

Division of Marketing
Agricultural Development and Diversification (ADD) Program
1993 Grant Final Report

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Grant Title "Farm Trails" in Southwest Wisconsin

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FINAL REPORT

October 19, 1994

ADD Grant #8003
"Farm Trails in Southwest Wisconsin"
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SUMMARY OF ORIGINAL INTENT

"Farm Trails in Southwest Wisconsin" was conceived with a 2-pronged purpose. First, to provide the opportunity for farm people to make additional income from their home-based rural businesses. Second, to give urban people awareness of and access to the scenic hills, valleys, farms, and people of Southwest Wisconsin.

OBJECTIVES REACHED

Twenty-six farms participated in the first year of Farm Trails. All have been involved in producing and selling their products for some time, eight had not previously sold direct from their farms. Four developed new products for this season. Several others have expressed intentions of bringing on new products for next season.

At least four invested in new construction or improvements in existing buildings this season.

EVALUATION OF RESULTS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS

The project has been well received by participants, targeted markets and the media during the first season.

Success stories:

- ◆ Greystone reported doubling of their sales due to Farm Trails publicity.
- ◆ Peggy Biddick of Rural Route 1 Popcorn estimated at least a 5% increase in sales
- ◆ Spurgeon Vineyards reported a significant increase in traffic.
- ◆ The Summer Kitchen estimated over \$4,000 in sales directly from Farm Trails.
- ◆ Walnut Ridge, a Bed & Breakfast business, said they could be booked solid all year from Farm Trails alone.
- ◆ Also reporting significant increases were Alpine Gardens, Dead-End Woodworkers, Shaw Hollow Produce, Fine Fettle Farm, and Kickapoo Honey Farms.

Several members did not have much to report in the way of customers or profits. We feel the reasons for their limited success was based on one of the following:

- ◆ Lack of set hours of operation. People do not want to drive 30 miles out of their way to catch someone "by chance"
- ◆ People are not as apt to "phone ahead" for an appointment to visit a farm - that puts too much pressure on the casual visitor, and lacks spontaneity for people on "holiday".
- ◆ Lack of adequate road signs. Some county and townships have trouble keeping their signs up and people could not find their way.
- ◆ Some members were not home when they said they would be.
- ◆ Some members were not available on Saturday or Sunday, which is are big days for business.
- ◆ The description in the Farm Trails brochure was not inviting, or not accurate.
- ◆ It was also thought that the northern section was undervisited because of their distance. The most visited stops seemed to be in a little grouping on the southeast section of the map.

Response of target markets:

We were very fortunate to have caught the attention of the media early on. The concept seemed to have a great appeal to such urban centers as Milwaukee, Madison, Dubuque, and Chicago. An April 10th column by writer Ron Leys in the Milwaukee Journal brought over 500 requests for maps. Dubuque television did a spot on the evening news which generated few calls, but it is possible that people picked up maps in the area after seeing the interview. July 23 was the weekend we came out on the front page of the Local section in The Wisconsin State Journal and also the front page of the Travel Section in the Chicago Tribune. The response was overwhelming, over 2,000 direct requests, either by phone or mail. In addition, all 11 Wisconsin Information Centers requested our maps, several asking for more copies. The original 25,000 maps were depleted by July 15 and 6,000 more were printed. They were gone by mid-October.

Once here, the people seemed to have a good time, local restaurant owner Carol Mc Creary of Carol's Custard in Fennimore reported customers coming in with dog-eared maps, highlighted and marked with intended stops. We noticed many customers made several stops along the way. One group brought their mopeds out, stayed at Walnut Ridge for 2 nights and made day trips to many of the farms. I received several requests for more maps from satisfied customers who wanted to share them with others. Criticisms included lack of signage and a scale to show distances between farms.

I would estimate 35% were young families who brought their

children out to see a farm. We gave many tours on the farm, including the livestock, pets, and gardens. People had a lot of questions and seemed interested about farming and farm issues.

Probably the largest segment were older people who were traveling in groups of 2 or more. They were out to enjoy the area as well as the farms.

Several local motels also indicated overnight guests as a result of Farm Trails.

MATERIALS DEVELOPED

The major piece developed during the project was the Farm Trails map (attached). I have also prepared an outline to help others start a farm trail in their own area (attached).

During late winter I was busy with presentations for several groups. I spoke in Black River Falls at a tourism meeting and also for the ADD Diversity Conference in Richland Center. I was on the radio several times, including a northeast Iowa station. I have been invited to speak at The Rural Life Gathering in Sinsinawa Nov. 5 of this year. Three couples drove out from eastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois to consult about starting a trail in their areas. Another woman called several times to consult about her project in west central Wisconsin. A woman in Richland county has approached us with the concept of a regional trail for our RC&D region.

At the end of August Farm Trails was chosen as one of the stops during the Governor's visit to Southwest Wisconsin. We were awarded with a plaque for our efforts to promote our area and help ourselves.

