

# higher GROUND

Faith, floods, and chili  
flow through the town of Lupus.

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**TURN OFF OF ROUTE 179**, and follow Route P through northern Moniteau County, down a plunging hill to where the blacktop ends. Unless you're lost, you've arrived at Lupus. The city limit sign—if it hasn't been stolen—signals your entrance into town. It decrees, "Lupus Population: 33," which is more or less true at any given time. Lupus looks like many other small communities across the state, except for the fact that almost all of the eighteen frame houses in town are raised above the ground level. Many rest on above-ground basements, and one even towers fifteen feet into the sky on upended culvert pipes.

Cross the railroad tracks, and you'll find the reason why Lupus's homes have been raised: the Missouri River. Since the town was founded, floods have visited frequently and turned the streets into waterways. But since the houses have been raised, recent floods cause inconvenience but little actual damage.

Like many other small towns, Lupus has seen better days. Today, there are almost none of the many businesses that once thrived in the town's heyday. On one of any number of slow days, Lupus is a pretty sleepy place. Few signs of life appear, save for the town dogs and cats and the animated sounds of wind chimes on nearly every porch. Equidistant from Columbia and Jefferson City, Lupus is just far enough away from every noisy place. That's why some people have chosen to live here. However, it still remains beyond the reach of most progress; the residents have yet to see broadband internet service come to town.





Flowers bloom at Jim and Sue Denny's home on Walnut Street. The Dennys elevated and expanded their home after the 1993 flood, but they have lived in Lupus since 1986.

Just beyond the city limit sign, the Lupus Baptist Church is a simple country church with frame construction, bright white walls, a green roof, and arched Gothic windows. A small

vestibule shelters the entrance to this warm, welcoming place.

To get a sense of what Lupus was like in its best years, the church is the place to go. Show up on any

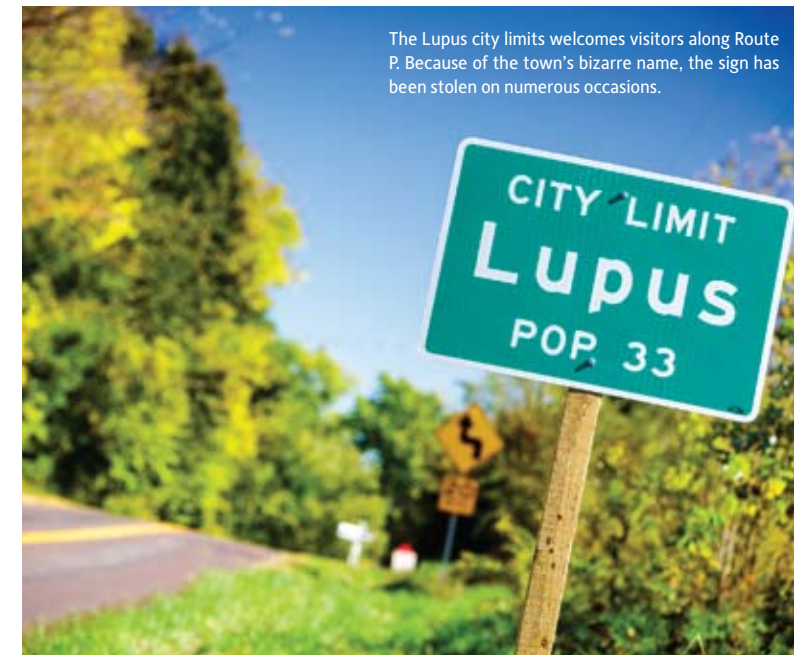


Sunday, and you will meet a congregation of churchgoers who have descended from earlier generations of Lupusians.

These kind folks still remember when Lupus was a thriving railroad town, lined with businesses and buzzing with activity. Here, people tell stories of the happy days they spent growing up in this village by the river.

"This town used to be wonderful!" That's what Patsy Cox, a member of one of the oldest families in Lupus, says. She recalls the times when the railroad stops provided the most exciting days of the month, the children ran around outside, and the neighbors socialized on porches. Her nostalgic description almost sounds like Mayberry.

The Lupus General Store, which still stands, kept the essentials in stock: fruit, bread, and other necessities. Nowadays, the store is a



The Lupus city limits welcomes visitors along Route P. Because of the town's bizarre name, the sign has been stolen on numerous occasions.

venue for frequent concerts and special events. The kids played in the street without a perceived need for parental supervision. And neighbors weren't just neighbors; they had gone through too much together to be anything but close. Without the distraction of modern technology, they spent their time outside—just waiting for neighborly hellos and the latest town gossip.

