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Selling sense of place: marketing the small town image

Donna L. Sampson

Iowa State University

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Selling sense of place:
Marketing the small town image
by
Donna L. Sampson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Anthropology

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2002

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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Donna L. Sampson

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PREFACE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Setting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Assumptions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Place</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Theory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Ideology</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Place/Sense of Exclusion</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country vs. City/Rural vs. Urban/Little vs. Big</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Change Theory</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting to Change: Marketing the Small Town Image</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 3. METHODS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Versus Quantitative</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 4. EAGLE ROCK COMMUNITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Results and Discussion</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

With this research I intend to answer three fundamental questions. I am intrigued about how sense of place influences the choices people make about where they live. More specifically, I want to find out what about a "country culture" makes some people want to stay and others to return. Second, I wish to examine how the community that is the focus of my research is adapting to the pressures of socioeconomic change and an ever-encroaching urban lifestyle. An integral component of this question is its degree of success in balancing its desire to retain a unique country culture and its desire to secure economic vitality. The myths and urban legends of the community, as told to me during my research, serve to reinforce and reproduce the small town values at the same time as they protect a shared sense of place and the image projected to outsiders. Thus, the third question concerns what this small town does to capitalize on its unique sense of place, and how it might exploit this special image to promote economic development.

Significance of Study

This research is important for the future of small towns in Iowa. It is prudent to understand how a community's social system works to mediate the inevitable changes that will be taking place in the next century. The leaders of the state of Iowa are looking to bring Iowa natives back home and keep young Iowans and its college graduates from leaving. In the present statewide climate of slow growth, and in order to pursue economic growth, some of our leaders want to import workers from other countries. These are complex issues that beg to be explored anthropologically if rural Iowa is to make a smooth transition from its traditional position of isolation to one of incorporation into the modern global economy. If a
community’s collective system of values affects how it will act and react to the economic and social changes taking place, then surely interpreting its sense of place is the key to understanding a community’s value system and its adaptation strategies.

Research Setting

Eagle Rock is the county seat of a mostly rural Southwestern Iowa county. In the 1950s and 1960s, this was a thriving agricultural community. The prosperity of every local business was in some way tied to the prosperity of the surrounding community of family farms. The public square or its periphery accommodated a movie theater, a bus depot in the lobby of the old downtown hotel, restaurants, a bakery, two variety or "five and dime" stores, clothing and shoe shops, four grocers, and multiple banks, not to mention, among other things, several bars. The town also boasted multiple lawyers, both new and used automobile dealerships, beauty and barber shops, insurance businesses, three doctors, and two veterinarians. There were farm implement dealers, welding and machine repair shops, and a lumber yard. Full service gas stations anchored nearly every corner along the highway through town. The local hospital still had a baby nursery and delivery room before escalating insurance costs and easy access to bigger city hospitals drove them to eliminate this service.

The public library, built in 1916 with Carnegie largesse and his quality of life principles for education, was the destination of eager young future readers during the weekly Saturday morning story hour. Teens stopped for a Coke at one of the drug store soda fountains on the square. If a young man did not have enough gas in his car to take a girl home from the football game on a Friday night, the town cop would pump a dollar’s worth

\[1\text{A pseudonym.}\]
from the service station for which he had a key. The local evening street life consisted of teenagers driving around the public square with their friends. Adults mostly stayed home and shook their heads in consternation at the waste of youthful time and energy (not to mention gasoline), declaring to themselves and each other that this irresponsible younger generation would surely be the end of us all.

At first glance things today look much the same as they did in the 1960s. A quick drive around the town square reveals the familiar store fronts, if, on closer inspection, not the familiar business establishments. Although things have changed in nearly four decades, yet babies are born, children grow up babysitting for their neighbors and mowing lawns or scooping snow for the old folks down the street; local citizens eat, sleep, work, play, age, and die. And teenagers still drive around the square on Friday and Saturday nights.

Census data for the county for which Eagle Rock is the county seat reveals a steady decline in agricultural economic base. In 1900 this county boasted a total population of 2,387 with 16,192 tax roll farms, for a total of 360,224 acres. Data from the 1950 census shows that county population increased over this 50-year period by almost 10,000. However, during this same 50-year-period the number of farms decreased by more than 14,000 farms. Only 210,815 acres of farmland were still owned and operated by a farmer. In 1960, with a population in decline, the rural non-farm population of this county already made up 47 percent of the total county population of 10,893.

Mirroring countrywide trends in population and economic base, Eagle Rock is undergoing its own economic and social changes. However, it is putting up a good fight.

\[2\text{(Source: www.fisher.lib.Virginia.EDU/census/).}\]
Eagle Rock today has a population of 2,129 according to the 2000 United States Census. While Eagle Rock lost in population from 1980 to 1990, it gained by 2.7 percent in the decade 1990-2000. Thus, as the 2000 United States Census confirms, while the Eagle Rock community may not be growing like Iowa’s ubiquitous corn crop, neither is it drying up with the most recent economic drought.

Eagle Rock is fortunate to be only twelve miles from Interstate 80, which is the main traffic artery between two major metropolitan areas, Des Moines, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska. Eagle Rock can claim some advantages for attracting industry by being situated nearly half way between either urban center and in such close proximity to a major traffic artery. However, the downside of this is that Eagle Rock is in competition with Omaha and Des Moines for shopping, entertainment, and employment opportunities. Many commuters live in Eagle Rock but work and/or play in Des Moines. The Chamber of Commerce estimates that between seven and ten percent of all workers living in Eagle Rock commute daily the sixty miles to the capital city for work. Despite that fact, Eagle Rock has managed to retain its movie theater and bowling alley. However, those establishments are not enough to keep local entertainment dollars in the community or bring in significant economic benefit from neighboring towns.

While Eagle Rock was once primarily dependent upon local farmers for its economic base, since the farm crises of the last few decades, the economy has changed, and the businesses have had to change along with it. Ninety years ago, an Eagle Rock lady’s excursion to visit someone in the neighboring town twelve miles away made the local society column of the newspaper. Forty years ago, one would only make the 60-mile trip to Des Moines for a holiday family gathering or an annual shopping trip for school clothes. Now a
trip to the Valley West and Merle Hay Malls in Des Moines is considered an ordinary event, if not a necessity. Local stores also struggle to compete with Wal-mart only 20 miles away. The prognosis for the town’s only grocery store is in question.

The Eagle Rock City Council is very community goal-oriented. Although the Mayor and Council are all local business people, they all have the community’s interest at heart because it is their home. In a small community, your business and your position on the Council are at risk if you are not community-minded. The town’s goals are to maintain and to grow. Eagle Rock would like to be more competitive for shopping, employment, and entertainment with the larger cities. Their competitive disadvantage is exacerbated by the fact that shopping for those commuters is more convenient when you drive right by the malls or super stores on the way home every day and the available choices are more attractive. Eagle Rock now sometimes refers to itself as a “bedroom community” which could be seen as a negative and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A Mayor and City Council run the city of Eagle Rock, along with a Public Works Director and an Executive Director for its active Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Corporation, and Main Street program. Downtown Eagle Rock, which consists of the public courthouse square and surrounding businesses, is overhauling and upgrading both its infrastructure and its aesthetics. Once a very socially active community, the town volunteers are working hard to restore some of those social amenities that have been neglected until recently. Primarily through volunteerism, Eagle Rock has been aggressive in promoting its attributes, be it abundant hunting and fishing, its historic sites, renovated historic architecture, small town family values, or a progressive business atmosphere.
Eagle Rock volunteers, working through their community organizations, are attempting to attract new business, tourist attractions, and entertainment that would keep people at home. Eagle Rock is working to renew a sense of community, building on its Main Street revitalization. This focus around a Main Street model fits what Steiner calls a “community renewal” approach based on committed volunteerism (Steiner 1992:26). In this regard, Eagle Rock has aggressively sought and been awarded the opportunity for being a host city for two RAGBRAI events. Eagle Rock still hosts the county fair. The annual Wings, Wheels, and Whistles celebration honors both the importance of the railroad to its past and the Iowa Aviation Museum located north of town. The Henry A. Wallace Country Life Center is located five miles east of Eagle Rock and includes the boyhood home of the former Vice President and also former Secretary of Agriculture of the United States. Eagle Rock is very proud of its active membership and volunteer efforts in the county historical complex.

One of the most noticeable improvements to the town comes from its efforts in historic preservation of the courthouse square. It is sometimes referred to as a “rare square,” because of its unique design with a center street entering each side of the square and an exit at each corner. Eagle Rock’s courthouse square offers a unique “sense of place” because this unusual form is rarely found in the Midwest and is the only known square of its kind in Iowa.

One of the most impressive architectural features of the square is the county courthouse itself, built in 1892 after a fire destroyed the original in 1883. It is still being used for county government offices today. Plans are now being discussed to rebuild the original tower which 3RAGBRAI is an acronym for Register’s Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa.
was removed years ago.

