

By Renee Changnon, [rchangnon@nrha.org](mailto:rchangnon@nrha.org)



# On the Road Again

## Highlighting Independent Retailers Along the Mississippi River



**H**itting the open road and embarking on a journey is something you have to do at least once in your lifetime. Whether you're excited to see roadside attractions or you dream of watching the sun rise above the Grand Canyon, a road trip creates lasting memories. Imagine experiencing those adventures while patronizing only local businesses, including home improvement stores, along the way.

My name is Renee Changnon, and I'm the profiles editor at the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA). In March, I joined small-business advocacy group Independent We Stand for its annual road trip as NRHA's representative.

It was my third time hitting America's highways with Independent We Stand, and I was excited for the journey that lay ahead. The Great American River Road Trip had

our team traveling 1,400 miles along the Mississippi River with many stops along the way. The purpose of this trip, and everything Independent We Stand represents, is to promote independently owned businesses and to share the impact America's Main Streets have on local economies.

This road trip showed me, once again, that what makes a city or town great is its unique, independent businesses. Yet to keep these businesses thriving, consumers must make shopping locally a priority. Small businesses across the country are showing resolve and creativity in the face of unprecedented online competition, proving their value and enriching communities each day.

To read all of my blog posts from each day of the trip, go to [TheRedT.com/IWS-road-trip-2018](http://TheRedT.com/IWS-road-trip-2018). Now hop in the car and join me on my trip along the Mississippi River!



While in Minnesota, we visited **Hirshfield's**, a family-owned paint and wallcovering business that's been in operation for over 125 years. We met CEO **Hans Hirshfield** (left), and his daughter, **Samantha Hirshfield**, who is learning the ins and outs of the business.

After weeks of planning and coordinating with Independent We Stand, the Great American River Road Trip was here. On Sunday, March 11, I flew from Indianapolis to Minneapolis-St. Paul, ready for our adventure.

## ➔ Travel Itinerary

### Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, to La Crosse, Wisconsin

**Miles Traveled:** 150

**Hotel:** The Charmant

#### Independents Visited

- Jerry's Do it Best Hardware & Rental
- Hirshfield's
- Fair State Brewing Cooperative
- Aki's BreadHaus

#### Food and Fun

- 12th Avenue Brewing
- The Bulldog
- Holy Land Bakery and Deli

**Fun Fact:** The Mississippi River stretches from northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. While many cities lie along the river, St. Paul boasts more shoreline than any other city.

We stayed at Hotel 340 in St. Paul, Minnesota, an independent hotel located inside a historic building, which dates back to 1917. I think it's remarkable that someone found a way to save this timeless building from being leveled and gave it purpose again.

That night, I met up with Bill Brunelle, co-founder of Independent We Stand; Katherine Seibt, communications manager for the organization; and videographer Scott Sonnenberg for dinner and planning before Day 1 kicked off.

Our first stop Monday morning was at Jerry's Do it Best Hardware & Rental, located in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, in a building connected to an independent grocery store.

As I chatted with employees, they told me the history of the business. In 1947, Jerry Paulsen was the neighborhood butcher in Edina, Minnesota. When the grocery store he worked in was put up for sale, Paulsen decided to buy it, eventually naming it Jerry's Foods. Over the years, his businesses continued to thrive, and he added hardware to create several one-stop shop destinations.

Paulsen died in 2013, but his legacy remains. His company, Jerry's Enterprises, operates four grocery stores named Jerry's Foods, has several franchised grocery stores, including Cub Foods, County Market and Save-A-Lot; five hardware stores, bakeries, print shops and more.

Learning about Paulsen and his accomplishments was inspiring. His story is just another example of the great things independent retailers have done and are continuing to accomplish.

At the store, I also got to talk to the manager, Trent Pearson, who has been a part of the business since 1998. "Our products and services at Jerry's are different than a big box in the way that they're tailored specifically to the communities we're located in," Pearson says. "Being an independent retailer, we're able to be more in touch with the community."

After visiting Jerry's, we went to a variety of businesses, including a cooperative-owned brewery, an independent paint store and a bread shop. We had lunch at Holy Land Bakery and Deli, which was on the popular Food Network show "Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives."

By early afternoon, we started the first leg of our road trip, heading to La Crosse, Wisconsin, for the evening. For a more detailed look at all the businesses we visited in Minneapolis-St. Paul, visit [TheRedT.com/trip-mn](http://TheRedT.com/trip-mn).



At Jerry's Do it Best Hardware & Rental in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, I had the chance to talk with store manager **Trent Pearson** (right) about the business.





# Day 2



While traveling to different locations, several local television stations reached out to spread the word about Independent We Stand and the importance of shopping locally. In Davenport, Iowa, **Bill Brunelle** (right) answered questions for a segment on the local evening news.

**A**fter the first day of the Great American River Road Trip came to a close in Minnesota, we arrived in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and went to The Charmant, a luxury boutique hotel. The building is a renovated candy factory, which was built in 1898 and was in operation for 35 years.