Population-wise, Lupus, like much of rural small town America, has shrunk. Tim Redmond—a soft-voiced, lean, tall man with a comforting gaze who served as the pastor of the Lupus Baptist Church until February 2015—rightfully observes that Lupus is a shadow of its former self.

Lupus sprang into existence in 1901 when the tracks of the Missouri Pacific Railroad were laid across the small valley shaped by Big and Little Splice Creeks. During its first three decades, the town grew and prospered. The main street was a bustling place. Along the railroad right-of-way was the depot, grain elevator, and stock pens. For a brief time—from 1908 until 1911—there was a tomato-canning factory. Just outside the town was the school, now long gone. A newspaper, *The Riverside Gazette*, published for just a single year back

in 1908. And the tiny, brick bank building dates to 1903; it is now a ghostly ruin.

Once, according to church members, Lupus had two general stores, a druggist, the bank, a hotel, blacksmith, hardware store, two restaurants, a barber, and a livery and feed stable. Four trains a day—two passenger and two freight—stopped in Lupus, and river steamers still tied up at the town landing. Annual street fairs featured cattle shows, horse racing, and exhibitions and made for lively and exciting times.



The Lupus General Store is at the heart of the town's annual ChiliFest. Here, a few festival attendees mingle outside of the general store that is now a concert venue.

It never got any better for Lupus. Longtime Lupus residents know their once prosperous town has been sliding downhill inevitably for many decades.

The worst disaster struck in the late 1920s, when both sides of the town business district burned to the ground. Nobody knows exactly why. Simultaneously, the Great Depression hammered the town. In the 1950s, the bank and school relocated to nearby Jamestown. The train stopped making stops in Lupus in the 1960s. The old Lupus General Store shuttered in 1973.

In conjunction with these devastating events, the town population plunged with every passing decade. In 1930, the population on the city limits sign would have read 185. By 1970, less than half that number, 68, were still there.

Through all this change and decline, the traditional community held together. These people were family. The elderly churchgoers who gather every Sunday at Lupus Baptist Church remember a town of solidarity and of friendship, united by blood or by neighborly property lines, a town of 1950s idealistic American charm.

In recent years, nearly all of the former residents have relocated to the



The Lupus Baptist Church sits at 3855 Adams Street on a beautiful autumn afternoon. The church was founded in 1904, and many former Lupus residents worship here each Sunday.



Pastor Tim Redmond talks to the congregation at the Lupus Baptist Church. He was pastor for seven years before he resigned in February 2015 for personal reasons.

surrounding towns, such as California, Missouri, and Jefferson City.

The elderly church members—who now sometimes communicate on what they call “The Facebook,” supplemented with weekly phone calls and visits on Sundays after church—can’t fathom living here again. It’s too difficult and too far from essential services that older folk need. But they still return to go

to church and talk about the days when they did live here, and back then, they say that this town sure was something.

Inside the Lupus Baptist Church, it smells like pine needles, and the light streams through the plain glass windows, angling across the simple wooden pews. The Southern Baptist church has stood on the very same plot of land since 1904.

“And we thank you, God,” Tim says before the congregation of about thirty, “for this blessed day, and for this church, and for its survival throughout the floods and the years and the challenges that have come our way.”

After the service has ended, the church’s multipurpose room hosts spreads of fried chicken, deviled eggs, homemade mashed potatoes, and more. The church members sit around, talking about Lupus, what it used to be, and how, to them, it will never be again.

Sometimes the golden memory of old-timers is tarnished by what they must have thought was an alien invasion of strange and weird folks.

“This town was different before those damn hippies showed up,” is the way one resident put it. The “hippie invasion” referred to occurred in the midst of the countercultural movement of the late 1960s and 1970s that attracted many idealistic young people back to the land and to simpler, more tribal ways of living.

These folks “discovered” Lupus by way of the Missouri River, traveling in canoes much like the early explorers who first passed through this region. For these newcomers, Lupus seemed a charming place that, thank goodness, time and progress had forgotten. Lupus was a quaint but declining town by the Missouri River where real estate was cheap; a house could be bought for as little as a thousand dollars.

It was like a magnet for a small contingent of the counterculture. Soon bargain-basement vacant houses were bought up; old-timers and newcomers had to learn to coexist. And despite dire proclamations to the contrary, they have, by and large, gotten along quite well.

Decades have passed since this new generation of Lupusians made this small river town their permanent home. Along the way, the “hippies” got permanent jobs, raised families, and learned to cherish the special qualities of Lupus in many of the same ways as their predecessors. They’re now the old folks in town, wondering—like previous generations—what will become of Lupus after they’re gone.

Both groups have shared one very significant link in common: living cheek by jowl to the mercurial and sometimes terrible Missouri River.