Several other significant buildings are located around the square. Built in 1896, the first floor of the opera house has been used for a dry goods store and a grocery store. The second and third floors were originally used for living quarters and a cultural center for live performances on the stage. A tea room, beauty parlor, wallpaper and paint store, a duckpin bowling alley, and an archery range have all been located in the opera house basement at some time in the past. Volunteers have organized an association to promote renovation efforts for the opera house. It is busy promoting events in the newly restored basement as fund-raisers to help defray the costs of ongoing restoration.

The county newspaper that has been owned and operated by successive generations of the same family since 1889, still occupies the 1903 building for which it was constructed. Fifteen local men built the hotel next door in 1910, not to make money, but to serve the traveling public. The restored first floor now features a full-service restaurant and bar. Recently the library and City Hall moved into a remodeled former retail building. The restored Carnegie building now houses a gift and ice cream shop. Many other fine examples are found on the Eagle Rock public square.

In a personal interview (2001) with the Executive Director of the Eagle Rock Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Corporation, and Main Street program, she explained the importance of historic preservation to the community in this way:

> Historic preservation is also a major attraction I think to the community and for those who are considering moving to the

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"A game using three small balls without finger holes for each game” (1992: The New Lexicon Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language, Lexicon Publications, Inc.).
community. . . . [H]istoric preservation is almost an attitude of the community in that just the words are enough to associate preserving a quality of life, or what the community perceives as a quality of life. . . . [E]ach community has its own definition of quality of life . . . [and] along with that is the preserving of the community.

In other words, it is evident that this town’s people care about their community and have a strong, positive sense of place upon which to build.

**Working Assumptions**

I began this project with certain assumptions about my research subject. I assumed that the people who use the town square comprise a representative sampling of the town’s population. This assumption is based on the further assumptions that residents visit the courthouse for local and county governmental needs; residents visit the shops and businesses; the park-like courtyard with its convenient and pleasant location is amenable to informal social visits between residents; and social gatherings or activities sponsored by city or local civic clubs are popular with people of the town and of the surrounding rural population. A collective sense of place as reflected by everyday life on the town square and expressed in the built environment is an indicator of a community’s values. Lastly, the health of a downtown or town square is measured in direct proportion to the health of the community as a whole, with the term “health” being a metaphor for a community’s economic well-being, its civic vitality, and its ability to sustain growth.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sense of Place

I think of that mountain . . . as if it were my maternal grandmother. I recall stories of how it once was at that mountain. The stories told to me were like arrows. Elsewhere, hearing that mountain’s name, I see it. Its name is like a picture. Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right. Stories make you replace yourself.

--- Benson Lewis, Apache elder (Basso 1996:38)

In the eyes of the nation, the American Heartland is a place where you can still find the American Dream. It is a place of tradition, family, endurance, stability, continuity, and safety. Children get a good education in a rural town; they are safe from drugs and gangs. There is nothing to fear and everyone loves his neighbor. Adults watch out for children, no matter to whom they belong. Small towns represent community. The American Heartland is still thought of as a land of farms and abundance. Even city dwellers attempt to recreate this notion in their suburban “estates,” hoping to isolate themselves from the crime and noise of the crowded city. Small towns represent to many a simpler, better place in time.

This urban exodus represents a culture longing for community, lured to the country by the promise of the Heartland Myth, a myth based on what anthropologists, cultural geographers, environmental psychologists, architects, and city planners all call a sense of place, an ideal, “rootedness, placeness, knowing where home is” (Nabhan and Trimble 1994:26). Sense of place is what Wendell Berry calls “a particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in” or, perhaps more poetically, “local life aware of itself” (Berry 1972:67, emphasis in original). Steven Feld and Keith Basso define sense of place to include “the relation of sensation to emplacement; the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled
over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities” (1996:11).

A community knows itself through the connections people form over time, the trust and respect they develop for each other, and a common sense of purpose they create and maintain (Freie 1998:21). This common sense of purpose is often tied to the landscape we live in. Because of the ease with which we can now move all over the landscape, even beyond our earthly boundaries to the moon and beyond, a common sense of purpose becomes key to sense of place. When we live in a place, we inscribe in it the paths, patterns, and events of our own lives (Ryden 1993:64). These relationships to places we live in transpire best in the company of other people, “and it is on these communal occasions — when places are sensed together — that native views of the physical world become accessible to strangers” (Basso 1996:109, emphasis in original). It is as a community that a collective sense of place is most visible to others.

Thus, with a sense of common purpose, a community cannot only reproduce its social values through socialization of its children, but also communicate its sense of place to the outside world through the everyday events in the lives of its people. John Brinckerhoff Jackson maintains that sense of place is defined by events that occur in the easily accessible, everyday world (Jackson 1994:159). Social activities a community produces transmits its sense of place to the surrounding community. In the past, occasions such as weekly summer band concerts and ice cream socials in the town square brought youth and adults alike into town from outlying farms, providing an opportunity to maintain friendly ties with the people whose businesses they relied on and whose livelihoods they supported.
Deliberately and otherwise, people are forever presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where and how they dwell. In large ways and small, they are forever performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place — and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are (Basso 1996:110).

Public social events may be organized to bring people together to act out these culturally mediated images. Public spaces can be designed to encourage or inhibit public discourse.

Space is socially produced and culturally defined. Social values and norms are expressed in the built environment where everyday events shape the way a public space is designed and maintained. Setha Low integrates “social production of the built environment with the daily routines and ceremonial rituals of the cultural realm and the phenomenological experience of individuals” (2000:36). Yet, according to Jackson, sense of place does not come from the architecture or monument or designed space, but from some event that occurs daily, weekly, or seasonally that we look forward to or remember and which is shared with others in that space (1994:158-159). From this model we can examine the relationship between people and their spaces.

How people shape their environment, how the physical environment affects people, and what mechanisms link people and environments becomes a two-way interaction (Rapoport 1977:1). Low explains how social and economic aspects of the built environment are “conjoined within a system, a kind of ecology” (2000:36-37). Miles Richardson (1974:5-6) explains how the places most familiar to a community, its homes, schools, churches, meeting places, and even streets, require a distinct set of rules of behavior. Thus, these “social places” function as “a mirror containing reassuring information for appropriate action, [and] material culture orders our world into discrete social places.” Fred Kniffen concurs that the “occupance pattern[s], composed of the material forms arising from the satisfying of
man’s needs” are the “product of technological capacity, cultural norms and values, and natural environment” (1974:255).

Kevin Lynch has written extensively about the experience of place as it relates to the built environment. In The Image of a City, he describes how the social meaning of an area, its function, its history, and its name all influence “imageability” (1960:46). “Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences” (1960:1). In other words, place a Midwest Main Street in the middle of New York City and, while it may still look the same, it will provide a different image than when in its original surroundings. Environment affects the everyday lives of the people sensing it — through eyes, ears, nose, and skin (Lynch 1976:3).

Thus, how the public environment such as a town square is designed, and for whom it is the most accommodating, is indicative of a community’s sense of place as it relates to the community’s social values. Mental maps show that spatial and built environments are subject to cognitive interpretation (Hummon 1990:18-19). In a study of mental maps made by members of various specific communities, Lynch (1960:46-48) identified five key elements to organize spatial knowledge — paths, nodes, landmarks, edges, and districts. He concluded that physical structures of a city — its street patterns, neighborhoods, and other aspects of the built environment influence its image. Like the central plaza or zocalo of Latin America (Low 2000; Whiteford n.d.), the town square was originally designed to satisfy all of a community’s needs from a central location. Man’s basic animal needs -- food, water, shelter, communication -- expanded to culturally acquired needs -- religion, government, recreation, social interaction -- could all be met in the town square. Public spaces emphasize the value of equality, act as leveling devices, serve as a forum for therapeutic relaxation, and help provide
the social glue for genuine community (Freie 1998:59). The physical and psychological function of the square serves to “create a gathering place for the people, humanizing them by mutual contact, providing them with a shelter against the haphazard traffic, and freeing them from the tension of rushing through the web of streets” (Zucker 1959:1).

The grid system on which the town square is built is the ideal settlement pattern. It is compact, clearly defined, with streets and houses surrounding a central landmark. It is picturesque and easy to control or defend. It is convenient for pedestrians and encourages social interaction. Besides being picturesque, the rural town square as a built environment historically has been an important political, economic, and social center. Low suggests that we should can look at how this particular public space integrates both the social production of space — social, economic, ideological, and technological — that results from the physical creation of a space, with the social construction of space — the way the material setting is produced through peoples’ social exchanges, memories, images, and daily activities (2000:127-128). These are the ingredients for a community-based sense of place.