THE FUTURE OF FARM TRAILS

Farm Trails is planning to continue in the wake of a very successful first season. Our main goal right now is to help our members be more profitable and to find new members. We have several leads of home-based farm businesses that would be a nice addition to the mix and diversity of the trail.

For now, we do not want to become a part of a large group of farm trails, and the membership would like to maintain possession of our logo. We are considering finding a corporate sponsor to help with the printing of the maps, and then dues would be used to cover postage, telephone, and my time. Dues will depend in part, on how many members we have. We plan to widen the mix of businesses offered to include a weaver and possibly other artistic enterprises.

We are considering a schedule of on-farm events next year to be

included with the maps. All requests for maps were entered into a data-base which will be used for further marketing.

CONCLUSION

I am very grateful to the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection, especially to the entire ADD marketing staff, including Stacy Chrislaw, Bud Sholts, and Helen Fauerbach for not only choosing this project for funding, but also helping me to complete it successfully.

Stacy was an excellent supervisor, always getting back to me and answering my many questions. Helen was very instrumental in getting out a major press release which generated many requests for maps.

In short, everything ran smoothly, and we were able to accomplish our goals, because of your faith and support in our concept. Thank you very much.

STARTING A FARM TRAIL

INITIAL ORGANIZATION

A Farm Trail can be organized by one person, or a group. It can be loose or very tightly organized.

The first decisions are most important:

- Choose a geographical area for the trail
- Choose the criteria for membership in the trail

I recommend that the area be one that can be travelled from end to end in less than two hours. Travel time is an important factor for people coming from a distance. It's nice if the map has a "group feel" to it, like a road trip that would be fun to take.

Criteria for membership will be the rules by which you select and reject applicants. You need to have a clear idea in mind of the package you are selling. There should be a cohesiveness to the mix of farms and products, a common thread of some sort. Will you allow crafts? artists? B&B's? Will they be all home-based businesses? Will you limit the size of the operation? Nothing is written in stone anymore, but it helps to clarify your vision on these matters.

MEMBERSHIP

Next, it is time to Publicize The Concept:

Use radio, newspapers, and networking to find people who fit the criteria and who are interested in becoming members. Fifteen to fifty farms would be a workable range for membership.

The number of members and what they are willing to pay in dues will determine the amount of money you will have to print the maps and signs along with postage for mailing out maps.

Have a meeting with those potential members and determine eligibility. It is very important that every member is a good representative of the trail concept. One bad experience can have a big negative impact.

If possible, go to the farms to see if they are welcoming and if they are set up to handle tourist business.

Once membership is fixed, it is helpful to invite various

professionals to talk about insurance, liability, pricing, signage, marketing, record keeping, and other business related topics.

MAPS AND SIGNS

Begin the map assembly two months before your start date:

- ◆ You can obtain excellent maps of your specific area from the DOT or local governmental agencies.
- ◆ Develop your name and logo.
- ◆ Work with members to come up with the copy for the map. This should include: Name of farm, owners' names, address, phone number, products for sale, days and hours of operation.
- ◆ The map itself should be large enough to read easily. Miles or a milage scale are nice, along with some landmarks for hard to find spots. Don't forget to show at least 2 ways to get to each farm, and keep in mind scenic roads.
- ◆ Try to avoid clutter.
- ◆ Assign a number to each farm. We divided the area into "zones" and left room for new members in coming years. For example, Zone 1 uses numbers from 1-15, even though we have only 7 farms there. This way, if we add a farm there next year, they can have a number that makes sense geographically.

If you would like to have the maps available in the Wisconsin Visitors Centers, call Faith Svenson at the Division of Tourism for guidelines before you go into production.

The number of maps you decide on is at best an educated guess. Think about dispersal, your target markets and go from there. Anything less than 10,000 is probably not going to do you a lot of good.

The signs should be in production at the same time as the maps. Use your logo and make sure the signs are readable from the road. We chose steel for durability and used 6" high numbers.

PUBLICITY

Spring is a good time to open for business. If you feel you are all really ready for this, you may hold a festival or big kickoff celebration and invite media for a special tour. Otherwise, you can start slowly and quietly at first, to work out any kinks. You can always expand next year.

*****Do everything you can to get media coverage in your target markets.*****

When you get direct requests from people, keep names and addresses in a data base for future marketing.

Finally, focus on making the visitors happy. Word-of-mouth is the most significant form of advertising. On our trail, many of us offer tours of our farms, treating people like invited guests.

MONEY MATTERS

There are several ways to go about funding the trail:

- Dues
- Sponsors
- Advertising
- A combination of the above

The cost depends entirely on your wishes. The map can be as simple as a hand-drawn photocopy available at local businesses to 4-color tri-fold maps distributed around the entire Mid West. It depends mostly on who your customers are going to be, and where they are coming from. Signs can be very fancy or hand painted on wood. If your group decides they want to foot the entire bill themselves, then get estimates for your maps and signs and divide by the number of members to find your dues. Add a little bit more for postage, and if you are going to be compensated, add more.