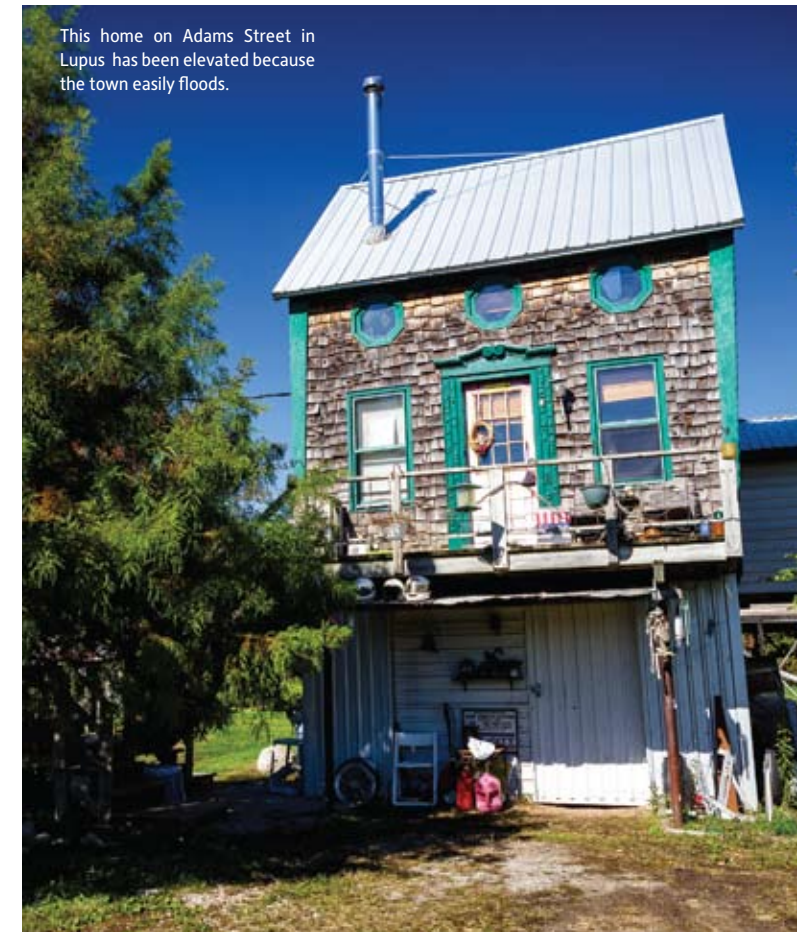
Wandering into this captivating little town is a lot like wandering down

a rabbit hole. This town is a curious little place that mixes the past with the present and the constant presence of the Big Muddy to create a singular place with a big set of challenges. Town clerk and former mayor Jim Denny will tell you: “A lot of water has passed through here since Lupus was first founded.”

The church’s Sunday school teacher and sweet-voiced wife of the former pastor, Linda Redmond puts it another way: “Lupus is a flood town.”

The Missouri River runs parallel to the Lupus homes, bubbling and brewing during times of weather fluctuations. When the air is calm, the river is, too. But Lupus is a town plagued by the very same river that provides the residents’ favorite pastimes: fishing and boating.

Ninety-three-year-old Jessie Garrett can’t bring herself to move too far from the river. She relocated to California, Missouri, but it took flooding in both 1993 and 1995 to coerce her.



From left, Louis Anderson, Robin Anderson, and Carrie Kiesling attend the Lupus Baptist Church.

To her, the Missouri River was an important part of her childhood. She’s the oldest member of the Lupus Baptist Church, but she still remembers the vibrancy and excitement that came floating downstream when she was young. The adventure of the Big Muddy was more than enough for this small-town Missouri girl.

As she recalls her childhood, she sits on a folding chair in the church’s multipurpose room and gracefully folds her right hand over her left in her lap. Her petite build is draped in a floral blazer and loose black slacks, and she sits with proper posture, framed by a window that overlooks her beloved girlhood stomping grounds.

While she looks out in the direction of the water and points with a nimble but firm finger, she talks about how much her children loved racing down to the bank to have their own imaginary adventures. Although they were never seriously injured, she always preemptively told them not to cross the railroad tracks and venture down to the water alone.

“It was too dangerous,” she says as she shakes her head. “It still is.”

Before 1993, when the great flood came, the scene in town was one of neighborly love. The residents understood which homes flooded first. Instead of each family taking care of their own belongings, they all worked together to methodically protect each and every home as best they could.





Wentzville residents Greg and Stephanie Holland along with their children Sophia, age six, and Theodore, age three, attend the Lupus ChiliFest.