## Travel Itinerary

### La Crosse, Wisconsin, to Davenport, Iowa

**Miles Traveled:** 187 miles (337 total)

**Hotel:** The Current

#### Independents Visited

- The Silver Key Tattoo
- The Brewed Book
- Abernathy's
- The Full Kit

#### Food and Fun

- Simply Coffeehouse & Eatery
- Up Bar
- Me & Billy Kitchen and Bar

**Fun Fact:** Ronald Reagan began his career as a radio broadcaster in Davenport, Iowa, before moving to Hollywood to be an actor and eventually becoming the 40th president of the U.S.

This was one of my favorite hotels, and it wasn't just because I received chocolate during check-in. The interior design choices were carefully made to capture the golden era of candy manufacturing. For example, a picture box with candy tins that were used to package the chocolate manufactured in the building was showcased in my room.

On Tuesday, we continued to Davenport, Iowa. By early afternoon, we began our second day of visits. This was the only day that we did not visit a hardware or home improvement business, but we discovered other wonderful independent businesses.

One of my favorite stops was at a used bookstore and cafe called The Brewed Book. We met Tony Fuhs, who opened the shop with his son Trevor when he retired. They purchased a vacant building in Davenport's Hilltop Campus Village and had a lot of work to do before opening. Fuhs says they worked with architects and construction companies to update the building.

At the store, we met Scott Tunnick, director of the Hilltop Campus Village, a Main Street Iowa Urban commercial district. He says revitalizing buildings to house businesses like The Brewed Book makes a bigger impact than new construction.

After a long day of retail visits, we checked in at The Current to rest before heading on to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, in the morning. For a more detailed look at all the businesses we visited in Davenport, visit [TheRedT.com/trip-ia](http://TheRedT.com/trip-ia).





While in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, we met **Tammy** and **Fred Elias**, owners of **Elias Ace Hardware**. They spoke about how they met, operating their family business and the many ways they support their community.

After a six-hour drive from Davenport to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, we made our way to Elias Ace Hardware. Store owners Fred and Tammy Elias were there to welcome us.

➔ Travel Itinerary

- Davenport, Iowa, to Cape Girardeau, Missouri**
- Miles Traveled:** 380 (717 total)
- Hotel:** Drury Plaza Hotel Cape Girardeau Conference Center
- Independents Visited**
  - Elias Ace Hardware
  - Heroes Way
  - Crader Distribution Co.
- Food and Fun**
  - The Southerner by Tractors
- Fun Fact:** Travelers had to use ferries to cross the Mississippi from Missouri to Illinois until the state built a bridge in 1928.

They shared how they met working in Fred’s family hardware store, got married and had children. The business was founded in Illinois, and they later opened a second location in Cape Girardeau, which is now their only location. They say Cape Girardeau is the place they plan on staying the rest of their lives.

Customers return because the business not only stocks much-needed items, but also offers hands-on demonstrations, Fred says. According to Tammy, that advantage stems from having knowledgeable employees.

“We have a great team who genuinely likes being around people and will go the extra mile for our customers,” Tammy says. “Customer service is huge. We provide the extra level of service you won’t find in the big-box stores.”

Scott Crader, co-general manager of Crader Distribution Co., the exclusive distributor of STIHL Outdoor Power Equipment in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and southern Illinois, stopped by the store, too. As a family business operator who serves other family businesses, including Elias Ace Hardware,

he was able to share the importance of not only shopping locally but also buying quality equipment from independent businesses, which is where STIHL equipment is exclusively available.

Our last stop of Day 3 of the Great American River Road Trip was at The Southerner by Tractors, a southern-style restaurant in Cape Girardeau. We met the owners, Steve and Teresa Blankenship, who share their love of good food with the Cape Girardeau community. The new restaurant is the Blankenships’ second culinary venture after previously opening a restaurant in Jackson, Missouri. After visiting with Steve and Teresa, we enjoyed dinner at The Southerner. The food was mouthwatering and the atmosphere and design was very eye-catching. Conveniently, the Southerner was attached to the Drury Plaza Hotel Cape Girardeau Conference Center, which is a family-owned hotel chain that opened its first hotel in Cape Girardeau. For a more detailed look at our day in the town, visit [TheRedT.com/trip-mo](http://TheRedT.com/trip-mo).



Our last stop of the day was at **The Southerner by Tractors** in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. While there, we enjoyed dinner and a few signature drinks.





# Day 4



Our first stop in Memphis, Tennessee, was in a commercial neighborhood called the Memphis Medical District. We met several entrepreneurs who were getting their start, like **Brian Christian** (left) of **Shab Chic Marketplace**, a creative market and social hub.

**O**n the fourth day of our road trip, we made our way from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to Memphis, Tennessee. The trip was half way over, but we were still excited to see what the rest of our destinations along the Mississippi River would have in store for us.



## Travel Itinerary

### Cape Girardeau, Missouri to Memphis, Tennessee, to Greenville, Mississippi

**Miles Traveled:** 322 (1,039 total)

**Hotel:** The Lofts at 517

#### Independents Visited

- Paulette's Closet
- Shab Chic Marketplace
- Germantown Hardware & Paint

#### Food and Fun

- Central BBQ
- Downtown Grille
- Doe's Eat Place

**Fun Fact:** Elvis got his start in Memphis where he recorded his first album at Sun Studios. His home, Graceland, is the second-most visited house in America, after the White House.