Others have a different view of what sense of place has come to mean in the modern community. Louise Erdrich (1988:38-39), in her essay about the role of place in literature, cautions that in modern American culture “we are bound together by that which may be cheapest and ugliest in our culture . . . common references to mass culture.” These common references take the form of familiar icons, for example golden arches or flying windows, or our stories -- urban legends really -- of folk heroes, both real and imagined, like Bill Gates and Colonel Sanders. This begs the question: How has our collective sense of place been co-opted by images of mass production to which our society has become accustomed, and what can we do to change it?
Cognitive Theory

A ritual must be enacted, a myth recited, a narrative told, a novel read, a drama performed, for these enactments, recitals, tellings, readings, and performances are what make the text transformative and enable us to reexperience our culture’s heritage.
--- Edward M. Bruner (Turner and Bruner 1986:7).

Stan Leroy Wilson argues that the most effective function of mass communication may be its ability to "mentally order and organize our world for us" (1993:97). Charles Frake explains that we arrange our lives into sequences or chunks of experience (Frake 1981:375). More importantly, we do this unconsciously. Through the subtle inferences of symbolism, we communicate social values via ritual, religion, and myth, often so inconspicuously that they take on a subliminal characteristic. This is an important distinction because, as social reproduction, it sets up the rules of behavior necessary for the smooth organization and regulation of the community. Linguist M. Morgan explains that “when people come together through discursive practices, they behave as though they operate within a shared set of norms, local knowledge, beliefs, and values” (2000:36). Thus, how people cognize their community and their place within it is essential to understanding how sense of place relates to its vitality and viability.

We use symbols to stand for any number of ideas. Symbols stand for ideas and knowledge that assist people with their view of the world by standing as markers of their experiences with the world. Further, the way symbols are manipulated and represented through artifacts such as art, architecture, or spatial design, depends on the specific meanings given to the symbols within the local social context. It could be as simple as the dollar sign representing money in an American context, or as complex and emotionally-charged as the meaning a cross represents to Christians. According to Ian Hodder, "symbols do not 'reflect'
but ... play an active part in forming and giving meaning to social behavior" (1982:11-12).

Therefore, “given that we create gestalt configurations of [natural world] features, the expansion of a term from its true referent to other objects which have many but not all of the features in the configuration is an efficient coding technique" (D'Andrade 1995:105). So while a large building full of books may symbolize a value shared by the rest of the world, it is the name “Carnegie” etched in classic style over the big double doors that sparks a memory of childhood summers wandering happily through the shelves and lazy summer days reading in the intimate shade of one’s own front porch. Similarly, a unit of chunked information may encompass all the good experiences one has had as a youth growing up in a small town.

Hodder (1982:36) observed that "material symbols can actively justify the actions and intentions of human groups," while Victor Turner (1996:451) defined symbols as forces that instigate social action. Wilson (1993:8) interpreted the resulting message as “whatever the source attempts to share with someone else. It originates with an idea, which then must be encoded into symbols that are used to express that idea." But as George Lakoff explained, "Certain concepts are not merely understood intellectually; rather, they are used automatically, unconsciously, and without noticeable effort as part of normal functioning" (1987:12, emphasis in original). Thus, we can take some idea such as the joys of a happy small town childhood, represent it with a material or physical symbol such as the historic town library, and express the message that here, in this particular town, still exists the ease and simple pleasures of our youth.

The selection of symbols to represent an idea is essential to communication because if they are not effective symbols, the message will be misunderstood and thus made moot (Wilson 1993:8). For example, the African ancestors of American slaves counted cowrie
shells, where a specific number and its corresponding verse symbolized specific codes for rules of living (Bascom 1980). In this way, they used life experiences to give meaning and interpretation to symbols as well as reproduce the meanings and interpretation of their society. Similarly, in the American antebellum South, slaves sewed secret coded messages into quilts for help in navigating the Underground Railroad routes to the northern United States and Canada (Tobin and Dobard 1999). Like their ancestors’ ritual of counting cowries, slaves may have counted knots tied in quilts that they displayed under the full, but uncomprehending, view of the plantation owners (Tobin and Dobard 1999).

Human understanding of an experience is processed in terms of some other kind of experience. Metaphorical thinking is a common part of everyday life that provides a framework for understanding the social world around us. Mark Johnson defines metaphor as “a process of human understanding by which we achieve meaningful experience that we can make sense of” where we “structure one domain of experience in terms of another domain of a different kind” (1987:15, emphasis in original). Thus, metaphor, or association by analogy, can occur when something about a place reminds you of something you enjoy. For example, the cool shade of the public square’s courtyard may be analogized to the tranquility of a rural summer day.

How a person feels about a place is tied to events experienced rather than the place itself through the use of metonymy. Thus, sense of place is defined, not by the architecture or monument or designed space, but by the experience of something that we look forward to or remember and which is shared with others. Metonymy is using one thing in the place of something it symbolizes. Metonymy is the association by the physical connection, like the gazebo on the town square, with the experience of a special event, the Fourth of July band
concert. The terms "old-fashioned" and "rustic" combined with "barnboard" and "lace" may conjure up the perfect image of a gift shop in an old barn surrounded by beautiful wildflowers, but this is due not to knowing any particular gift shop but to having once experienced (either personally or vicariously) just such a shop. One may have visited a real shop or one may have visited a similar place through pictorial representation, but it is the event of experience, not the shop itself, that produces the mental image. "Lived experience, then, as thought and desire, as word and image, is the primary reality" (Turner and Bruner 1986:4-5).

One's identity is intricately tied to one's association with a place. In New England, the descendants of the "first families" may be some of the community's poorest, while "it is not they who are celebrating their ancestors" (Lippard 1997:91). In the South, many people still attach their identity to the Confederacy. In historic Old Charleston, some members of the wealthiest old families see "heritage" as a crucial component of identity (Lippard 1997:96). Charles Rutheiser suggests that the "imagined landscape of Lost Cause Atlanta" and Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind had a profound effect on shaping the image of that city, for those who associate with it (1996:40). Not only have Mitchell's book and the subsequent movie brought millions of tourists to Atlanta searching for Tara, but Atlantans have named numerous streets Peachtree because everyone covets that famous address.

While these examples illustrate "the power of mediated fictions to shape social reality in their own image" (1996:41), Rutheiser stresses that the New South did not have to give up its Old Southern identity, nor take on an exclusively Northern identity, in order to accept Northern capital. "[T]he idea of the New South offered a way of reclaiming regional identity and the honor of the Lost Cause in the face of an ignominious defeat" (Rutheiser 1996:21).
Thus, while projecting a stylized image of the Old South, it simultaneously promoted a spirit of tenacity and progress for itself as the New South.

Similarly, if Midwestern rural America brings to mind a particular mental image, it is often based on a nostalgic notion of history rather than on fact. This image or idea of a place is expressed through folklore passed across generational and geographical boundaries as a sort of collective memory from those who have experienced a place. But it can just as easily come from those who have not. Arjun Appadurai calls this “nostalgia without memory” or a social *imaginaire* built largely around reruns* (1996:30), where we get our mental image of a place we have never seen through the movies and television. Richard Davies explains in *Main Street Blues* (1998) that as we began to lose our small towns after World War II, television and motion pictures began to depict small towns of America as “idealized places where everyone is friendly (if perhaps a little eccentric), life is lived at a relaxed, humane pace, and no one locks their doors at night” (Davies 1998:7). Thus, sense of place often relies on an imagined community with an imagined worldview.

We learn most of our stories in childhood. We hear them in public places and at our Grandmother’s knee. We reproduce community social values and norms with those stories. Thus, urban legends in the form of gossip are a prime strategy for reproducing a small community’s system of norms and values. Gary Comstock says that “[s]tories are funny things; they can stand you up and knock you down, and sometimes one right after the other (1988:129). When you tell a story about somebody doing something that goes against the system, and the moral of the story is that they get hurt by it, that reproduces the system. Similarly, when you tell a story of good fortune, that also reproduces the system. Taking this one step farther, “Our anthropological productions are our stories about their stories, we are
interpreting the people as they are interpreting themselves” (Turner and Bruner 1986:10). Anthropologists add the second level of interpretation, and our readers add another.

According to Ryden, “to hear talk about a place is to understand what else happened there that has been deemed worth remembering” (1993:64). Similarly, Lucy Lippard tells us that “we need to know our own histories so that we are not defined by other people’s images of our past” (1997:85). Be it imagined or not, we use our folklore, stories, and urban legends as mechanisms to understand and pass on our view of the world. Trimble tells us that “[w]e learn our homeland from stories” because mental map-making is most effective when accompanied by stories (Nabhan and Trimble 1994:20). Ryden believes that people recount stories of local history to reaffirm who they are (1993:65). For instance, small town people are honest: The local vegetable seller makes more money by placing a cash box beside his vegetables and leaving because people pay more when they do not have enough change. Small towns are safe: You can go away and leave your front door open and when you come back, everything will be as you left it (Melko, Koebernick and Orenstein 1994:64).

According to Charles Frake, culture is not a cognitive map in itself, but rather a tool for map-making and navigation (1981:375-376). Geographer and cartographer Borden Dent noted that mental maps “are not tangible ‘paper maps,’ but maps that reside in our heads. . . . These images often distort areas and distances, usually in ways that have meaning only to us. Mental maps . . . are abstract constructs that allow us to operate on them, to problem-solve, perhaps to way-find” (Dent 1999:10).