Sponsorship might come from local banks or power companies that express an interest in rural development, or perhaps a large company that is sympathetic to the needs of farmers.

You may decide to try and find local advertisers, for example, restaurants, motels and gas stations that will be favorably impacted by the increased traffic. Be careful not to let advertising overshadow your map.

Or put these together in some creative fashion.

EVALUATION

At the end of your first season try to evaluate the groups success by means of a member and, if possible, customer survey. This is the time to see who got the most business and try to determine why and what the others can do to improve theirs. It is a nice feature of the trail that all are working to help everyone be successful. Look at such things as location, product mix, the ad copy in the map, or possibly some problem on the farm itself.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON STARTING A FARM TRAIL IN YOUR AREA,
CONTACT ME:

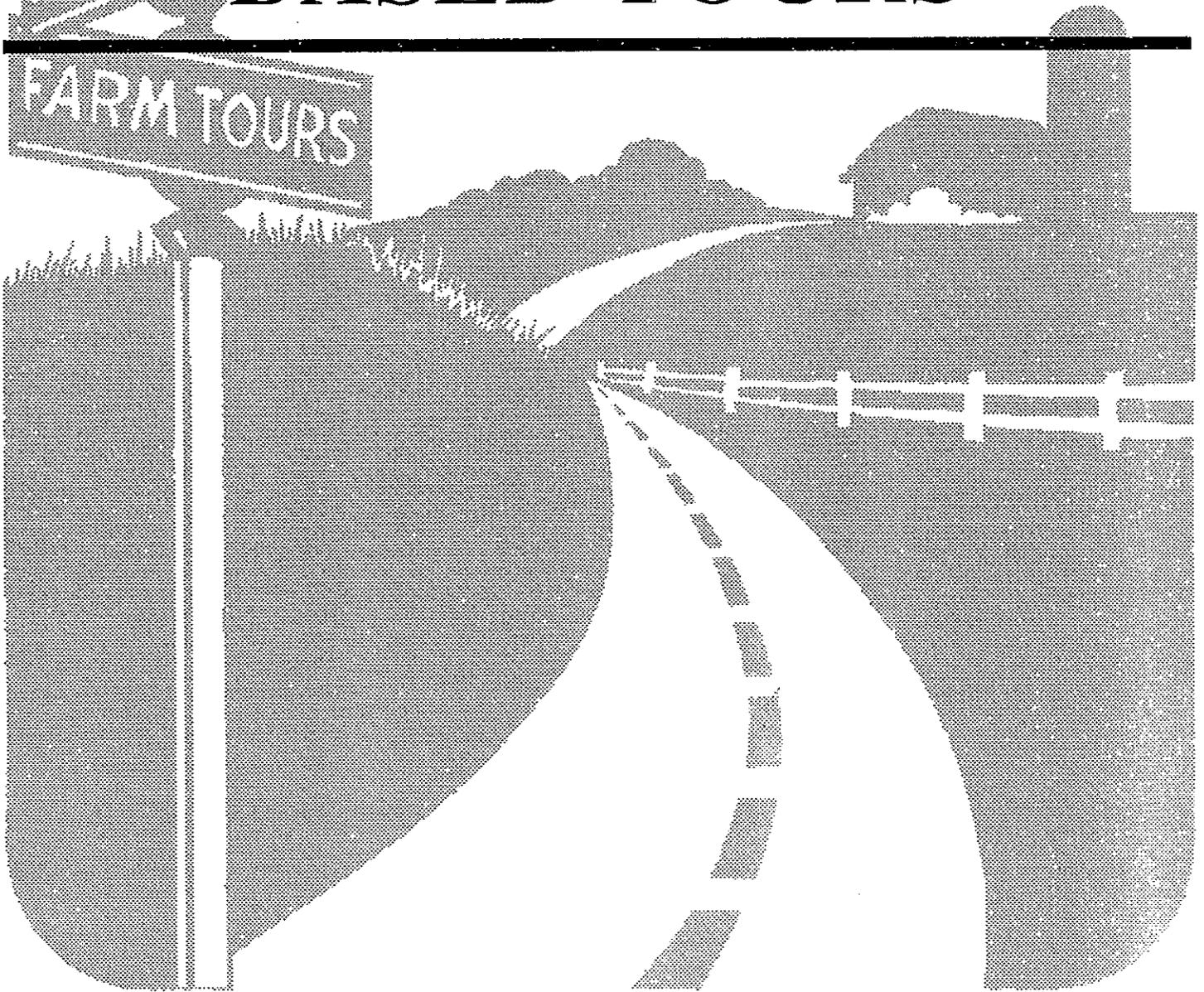
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GOOD LUCK!

FEASIBILITY OF AGRICULTURAL AND COMMUNITY BASED TOURS



FEASIBILITY OF AGRICULTURAL AND COMMUNITY BASED TOURS

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