My oldest brother Nick lives in Memphis, so coming into the city I had high expectations, but was blown away by all of the entrepreneurial-minded people who call this city home.

We spent some time in an up-and-coming neighborhood called the Memphis Medical District. We met with several business owners who were doing whatever it took to gain a foothold in the retail marketplace. One of the owners we spoke to set up shop in a shipping container, and others were leasing space before setting up a permanent shop. Talking to these driven individuals who had such a spark in their eyes when they spoke about their goals and dreams was inspirational.

You can't visit Memphis without getting your hands on some barbecue, so we had to visit Central BBQ downtown. We pulled up to the restaurant and saw a line around the building. That's when I knew the food was going to be legendary. While there, we met Felix Vega, manager of the downtown location. He spoke about the restaurant's popularity and what makes their barbecue so tasty. He even gave us a behind-the-scenes tour through the kitchen.

After we ordered our lunch, we enjoyed our meal at the bar where we were able to continue talking to Vega about food, barbecue, and the finish line of our whirlwind road trip.



## Day 4 (continued)

Before leaving town, we made our way to Germantown Hardware & Paint, in Germantown, Tennessee. We talked to two employees, including Mary Faulk. Our visit with Faulk reminded me how much independent retailers not only give back to their communities, but also how they support their employees. For example, when Faulk lost her home to a devastating fire, the team at Germantown Hardware & Paint was there for Faulk. “The first thing store owner Justin Wagner did for me was set up a fundraiser on GoFundMe,” Faulk says. “Justin helped make sure we got all the things we’d need for our home. I love every one of my co-workers with my whole heart. They’re like family.”

After leaving the store, we had a few more hours on the road before we arrived at the Lofts at 517, a hotel located in downtown Greenville, Mississippi, in a Sears Building constructed in the 1940s. Overall, it was an eventful day, and I got a better understanding of the Mississippi Delta. For more about our day in Memphis, visit [TheRedT.com/trip-tn](http://TheRedT.com/trip-tn).



On the fourth day of our trip, we visited **Germantown Hardware & Paint** in Germantown, Tennessee, where we met key employees.





Holmes Building Materials in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, welcomed our team to the store. We met **John Holmes** (left) and his son **Matthew**, who he owns and operates the business with. They spoke about their deep support for their employees.

Our last day on the road required another early wake-up call. We packed our bags and began our trek to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Our first visit was to Holmes Building Materials, where we met John and Matthew Holmes, the father-son team that runs the family-owned home improvement business.

➔ Travel Itinerary

**Greenville, Mississippi to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to New Orleans**

**Miles Traveled:** 361 (1,400 total)

**Hotel:** Alder Hotel

**Independents Visited**

- Holmes Building Materials
- Mike’s Hardware and Supply
- Massey’s Professional Outfitters

**Food and Fun**

- Angelo Brocato’s Original Italian Ice Cream Parlor
- Wayfare

**Fun Fact:** New Orleans is often called the Crescent City because of the distinctive curve of the Mississippi River that runs right through it.

John and Matthew told us about the company’s history, how they support their employees and what they did after the destructive flooding that occurred in the summer of 2016. Many of the employees at Holmes Building Supply were directly affected by the flood, and several lost their homes from the floodwaters. But the support of their employer and fellow employees helped them find their footing even after a natural disaster. It was so uplifting to see how close all of the employees were to each other and their deep gratitude for the help that the John and Matthew provided.

After spending time with them and seeing their store, we left for our last location: New Orleans.

We met with Lee and Robert LaFleur, brothers and second-generation owners of Mike’s Hardware and Supply. They spoke about their experience through Hurricane Katrina and how the business helped hundreds of people in the aftermath of the storm. They also spoke about the power of being independent business owners and why they love what they do.

“Our father built this business in hopes that one day we would show an interest and want to take over, and we did,” Robert says. “I think he’s very proud. It’s enjoyable to be able to make decisions and call the shots without having to go through anyone else.”

Our last stop along the Great American River Road Trip was at Massey’s Professional Outfitters, a local business that offers clothing and outerwear. We met Mike Massey, owner of the business and founder of Locally, a website that connects brands to local businesses. The website shows shoppers where products and brands they want are in stock in their communities. He and his colleague Mark Strella spoke about the concept and how it brings brands and retailers together to drive commerce.

Once we ended wrapped up our final visit, we made our way to the Alder Hotel, where we rested before heading home after a long week on the Great American River Road Trip. Our group grabbed dinner near the hotel at Wayfare to celebrate our trip and reflect on the many great businesses and the hardworking, diligent and creative entrepreneurs we met along the way.

During the trip, we visited with more than 25 independent retailers who all have something their communities rely on. For more about our last day in Louisiana, visit [TheRedT.com/trip-la](http://TheRedT.com/trip-la). ➔



The last hardware store we visited on the trip was **Mike’s Hardware**. We met brothers (from left) **Lee** and **Robert LaFleur**, second-generation owners of the business.