Basso describes how Apache clans named themselves and the places where they lived from the stories they told about them. “[T]heir names for themselves are really the names of their places” (1996:21). The Apache, who were even more dependent on growing corn than
Iowans, settled in the places where corn would grow plentifully. They were grateful to the corn and the place that helped them grow it. "Our corn draws life from this earth and we draw life from our corn. This earth is part of us! We are of this place" (Basso 1996:21).

Western Apache place-names are rich with descriptive imagery: "Green Rocks Side By Side Jut Down Into Water" (1996:23) may be a little more compound than contemporary names often used by modern suburbs, names with Trail and Lane and Farms and Village affixed in order to secure a place in the nostalgia-seeking minds of potential suburbanites. But similar to the Western Apache, this country's new settlers gave their small towns place-names based on their own relationship with the land. Names like Blue Earth or Greenfield or Red Oak tell their own story. One can easily imagine the longer version of what would eventually become Eagle Rock.

Frake explains how this cognitive map making enables us to understand a people through their knowledge of flora and fauna. "If we can arrive at comparable knowledge about their [the people's] concepts of land animals, plants, soils, weather, social relations, personalities, and supernaturals, we have at least a sketch map of the world in the image of the tribe" (1969:30). Conversely, then, it would seem possible that we could make such a cognitive "sketch map" of the people's concepts of knowledge of such things through their use of tribal image. Expand this reasoning to American small town "tribal image" and we can begin to explain how exploiting image can provide a cognitive map to outsiders of what that image represents to the "tribal" members of the small town.

People's experiences of a place, their sentimental attachment and local pride in a place thus prove to be powerful motivators. Hummon explains that "Community slogans and bumper stickers, landmarks and statues, myths about community founders and leaders..."
advance the economic and political interests of the city in regional and national competition” (1990:27). A good example of this occurred in Georgia. A leading developer in Atlanta built a huge new residential development modeled after the New Urbanism concept of locating residential, retail, and public services within the development’s boundaries, emulating the small town or neighborhood community of the pre-industrial era. When the property was not much more than a concept on paper, advertisements in local magazines and newspapers touted the virtues of this mythical village, as though its historicity were real, right down to the fictional founder’s stellar Civil War record. Playing on nostalgia and a romanticized, if not politically correct, Southern past, this very successful ad campaign gave regional and historical legitimacy to an imagineered community for its prospective buyers. Calling on an idealized sense of place, the developer constructed a mental blueprint to assess how this environment would be perceived by its actual users, and then built upon it.

Community Ideology

**Sense of Place/Sense of Exclusion**

It is a buffer, a refuge, a place to exhale, drop our guard, feel at ease. Out in the world there is chaos. Within our neighborhood, whose boundaries are defined, whose residents we assume are like us, we have a sense of control.

--- (Greenberg 1995:105)

Lamb explains that the low crime rate in North Dakota, with its sparse population, is related to “mutual respect engendered when people know one another and to peer pressure that makes antisocial behavior unacceptable” (1993:145). However, this intimacy is a double edged sword. As Osha Gray Davidson (1996:8) observed, “[N]ot everyone appreciates the

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5A term credited to Walt Disney for his vision of Disneyland, a cross between imagined and engineered (Rutheiser 1996).
kind of intimacy a small town provides.” James Acheson (1988:46) observed, some people
“appreciate the partial anonymity that goes with marginal acceptance.” Researchers Melko,
Koebernick and Orenstein studied a small town called Millfield in order to discover a
“comprehensive picture of community life” as it exists in the midst of encroaching
urbanization (1994:1-2). They found that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, “visiting
[between residents] was restricted by certain norms and that friendliness could go with
minding one’s business” (1994:64). A certain respect for privacy seems to add to the peace
and tranquility factor. One Millfield man even commented that “‘you can sit in your yard and
not even see your neighbors’” (1994:65).

The perception in Millfield is one of very little crime because of a strong sense of
community. Villagers said that because the village is small, they know their neighbors and
can, therefore, recognize a stranger as a potential threat to safety. But the researchers found
that not to be the reality. This perception is at best misleading, at worst artificial. While the
people of Millfield reported that “‘everybody ‘bout knows everybody’” and that they were
“‘[o]ne big family’” where Millfield is a very safe place and that people are willing to help
one another, in reality, the researchers found that no person or household group in their
sample could identify even half the families living in Millfield (Melko, et al. 1994:63). Rather,
“People like the atmosphere of the village; they encounter their neighbors casually but don’t
feel pressured by intrusion. They see them across the way or on the way to the post office;
they encounter them when they participate in community activities, which are pleasant, but
infrequent, and not at all compulsory” (Melko, et al. 1994:50). Nevertheless, the sense of
place of a community is a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the researchers said about the residents of
Millfield:
Their belief that they can trust their neighbors, call upon them if in need, and their belief that it is a place of peace and refuge does contribute to making it all those things. They have trust, support, and peace mostly because they believe they have it (Melko, et al. 1994:137).

Perhaps the feeling of safety without the pressure to be actively involved in the community is what makes Millfield attractive.

Similarly, maybe just emulating the image of a community-based rural enclave is enough. Perhaps, then, suburban imitation is as good as or better than actual small town living, and we are only fooling ourselves to obtain peace of mind while still having the convenience of living close to the excitement a big city brings. According to John Freie, “the reality of life in modern America has forced a reconsideration of community” (1998:22). Freie cautions against what he dubs “counterfeit community,” the lure of which he says we are particularly susceptible today. These counterfeit communities are born out of the growing perception that Americans have become too individualistic, and the resulting moral crisis can only be circumvented by reinventing community. Occurring primarily in legally private (i.e., exclusionary) rather than public realms, they offer a way to avoid dealing with complex and uncomfortable social problems. These “pseudo-communities,” which separate us from the reality of class, wealth, race, and gender differences, produce “citizens who claim to be a part of a community but feel no sense of social responsibility other than paying dues because the new meaning of community does not require anything more” (Freie 1998:32-35).

We see this phenomenon materialize in the form of gated communities. Setha Low questions whether residents of cities feel a “loss of place” which makes them feel unsafe and insecure in an increasingly culturally diverse neighborhood. This “urban fear discourse” reinforces the perception of need for exclusion behind locked gates and walls away from the
dreaded "others" — whoever they may be. Low defines the suburb as “an exclusionary enclave where upper-class followed by middle-class residents search for sameness, status, and security in an ideal ‘new town’” (2001:47). David Sibley describes this suburb as “a particular kind of *gemeinschaft* within the swathe of individual anonymous worlds that are supposed to constitute the modern metropolis” (1995:38).

Even *our* public spaces have become counterfeit versions of traditional public spaces. For example, shopping malls now take the place of the town square. Freie says that while the reasons for the development of shopping malls appear to be economic, in reality they are social. They create “a false sense of connectedness” while exploiting a fear of difference, constructing exclusionary controls on human interaction, and all while creating the “warm illusion of community” (1998:60-61). Further encouraging this deception, media reports, thriving on violence and crime, breed a “culture of fear,” less to inform than to naturalize these social and physical exclusionary practices (Low 2001:52).

This concept of gated community derives from Western culture’s long-held defensive space concepts. From Hadrian’s Wall in Britain to the army forts of the American colonies, human societies historically have organized to lock “the other” out. Similarly, our locked, wired, and gated prisons serve to keep “the other” sequestered. In either situation, we feel protected because we have control over those whom we think of as threatening our safety. Again we see that, through the perception of what we think of as safe, our built environment reflects our values. The attitude of protecting one’s boundaries, of exclusiveness, we Americans inherit from our colonial ancestors who felt that if their neighbors were repugnant, they could either kill them or move farther west. But, as Berry so aptly put it, “[W]hen there is no frontier to retreat to, the demands of one’s community will be felt, and ways must be
found to deal with them” (1972:153).

Small towns, like suburban neighborhoods, are an extension of our homes. They too can be a refuge, or they can be a fortress. Community sense of place can be welcoming, or it can be exclusionary. New people or new ideas that threaten a community’s collective sense of place may be rejected. Wendell Berry’s novel, *Jayber Crow*, depicts a small town’s hesitance to include an outsider. Jonah Crow was “a native as well as newcomer” in that he was born in the community, left it in his youth, and returned as an adult to open a barber shop on the town square. As the fictional Mr. Crow explains:

If you have lived in Port Williams a little more than two years, you are still, by Port Williams standards, a stranger, liable to have your name mispronounced. . . . And though I was only twenty-two when I came to the town, many of the [townspeople] would call me ‘Mr. Cray’ to acknowledge that they did not know me well. . . . Once my customers took me to themselves, they called me Jaybird, and then Jayber. Thus I became, and have remained, a possession of Port Williams (Berry 2000:11).

As this characterization illustrates, until the locals found some way of “owning” the newcomer, they contributed to his outsider status by emphasizing the unfamiliar about him.

