



Bernice and Bill Ritch

REDTT

Serving Up Tourism Advice

By Anna María Pérez-Wright

Most of the 86 people who live in Cuchillo, located on an isolated stretch of desert road 15 miles northwest of Truth or Consequences, thought Bill Ritch was a little nutty when he planned the tiny burg's first pecan festival more than a decade ago.

But nobody makes cracks about his dream anymore. Today, the Cuchillo Pecan Festival, which benefits the New Mexico Boys' and Girls' Ranches, attracts more than 2,000 attendees from across the nation.

Bill and his wife, Bernice, have succeeded by baking 400 pecan pies and accepting a helping of advice from NMSU's Rural Economic Development Through Tourism (REDTT) project. They credit REDTT's publicity with increasing festival attendance.

"Publicity's a lot of work, and when you're running a festival with volunteers, it's kind of tough," Bernice Ritch says. "REDTT set up a tourism council here in Sierra County with the Extension office, and now those members come help us every year. We know we can count on them."

Sierra County program director Albert Lyon says his Cooperative Extension Service staff helps local organizers coordinate and/or promote 24 annual events. Lyon sees tourism and festival promotion as just another part of his office's educational outreach. "Is it educational? Will it increase economic development in our rural communities?" he says. "That's what we look at first when considering a festival."

REDTT started as a temporary project in five southeastern New Mexico counties: Chaves, Doña Ana, Eddy, Lincoln and Otero. Former U.S. Rep. Joe Skeen sponsored legislation that created and funded the program, administered by Extension, in 1992. It was an innovative idea that other states

have duplicated.

Former project director Mike Cook likes to say REDTT is in the 12th year of a three-year pilot project. The project now serves 17 counties with a budget of just under \$400,000. "Considering the geographical area of New Mexico, that's not a lot of money," Cook says. "We partner with a lot of people and have a lot of volunteer participation to make it successful."

Extension agents organize tourism councils in participating counties and REDTT staffers attend the monthly meetings. "We went to 190 tourism council meetings last year and logged about 70,000 miles to get there," Cook says. Tourism councils can apply for up to \$4,000 in REDTT grants yearly for festival development and enhancement. Cook says the project has awarded about \$284,000 since it began.

"The money goes for everything from Web site development to providing festival amenities like portable toilets," he says.

REDTT project staffers also conduct hospitality training across the state. More than 6,000 tourism professionals and volunteers have attended Allison Southworth's free "Catch Our Enchanted Spirit!" workshops. Although Cook says there's no official statistics on the economic impact of the training, he estimates each person Southworth trains influences 10 people. "Each of those 10 visitors might stay an extra hour, spend another night, have another meal," he says. "If they spend \$25 more, that equals \$1.5 million more spent in New Mexico."

Jonni Valdez-Silva, north region coordinator of the New Mexico Tourism Department's Visitor Information Center Program, is enthusiastic about the hospitality training. Last year, more than 150 Raton residents, including employees at hotels, restaurants, service sta-

tions, galleries, museums and even hospitals attended a Southworth workshop. "The ultimate goal is when a visitor asks what there is to do here, we eliminate the 'there's nothing to do here' response," Valdez-Silva says.

Valdez-Silva liked Southworth's training so much, she's asked her back twice-once to provide cus-

more than \$25,000 in REDTT grants, mostly for festival development including Winterfest, a Western-style Christmas event that features horse-drawn wagon tours of holiday lights; and Billy's Last Ride, a trail ride recreating Billy the Kid's final days. Buchman's focus is on individual businesses. "It's not economic development until private people start putting



Billy rides again: Rex Buchman, left, De Baca County Extension agent, and Gary Graves, the county's sheriff, ride through Lincoln to recreate Billy the Kid's final days as part of an annual event.

tomer service and hospitality training for city of Raton employees and earlier this year to provide training for residents of Raton, Tucumcari and Chama. "Allison gives you all the right tools to turn you into a professional, a true ambassador for your town," she says.

Billy the Kid is De Baca County's best tourism ambassador. The Kid is buried in Fort Sumner and his grave is the county's most popular tourist attraction. Extension agent Rex Buchman says enhancing existing attractions like this one and developing festivals are vital economic development efforts to capitalize on in rural counties. De Baca County has received

tourism dollars in their pockets," he says. "The challenge is to find those entrepreneurs and empower them to succeed."

Buchman is looking for ranchers who want to expand their businesses to include visitor income. There are those, like Ritch's critics, who might say he lacks horse sense. But Buchman says not only will the ranchers benefit financially, the visitors will reap rewards, too.

"These ranch families have something to share like their faith and work ethic that they will be richer for sharing," he says. "These objectives can't be measured in cash." **R**