2023 as well, across the street from the Doherty. Built in 1930 with a state-of-the-art sound and projection system, it served generations of movie-goers. In recent years, it had changed hands several times and was purchased in 2021 by sisters and Clare natives Sandy Wright, Lisa Benic and Sue Leverage, who grew up watching movies in the art-deco-style theater. They spent nearly two years renovating the historic building and today are proud to show first-run movies as well as family classics.

"We are lucky to have a very supportive City Commission and hard-working staff that is dedicated to helping businesses," notes City Manager Jeremy Howard, who was hired in 2020 from nearby Mt. Pleasant. "People see that we have a thriving downtown, a vibrant area for development on the north end of Clare, and three industrial parks with a new one that is ready to go and available for development."

Howard notes that almost every storefront in the downtown area is full, with flourishing businesses and plenty of foot traffic, even midweek.

"Clare has a reputation for being business/development friendly and for making the process as quick and painless as possible. I have conversations with entrepreneurs and potential business owners all the time. They have a desire to do new and exciting things. I think that it is a testament to Clare and its residents and business owners."

Dianna Stampfler has been writing professionally since high school. Twenty years ago she founded Promote Michigan and since has authored two books: Michigan's Haunted Lighthouses and Death & Lighthouses on the Great Lakes, both from The History Press.

Enjoy this story? Sign up for free solutions-based reporting in your inbox each week.

SPONSORED BY