Iowans have a stereotypical reputation for being somewhat taciturn, for exhibiting an unapproachable friendliness. Meredith Wilson, in his *Music Man* (1962), insightfully portrayed turn-of-the-century (the previous one) Iowans as “neck-bowed Hawkeyes” who are “by-God stubborn,” contrary and independent with a “special chip-on-the-shoulder attitude.” However, Wilson also depicted Iowans as generous, who would “give you our shirt and the back to go with it if your crop should happen to die.” This paradox holds true especially for those considered to be outsiders. Consider Wilson’s character “Old Miser” Madison. He may have given the town of River City its picnic park, gymnasium, hospital,
and library, but the town would have nothing to do with him because "who did he think he was anyway!"

In his study of Maine coastal communities, James Acheson (1988) describes how this curiosity of outsider status works where new people find it difficult to participate fully in the local social life. Each treats the other with both humor and hostility. The "locals" -- community members of long standing -- find the newcomers patronizing and condescending, while the "summer people" feel the locals are curt and rude. Acheson attributes this bias to the functional reality that people feel a common identity with those of their own town based on a kind of kinship network enduring among the longtime residents (1988:24-25).

Thus, somewhat clan-like, the townspeople assign great importance to being related to some mythical ancestor, most likely the first settlers of the town. More significantly, this kinship may be a "symbolic manipulation of genealogical links to the past," and not being able to trace a direct lineage to this family is insignificant (Acheson 1988:31, 39). Acheson further explains that acceptance into a closed community, such as a small rural town, occurs on a continuum from complete stranger to core community member. Membership in the core community is reserved for members of long-established families, because newcomers could never accept enough of the value system to be entrusted with membership status and the duties and responsibilities that go along with it (1988:44-45).

Consider the cultural and social changes occurring in a small rural Iowa town as analyzed by Stephen Bloom (2000). Hasidic Jews originally from New York City have created their own enclave within the rural community of Postville. They are also determined to limit and define their own participation within the larger community. Just like Old Miser Madison in the imaginary town of River City, the newcomers to Postville may have saved the
community from an uncertain future with their infusion of much needed capital, but business, political, and social relations between the two groups are strained.

Established Postville community members of mostly German descent criticize that when they attempt to socialize with their new neighbors, their overtures of friendliness, traditionally concurrent with an offer of food, are summarily dismissed. This conflict only exacerbates the endemic presentiment of distrust already reserved for strangers and a fierce protectiveness for the local core value system. Although in large part this rejection by the newcomers is based on religious differences (keeping kosher for one), the locals do not see it as being a cultural issue as much as one of abject rudeness. Having been thus put in their place, they proceed to put the newcomers in theirs with criticisms of just about everything they do, from leaving their lawns unmowed to organizing their own parade -- things symbolically tied to Midwest values and the solidarity associated with a small town way of life.

In the example presented by this community, not only do we see the locals wanting to control the physical and social scope of the perceived invasion from outsiders, but we have the newcomers rejecting the constraints put upon them by the roles assigned to them. David Sibley argues that this boundary consciousness serves a distinct purpose. “In gemeinschaft-like groups, that is, closed, tightly knit communities with something approaching a conscience collective, it may be that adherence to the rules is more likely in times of crisis, when the identity of the community is threatened” (1995:38). As discussed above, the “locals” and the “summer people” described by Acheson, or the old-timers and the newcomers in Postville, illustrate what occurs between factions of a community when the established sense of community, or sense of place, of each is threatened.
Country vs. City/Rural vs. Urban/Little vs. Big

[O]ut there is the fresh country, the pastoral Jeffersonian ideal, the sort of place where that fellow Thoreau built a hut and grew beans, far from the townies living lives of quiet desperation.

--- John G. Mitchell, National Geographic

To a small towner, cities are noisy, hectic, rushed and uncaring, alien and impersonal, dangerous, morally impoverished, crowded, and a bad place to raise children. People tend to endow small towns with a certain ideology, one with very little crime and a strong sense of community. They refer to small towns as quiet, friendly, neighborly, personal, safe, family oriented, with a comfortable way of living that is slower paced, and where it is a good place to raise children. Conversely, true urbanists see cities as free-spirited and exciting, full of opportunity, and blessed with open-minded people. They see small towns as dull, provincial, traditional, and oppressive, where the people are closed minded, recreationally and culturally deprived, out of touch with the rest of society, lacking motivation and vision, judgmental, gossipy, and controlling.

Literary types, like Sinclair Lewis or Sherwood Anderson, described early twentieth century Midwestern small towns as ugly, provincial, narrow-minded, and petty, and the people as “defeated figures of an Old American individualistic small town life” (Anderson 1966:15). Calling upon his childhood experiences in the town of his birth, Sinclair Lewis in Main Street (1920:30-31) scornfully described his heroine’s first impression of Gopher Prairie:

The huddled low wooden houses broke the plains scarcely more than would a hazel thicket. The fields swept up to it, past it. It was unprotected and unprotecting; there was no dignity in it nor any hope of greatness. Only the tall red grain-elevator and a few tinny church-steeples rose from the mass. It was a frontier camp. It was not a place to live in, not possibly, not conceivably.
The people -- they'd be as drab as their houses, as flat as their fields (Lewis 1920:30-31).

These descriptions may hold an element of truth, but they both are subjective and selective in their portrayal. Lewis and Anderson described how they felt about their home towns from their experiences, and their experiences alone. Therefore, their descriptions could hardly be considered objective. Nevertheless, these versions had a powerful influence on the way outsiders felt about small towns at the time they were written.

David Hummon points out that there is a structure to community imagery. “American agrarianism, for instance does not simply assert the superiority of rural over urban life, but involves a system of beliefs and claims: that rural life is closer to nature, fosters greater independence, supports democratic citizenship, and nourishes moral and religious life” (1990:34-35). While rural life is identified with nature, familiarity, community, and tradition, urban life is typically identified with art, strangeness, individualism, and change. To complicate matters further, these binary oppositions can take on opposing meanings, interpreted within the context of diverging values. Ultimately, whichever ideology you confess, “community ideologies identify one form of community with the ‘good life,’ and relegate other places to the netherworld of community problems” (Hummon 1990:35-40).

Fredrik Barth, although discussing ethnic distinctions, made a valid argument about the persistence of social boundaries. He argued that such distinctions “are often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built” (1969:10). In other words, the boundary between country and town is what holds the system together and makes it work. Barth observed that despite socioeconomic changes and the community’s adaptation to them, “cultural differences can persist despite . . . contact and interdependence” (1969:10). Even
though socioeconomic changes may occur, which may result in more flexible social boundaries more easily crossed, the boundaries will still be maintained by the community.

Meredith Ramsay prefers to bridge the dichotomy between urban and rural studies by concentrating on their commonalities instead of their differences. Ramsay criticizes Louis Wirth’s vision of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* for rural and urban values. According to Ramsey, Wirth’s argument is that *gemeinschaft* is the traditional, personal, and communal small town and rural community based on family and kinship ties; *gesellschaft* is urbanism, rational with impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental social relations (Ramsay 1996:19). But culture is not homogeneously shared values. Ramsay argues that “calculations of individual interest are not made in isolation, and rationality itself is contingent on a selection of values and preferences” (1996:12). Ramsay’s position in the rural/urban-duality argument is that a sense of the past is not made up of ideal types rationally and logically linked. Ignoring temporal and cultural processes would only provoke accounts of social change that lack historical grounding. Thus, it is not urbanization, by itself, that transforms social relationships (1996:19-20).

Identification with a location, and identification of one’s self in terms of that location, comes from membership in a “place-based community” that shares a common worldview as a result of common experiences (Ryden 1993:59). There is a difference, however, between how the term country is used for positive connotations (such as country gentleman), and for derogatory ones (as in country hick). This concept is well illustrated by an explanation of the term “country” to embody a certain perception of rural economic, social, and even religious values. Initially the term “country,” dating from fourteenth century England, referred to what we now think of as “county.” It was not until the sixteenth century that country came to
represent rural. Applying the term as an opposition to the Stuart court, country came to represent the ideal of moral and environmental superiority of the rural (Scotland) versus the urban (London) landscape. The term country thus came to mean gentility and upper class. As the numbers of landed gentry increased, so did their power and autonomy. Country became synonymous with loyalty to the local community and its institutions (Fries 1977:44-45).

When English settlers arrived in the New World, they came with a command from the mother country to form towns. As the agricultural village was then the traditional social unit of English country life, the London capitalists envisioned a centralized site drawing on the energies, labors, and products of the surrounding countryside (Lingeman 1980:16). But the Puritans’ unpleasant experiences of the city formed their religious and social consciousness. The Puritans experienced the city, especially London, as an aberration. Contrary to instructions, they created a predominantly rural society in the New World, where the new rendition of country ideology became the prototype for what it is today — not so much based on class as a complex of mutual dependency grounded in shared experiences and values (Fries 1977:43).