Violinist Laura Billings rosins her bow for a performance with Dave & Dyno with the Roadkill Orchestra at the annual Lupus ChiliFest.

could just be swept away," she says.

The Great Flood of 1993 was a totally different kind of flood for which the traditional methods of readiness, such as stacking furniture and appliances on blocks, proved woefully inadequate. Every item on the first floor of every house in town was completely destroyed, including all major appliances, large items of furniture, and countless smaller keepsakes. Water stood in some houses for a month and reached ceiling height in one instance; the average depth was four feet.

In most cases, floors and walls of virtually all Lupus houses were ruined and required replacement. Lupus was then a small town of only thirty-nine people, but it took twenty-three large dumpsters to carry out all the damaged property; the total amount of debris hauled away amounted to 153 tons.

In Jim's opinion, the '93 flood is when everything changed. There was physical damage, sure, and psychological damage, definitely. People no longer felt safe enough with their typical "put your stuff on the block" philosophy. Every rainfall came with anxiety. Every time the water rose, people panicked.

In a way, Jim thinks the '93 flood ironically turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to Lupus. Because of this flood, the town got a government grant to elevate nine buildings in the town. An equal number of houses were raised using other funds. The first floor of nearly every house in town is now at least a foot higher than the '93 flood. Since the project, anxiety over flooding has been significantly relieved.

The elevation project healed the town in other ways, too. Virtually all residents, old-timers and newcomers, came together to save Lupus's future by pitching in to receive the grant and finish the elevation project. Jim Denny says that, no matter what previous differences might have existed, property owners whose homes were

But the traditional town response to floods changed forever in 1993 when the greatest Missouri River flood of recorded history struck the Missouri River Valley. There were no old-timers who could ever remember a flood such as this. Not even the benchmark flood of 1844 matched the monster flood that struck Lupus in 1993.

Jessie reveals a hint of fear in her eyes when she talks about the '93 flood. She says her recurring nightmare begins with someone in town telling her that the flood is coming. Then, the waters rise in her home. Each time, she isn't ready for the pending disaster, and her heartbeat quickens with the pace of the current. She says she feels her entire being losing control. As she recalls the memory, her eyes flicker with the image of helplessness. In the morning, she returns to wakefulness with the knowledge that her nightmare is more than just a dream; it was her reality.

"All these years later, and so many nights, I still feel like my whole life



Every year in October, the Ruth family gathers in Lupus to make hand-pressed apple cider.

elevated after the 1993 flood have benefited in more ways than one. The real estate value of elevated houses in town has doubled.

With all that's changed over the decades, one legacy of the counter-culture is alive and well: the Lupus ChiliFest, a music and food festival that has been happening every October for the past thirty-three years. Although the organizers do not advertise the event, word of mouth spreads the date around to devoted ChiliFest fans who want to come back year after year to hear free music, often on four stages, and eat the tasty chili. During the festival, Lupus becomes a tent city as hundreds of campers settle in to make a weekend out of the event.

This ability to throw a good party seems to be the town's most singular skill set. When tribal-like gatherings are in full flight, there is a sort of Lupus magic afoot that can be quite captivating. There's no place else quite like this quaint

little village by the Missouri River when this happens.

During the Lewis and Clark Expedition Bicentennial celebrations, Lupus became a favorite stopover for the Discovery Expedition of St. Charles—the folks who built the replica keelboat and pirogues that journeyed up and down the Missouri River. Between 1996 and 2006, they pulled ashore at Lupus seven times—a record number of visits. Not even the big riverside cities can come close to matching that number.

During each visit, the town would also present a crew member with its only award, the "Order of the Pink Flamingo." Strangely, these awards came to be quite coveted by the recipients.

At seventy-two years old, Jim is now the chief "geezer" in terms of seniority among Lupus's current residents.

"Lupus is a beautiful place to live the good life," he says. "Our gardens can feed us; Lupus dirt is like pot-

ting soil. And the town is an almost tropically lush little spot that is just beyond the pale of the rat race. We are just modest people living by modest means who appreciate the fact that, on some days, you can't even hear modern civilization in our little town."

Residents like Jim say that's why Lupus will remain their home through wet times and dry times.

This is a town of spirited faith, a town of slow, brittle change. To some, it is a good change.

To some, it's been the kind of change that's the slipping kind, the shrinking kind.

The people who resurrect this pint-sized settlement along the Missouri after each and every natural disaster are resilient. And that resilience is rooted in an impassioned plea to keep their intimate way of life afloat.

This town is a pretty amazing place. That's what they all say.

*This year, Lupus ChiliFest is on October 3, but don't tell anyone! It's a secret.*