In 1918 Meredith Nicholson described “Folks” as an attitude or state of mind. Those people who settled the valley between the Missouri and the Mississippi Rivers — the “Middle West” — are different than Folks of the South or the East. These Middle Westerners are people with a “passion for democracy,” and the Middle West is distinguished by its “achievements, its prodigious energy, its interpretation and practical application of democracy” (1918:2-4). Further, Middle Westerners come from stock “of men and women who carried ideals of life and conduct, of justice and law, into new territory where such matters were often lightly valued” (1918:5). Nicholson concludes that Middle Westerners
believe their rural status affords them “everything essential to human happiness” (1918:38).

In his essays on stewardship of the land, Berry warns us to “Think Little” rather than “Think Big” (1972:71-85). For most of our history, says Berry, our country’s motto has been to Think Big.

While the government is ‘studying’ and funding and organizing its Big Thought, nothing is being done. . . . But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, . . . to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem. A man who is trying to live as a neighbor to his neighbors will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and brotherhood, and let there be no mistake about it -- he is doing that work (1972:80; emphasis in original).

In Gary Comstock’s essay about the Iowan character, he further defines the concepts of big sense and little sense (not to be confused with no sense or nonsense). Big sense is of the cerebral knowledge variety. It comes from big cities, academics and intellectuals. Little sense is more modest and local, full of practical wisdom, “knowledge located in bones and bellies.” (1988:112). Typical manifestations of little sense are lovingness, sensitiveness, and godliness (1988:120). Iowa, Comstock asserts, is a place of little sense (1988:111).

However, today rural people tend to see the bucolic image as detrimental, especially those residents who would like to see their town brought into the twenty-first century.

Wendell Berry (1972), in his little book of “essays cultural and agricultural,” classifies regionalism into categories of what he calls “regionalism based upon pride” and “regionalism based upon condescension,” which he defines as exploitive, specializing in “the quaint and the eccentric and the picturesque.” The latter depends on mythology, generalization, and stereotype, imposing “false literary or cultural generalizations upon false geographical generalizations” (1972:63-64). Moreover, a hollow sense of place based on exploitive or sentimental regionalism can be harmful to the sustainability and preservation of a community.
Des Moines Register columnist David Yepsen calls this “hollow boosterism” that “makes it that much more difficult . . . to face facts” (Yepsen 2002). Or, as Berry explains: “Thus generalized, regional pieties blind a man to his whereabouts and his condition. . . . [T]hey come between him and his place and cause him to be, not its steward and preserver, but its destroyer” (1972:65).

Culture Change Theory

According to Larry Naylor, “All cultures change, and for a variety of reasons. . . . As the physical and sociocultural environments continually change, it is inevitable that people will adjust, or at least attempt to do so” (1996:1). Change can occur as people of different cultures adjust and accommodate each other, as people look for something better or a more efficient way of doing something, and from existing activities or deliberate attempts to respond to perceived problems. Change can be the outcome of all kinds of stress -- economic, social, physical, and environmental. Change can result from unplanned or unexpected consequences of a society’s own planned change efforts, and it can be caused by their attempts to avoid change. “Change also can be purely accidental, the result of unforeseen events, historical processes, or juxtaposition of events in time and place, as several unrelated things come together by chance, at the right moment in time” (Naylor 1996:1). Change that affects one sector of a community will ultimately affect the other sectors — a part cannot be changed without changing the whole. What affects the larger community will affect the small community, and, conversely, what changes the small community will also affect the larger community. Meredith Ramsay posits that “[c]alculations of individual interest are not made in isolation, and rationality itself is contingent on a selection of values and preferences” (1996:12). Because culture is not
homogeneously shared values, change necessarily generates both beneficial and negative consequences.

There is no lack of literature on the changes small towns are experiencing (see, e.g., Allen and Dillman 1994; Bodley 1996; Davidson 1996; Mattson 1996, to name a few). Davidson writes of the “decline and denial” of Midwestern agriculture. “[F]ormerly healthy, mostly middle-class communities throughout the Midwest, the small towns that have given the area its distinctive character since its settlement, are being transformed into rural ghettos - pockets of poverty, unemployment, violence, and despair” (1996a:8). The impact of modern global capitalism is that smaller, less-advantaged rural communities have become known as “forgotten places,” struggling to avoid becoming ghost towns (Mattson 1996b:317-318). The occurrence of this phenomenon in the rural Midwest echos the process John Bodley describes in Bangladesh where “[p]eople are hungry because they have been removed from the land by large landowners and multinational agribusiness interests and because they cannot earn enough to purchase the food they can no longer grow” (Bodley 1996:110). This is what Davidson meant when he warned that the Midwest is in danger of becoming “America’s Third World” (Davidson 1996:9). While there are some anomalous communities that have been blessed by history and geography to escape this prophecy of doom, both qualitative and quantitative data show that American small towns have fallen on hard times with a future prognosis anything but encouraging (Davies 1998:3).

In an essay on the economic and social changes experienced by the Iowa farmer, Douglas Bauer explains how these changes deeply affect him: “I’ve come to realize that what I’ll lose if [my hometown] dies is my most uncompromising mirror” (1988:61). People believe that small towns are timeless, “but only those who stay in them are privileged to live
with that perception. For those who have left and periodically return, the sense of change . . .
is dramatic” (1988:61-62). Bauer is telling us that while we expect our small towns to
imitate our own rate of change, instead small towns are facing change at ever-increasing rates
— some to their complete demise and others to an equally devastating end of life as they
once knew it, often at the hands of change disguised as progress and economic development.

Contrary to Bauer’s insights, John Allen and Don Dillman assert that “change
typically comes slower at community and, particularly, rural-community levels” (1994:47).
Allen and Dillman posit a model for analyzing community socioeconomic change. This
model classifies three distinct eras of social and economic organization, which they term
community-control, mass-society, and information eras. Within the framework of this model,
an analysis of a town would include determining within which of the three eras it is operating.
An understanding of how a town fits into this framework could help in the designing of a
strategy for sustainable response to socioeconomic change.

According to Allen and Dillman (1994:30-34), the community-control era represents
a time when numerous technological, social, and economic forces were mutually supportive,
strengthening internal ties within a community and tightening control over its citizens. This
was a time when community represented the place where people’s daily needs were met.
Community and individual interests and concerns were interchangeable. It was also a time
when status was ascribed, people were chosen for positions of responsibility because of
whom they were, and leadership roles were passed down from generation to generation.
Rules of behavior were mostly unwritten, but everyone knew them, and informal sanctions
like a disapproving word effectively deterred unwanted behavior. Traditional ways of doing
things controlled the way things were done. Everyone knew everyone else on a first-name
basis. Participation in community activities was mandatory.

During this community control era, people who worked within their community everyday had a greater opportunity to focus on children, family, and community. In the past, when a rural town was more isolated from outside influences, the community was not only much more self-sustaining, it was more socially nurturing as well. One element of sense of place for rural Midwestern communities is the perception that everyone in the community knows his or her neighbor and is intimately involved with his or her welfare. But that may no longer be true, if indeed it ever was. With the economic changes experienced by rural communities, those who became displaced from the local economy were forced to go outside the community to work and were forced to limit their investment of social capital once taken for granted.

According to the Allen and Dillman model, following the community control era is the era of the mass society. This era first appeared with the beginning of mass production. Vertical ties between community and higher-level organizations replaced horizontal, or social, linkages. The dramatic impact on rural communities includes a reduction in patronage of local businesses and services and the general decline of rural populations. Achieved status replaced ascribed status. Rules and expectations were formalized and codified. People were selected for jobs and leadership roles based on personal qualifications. Job security was weakened because job descriptions were now designed to fit the position rather than the employee. Expectations for people in various areas of responsibility — home, family, job, civic organization — were all independent of each other, and people were forced to prioritize. Relationships between people were more formal, and people were less likely to know each other well. Formal sanctions punished improper behavior. Voluntary
participation replaced the once-expected involvement in community activities (Allen and Dillman 1994:34-38).

It is perhaps instructive that the above-described mass society era immediately preceded the Great Depression. Robert and Helen Lynd’s study of *Middletown* (1929) looked at economic and social change in a Midwest town during the booming pre-Depression years. They chose the year 1890 as a baseline against which to project their data for the thirty-five-year period that ended in 1925. As the authors observed at the time, “we are probably living in one of the eras of greatest rapidity of change in the history of human institutions.” This was the era when the industrial boom was transforming the “placid county-seat during the nineties into a manufacturing city” (1929:5).

A decade later, the Lynds’ *Middletown in Transition* (1937) concluded their follow-up study during what one might consider to be the transitional period between the Allen and Dillman model’s community control and mass society eras. The Lynds went back to Middletown to reexamine this community in light of the 1929 stock market crash and the economic and social Great Depression that followed. In this sequel, one thing the Lynds wanted to see was how the catastrophic downturn in the national economy had impacted this community and how it was responding to those changes. According to the Lynds, Middletown saw cultural change as more threatening than the economic change, and tended to dismiss sudden change as against the laws of nature (1937:xvi). It was this attitude that had the most traumatic consequences for the community. As the authors pronounced, during the early 1920s prosperity, “Middletown busily turned its wishes into horses — and then abruptly and helplessly rode them over a precipice” (1937:3).

Middletown’s fear of culture change might best be understood in terms of a change in
technology. Because cultures are not closed systems, they are affected by forces outside the culture. The difference from a community-controlled era to a mass-produced society, as set out in Allen and Dillman’s model above, is akin to the difference between a hunting and gathering society to a society of increased population and economic surplus. Both examples demonstrate a change in the level of vulnerability to the environment for survival. Julian Steward proposed that cultural ecology “is less concerned with the origin and diffusion of technologies than with the fact that they may be used differently and entail different social arrangements in each environment” (1955:38). Similar to both of the above scenarios, advanced technology, along with economic surplus and higher population density, lead to a shift from egalitarian social organization to class stratification (Barrett 1996:85).

While being careful not to stray too far into the realm of cultural determinism, we can appreciate how global technological advancement impacts culture through both the individual and the society. Steward’s vision of an ecology of culture explains how individual workers in a mass-producing era may react to new technology differently than what employers had expected. Differing social arrangements in the form of a restructured social hierarchy may be the result of mitigation efforts by the new middle class and the new worker class to the changes in the way they work. An individual’s place in the social pecking order, then, may determine how he reacts to socioeconomic change.

Similar to Steward, and echoing the Allen and Dillman model, C. Wright Mills explains how the diffusion of mass technology caused the rise of the new middle class along with its deteriorating work ethic:

The new office at once raises a hierarchy and levels out personnel. The hierarchy is based upon the power and authority held by the managerial cadre, rather than upon the levels of skill. . . . Within this
hierarchy and mass [the individual employee] is classified by the functions he performs (1953:209).

Sometimes artificial distinctions of position or title are conferred on the employee to “improve morale and to discourage employee ‘solidarity’” (1953:209). Accordingly, the “gospel of work,” central to the historic traditional American work ethic, distinct in its enthusiasm and aggressiveness, declined under a mass-producing regime. What followed were worker apathy and resentment for the “necessary evil” of work, leaving employees unmotivated and unfulfilled, and totally devoid of pride in craftsmanship and skill (Mills 1953:215-238).

Recently, we have experienced a huge technological revolution, going from the industrial age to the computer or information age, forcing yet another reconfiguration of traditional worker and class divisions. Coincidentally, the third element of Allen and Dillman’s community change analysis model is that of the information era. Here information replaces fundamental elements of their model’s previous two eras, like time, energy, labor, and other resources for the production of goods and services. Rather than a man’s labor, a manager now looks to innovation in communication capability to increase profit. With computers, fewer people are needed for the making of just about every product, eliminating traditional jobs, especially for unskilled or specific-skilled laborers in the process. Those who possess the skills necessary to compete in this new niche rise in the socioeconomic hierarchy, while traditionally-skilled laborers fall to the bottom.

While information substitutes for other components of production, eliminating some jobs, there are positive benefits as well. Perhaps the most significant aspect is how workers process information -- “absorbing it, reorganizing it, and adding to it in a creative way that

Steward may have rejected the idea of unilinear cultural evolution in favor of a more complex understanding of evolution as multi-linear -- that cultures evolve at different rates even if in specific stages, such as those the Allen and Dillman model of socioeconomic change eras illustrates. Still, the whole notion of cultural evolution is anathema to those who disagree that all change is progress. Looking through a different theoretical lens, political economy theory shifts the focus from individual communities to large-scale, political economic systems. Political economy theorists tend to focus on symbols involved in the development of class or group identity in the context of political and economic dominance and subordination struggles (Ortner 1984:142). The main achievement of the information age is to bring small towns into the global economy in a big way. Thus we can see how societies change largely in response to the impacts of capitalist penetration. The information era is changing the way Americans work, and the survival of small towns may depend upon their commitment to resist these changes or how and to what extent they attempt to mitigate the effects of change with adaptations and innovations of their own.

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6When the information age is well settled in much of the “developed” world, it is ironic that, in a state that brags about its connectedness via a statewide network, rural Iowa, including Eagle Rock, is still struggling to obtain high speed Internet access necessary to bring it fully into the information age. This is perhaps instructive of the urban attitudes toward rural America in general.
Ramsay reasons that “because specific types of economies can sustain certain ways of life and not others,” economic change is potentially a restructuring event. “[Economic] growth threatens to disrupt long established power relations, degrade cultural values, and upset delicately balanced subsistence arrangements” (Ramsay 1996:108). The power struggle currently taking place in the small Iowa town of Postville, for instance, illustrates Ramsay’s thesis. The newcomers transformed the traditional concept of the family farm and made it their own. Bloom hints that the established Postville community members are threatened by the economic success of the newcomers. They were not only successful where the old-timers had failed, but they refused to share it with the rest of the community. This, coupled with conflicting social and religious attitudes, only exacerbates what Sibley referred to in explaining boundary consciousness (see discussion above), where adherence to the traditional rules of behavior becomes more critical in times of crisis, when traditional community identity is being threatened (1995:38).

New people with new ideas threaten a community’s collective sense of place and may encounter resistance. For instance, in the matter of historic preservation and back-to-the-country movements, it may be the newcomer who seeks to preserve the historic charm of the community, its old buildings and small town ways, while the natives may desire modernization. Newcomers may find quaint the central post office where everyone stops by to get his mail, while longtime residents may be petitioning for door-to-door delivery. While transplants from the city may want to preserve the original antique quality of the community’s historic homes and public buildings with zoning and historic preservation regulations, the people who have grown up in the community may be unhappy that newcomers are trying to stop them from updating uncomfortably old-fashioned homes with
modern additions. Outsiders may try to take over administration of the town’s affairs or petition to keep people from having a business in their homes. Newcomers may perceive improvements like bright modern street lights as a compromise to historical authenticity, while old-timers may think progress is safer streets.

Policies for change are prime targets of criticism and resistance. An outstanding example comes from Charles Rutheiser’s discussion of the rapidly growing city of Atlanta, Georgia. Preservationists in Atlanta have had to confront the city boosters’ desire to make it new and modern for international business promotions. Preservationists in Atlanta want to protect what, to Black politicians are “unpleasant reminders of a segregated city” (Rutheiser 1996:57). Similarly, Jackson warns against becoming too optimistic about the economic development of small towns via its town square. Jackson says of the revitalization efforts of small towns and urban historic districts he has visited: “I had the feeling that this expensive facelifting affected the rest of the city very little. Architecture buffs enjoy the results, and so do tourists, but if you are a resident of the city or merely on your way to work, you see the display in a different light” (1994:152). Likewise, Lippard explains that in Charleston, South Carolina, “the battles have heated up between advocates of property rights and lucrative ‘progress’ on the one hand, and advocates of historic preservation on the other” (1997:96).

Eric Wolf wrote that “[t]he enactment of power always creates friction — disgruntlement, foot-dragging, escapism, sabotage, protest or outright resistance” (1989:590). Michel Foucault theorized that “the belief that one is resisting repression, whether by self-knowledge or by speaking the truth, supports domination, for it hides the real working of power” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:169). How, then, can we explain what Patricia Hill Collins calls “the willingness of the victim to collude in her or his own
victimization" (1993:619)? Foucault asserts that power is positive, productive, and consists of a set of relations whereby “docile bodies” and “normalized subjects” reproduce a set of social norms and truths (Dubois 1991:5). Thus, the source of power and how it is naturalized are key to understanding the workings of power. Let us examine how this might work in the small town scenario.

To understand the workings of power, first we need to discover the functions unequal relations of power serve in society (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982:185-186). Conflict theory asserts that conflict is intrinsic to social interaction. Stanley Barrett (1996:94) quotes Max Gluckman’s argument that “conflicts in one set of relationships lead to the establishment of cohesion in a wider set of relationships.” While Marxism assumes that conflict among competing interest groups is what drives social change, Barrett concludes that a division of labor, with diverging interests between wage-earners and the owners of the means of production, provides the source of conflict in a capitalist society (1996:97).

According to Barrett, Victor Turner viewed conflict as individual factions striving for power, prestige, and wealth, with social crises representing the mechanism to achieve group unity (Barrett 1996:103-104). Thus, unequal power within a community causes conflict between the owners of power, forcing them to negotiate and renegotiate the balance of power and, thus, return the society to a state of equilibrium. Unequal power from outside the group generates internal solidarity as the community resists together the external forces of change. According to Foucault, power’s productive abilities relate to its position of exteriority to the system. Thus, it takes resistance to the inequalities of power to precipitate a response which will in turn justify the power structure’s display of power. The use of power, and the resulting resistance to it, are both functional parts of the system as a whole,
with power itself being outside but not independent of the power structure.

As Eric Wolf advised:

Power is implicated in meaning through its role in upholding one version of significance as true, fruitful, or beautiful, against other possibilities that may threaten truth, fruitfulness, or beauty. ... The cultural assertion that the world is shaped in this way and not in some other has to be repeated and enacted, lest it be questioned and denied (Wolf 1989:593).

A small community’s moral code perpetuates the unequal structures of power. However, violation of that moral code equals resistance to the system and a challenge to the authority of its representatives (Abu-Lughod 1990:47). Moreover, community ideology masks the workings of power and thus staves off resistance to power. When the authority of the system is challenged, its power is unmasked and the flaws of the code become visible to the society it governs (Wolf 1989:593). To put this in context, the traditional worldview of the Midwestern small town was created in the name of family values and religious tenets, the traditional version of what is true, fruitful, and beautiful. If, as Naylor says, any change necessitates modification of both behavior and belief (1996:158), then any change in a community’s learned beliefs and practices is a potential threat to its survival. Thus the intrusion of a new technology or change in the economy upsets the existing balance of power and suggests that there are inherent flaws in the system. The resistance that ensues inevitably produces change, albeit working not against the system, but as part of it.

In the small town of Middletown, the community was met with four types of change-making experiences. It suffered sudden and great strain on its institutions, a threat of doubt to its belief system, pressure for change from the larger culture outside it, and actual implementation of changes from outside agencies. During the depression, Middletown was
forced to shift from a preoccupation with becoming rich to worrying if it could stay alive. Its faith in the ideology of individual self-sufficiency, that everyone can and should support himself, gave way to the realization that one-fourth of its population could not find work. Citizens were unhappy that centralized administrative authority was intruding in local affairs. The working class then organized against the business class. Perhaps being the most devastating development, some local youth rejected the commonly held values of their parents and accused them and their entire community value system of making the world the botched mess it had become (Lynd and Lynd 1937:489). These conflicts all derived from external sources. They were so devastating as to lead Lynd and Lynd to surmise that “[t]hese ten years of boom and depression might be expected to leave permanent marks on the culture” (1937:487).

The Lynds concluded, however, that far from making permanent marks on the culture, “Middletown is overwhelmingly living by the values by which it lived in 1925” (1937:489). In the eight years since the stock market crash that heralded the devastating depression years, Middletown had not succeeded in repelling change, it merely lived like it had, holding on to the belief that this change was only temporary. Even so, within the bounds of the system, the old social norms and truths were reproduced, albeit in a new configuration. The inevitable resistance to change acted as a leveling mechanism, reestablishing equilibrium by reevaluating the balance of power within the real working of the system of power. The old socioeconomic system, along with its proponents, was forced to adapt to the new socioeconomic reality. Yet their resistance served to mitigate the effects of change.

Sherry Ortner (1984) explains that, counter to the inherent violence of conflict theory
or a Foucauldian power system, Marshall Sahlins' theory is that people in different social positions have different interests and act accordingly. This does not imply conflict or struggle, nor does it necessarily mean that people with different interests have different views of the world. People will seek to enhance their respective positions if the opportunity arises, but within the traditionally bounded means for people of their position. Accordingly, when traditional responses do not work as they always have, change will occur. "Change comes about when traditional strategies . . . are deployed in relation to novel phenomena . . . which do not respond to those strategies in traditional ways" (Ortner 1984:155).

That this change comes about without conflict and struggle is due to the mitigating aspects of culture and the pressures of societal norms. These "social and cultural filters" function to select or reinterpret outside influences (Ortner 1984:159). In this sense, a community's filters are whatever it does to mitigate change stemming from outside influences. Without these filters, "the transmission of novel meanings, values, and categorical relations to succeeding generations may be hindered" (Ortner 1984:157). Thus a county fair and an ice cream social on the town square, reminiscent of days gone by and traditional small town values, act to filter out the extraneous influences. They bring people away from their televisions or distract them from the allure of distant city attractions. In this way, society reproduces its traditional sense of place. Indeed, public rituals such as summer band concerts, Easter parades, or old settlers' day celebrations symbolically mitigate the effects of socioeconomic change.

Nativistic movements attempt to mitigate outside influences by returning to traditional or cultural patterns. Certain aspects of traditional culture take on a symbolic value. In rejecting changes brought by the white man, the Ghost Dance ritual was supposed to make
the North American Indians immune to the outsiders’ evil ways and evil bullets (Whiteford and Friedl 1992:336). Similarly, the small town social rituals calling back the “good old days” and a traditional sense of place are reminiscent of the Ghost Dance. They resemble nativistic movements in that the local people are attempting to resist change by symbolically incorporating elements of the past into their everyday lives.

A community knows itself through the connections people make over time, the trust and respect they develop for each other, and a common sense of purpose they create and maintain (Freie 1998:21). In the past, when social events on the town square brought youth and adults alike into town from outlying farms, this common sense of purpose was important for community solidarity. It is just as important today. According to Basso:

> Deliberately and otherwise, people are forever presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where and how they dwell. In large ways and small, they are forever performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place — and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are (Basso 1996:110).

Today a performance of a mock hillbilly wedding, where prominent community members dress up and act out the stereotypical “shotgun” wedding of the past, does more than simply entertain. This enactment of an event from the “good old days,” where family values were the rule and where acceptance of responsibility was enforced, reminds residents of who they are and from where they come.

History is repeating itself, as it tends to do, and stresses of war, new technology, and economic uncertainty similar to those that occurred during the turn of the twentieth century are now occurring at the beginning of the twenty-first. As a war begun by terrorists looms large and the country’s economy is faltering, small towns are indeed dealing with their own issues of socioeconomic change. It does not matter under what theoretical paradigm we
analyze the data. It is irrelevant whether we agree with Bauer, who says that small rural communities are facing change at an inflated rate from urban communities, or with Allen and Dillman, who produce evidence that small communities are more insulated from the vagaries of change than their urban counterparts. These are matters for individual interpretation.

What is significant is the level of community action taken in response to these changes. As Allen and Dillman said of the modern day rural Pacific Northwest community of Bremer, “The struggle in which Bremerites engage on a daily basis is one between maintaining those community-control processes and responding to the intrusions of mass society . . . . It is the strength of the former that gives them the ability to hold at bay many of the latter” (1994:220-221). Community action in the town of Bremer can be an inspiration for other small communities. Whatever socioeconomic change they face, if they are to sustain their community, “Bremerites will be doing what being a Bremerite is all about, working for the good of the community and its citizens” (1994:222).

Adapting to Change: Marketing the Small Town Image

There are times when the only vacation spot in the world is the past.

---King Arthur to Merlin, Camelot

In general, Americans persist in idealizing rural America as a security blanket. We have the belief that while the rest of the world is economically and morally deteriorating, our small towns are immune to the problems of the big cities. “[N]o matter how ragged the blanket is getting around the edges, we fiercely cling to it as we dream our American dreams” (Davidson 1996:72). So, is sense of place merely a figment of the imagination, a product of imagineering or making place in order to sell the idea of community to the ultimate customer? Or is it just a nostalgic refusal to admit to the hard truths of our modern world? Are we
really looking back to the simplicity of small town living, or are we merely trying to escape the complexities of modern life?

Lippard posits an answer: “Nostalgia is a way of denying the present as well as keeping some people and places in the past, where we can visit them when we feel like taking a leave of absence from modernity” (Lippard 1997:85). Visual icons can include an imagineered physical space designed to appeal to people’s sense of nostalgia -- their memories of growing up in a small town, both the real and the imagined. In 1955 Walt Disney called on his memories of growing up in a small Missouri town in the early 1900s to reproduce his first “Main Street USA” in Disneyland. Richard Francaviglia explains our fascination with early Main Street as “a sense of collective innocence in that our youths are times of relative simplicity before we experience significant personal, economic, and sexual responsibility” (1996:154). In this way, Disney’s brand of social engineering shapes the attitudes and perceptions of Main Street USA visitors (1996:156).

According to David Hummon (1990:48), in the 1970s, rural America experienced a revival as urban Americans became increasingly disenchanted with so-called “urban problems” and sought a type of community where they could “control their lives more effectively.” Richard Lingeman explains that the survivors of the socially tumultuous 1960s, hungering for community, led a back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s. These “latter-day-utopians” also fostered the movements of organic farming, zero population growth, and independence from big government, mass society, and big cities (1980:441-442). The completion of an interstate highway system connecting cities across the country made small towns less isolated. Suddenly escaping to the countryside was feasible and still within reasonable commuting distance for higher paying jobs and better shopping or entertainment.
While the town square, its central courthouse, and the surrounding shops once comprised the hub of business, shopping, legal, and financial transactions, today in most small towns, the square presents a mere shadow of its former self. Community planners Rusty Brooks and Cindy Searcy explain that “[d]owntowns impart community history and traditions and also serve as indicators of economic vitality to residents and visitors, alike” (1995:14). In attempting to ride the prevailing winds of economic change, small towns have turned to the downtown area for revitalization and economic development. In both visual image and in prose, small towns market their restored downtowns in true Disney-esque fashion. Often these restorations are more Victorian than their original.

Yet Davidson warns that our rural economy and our rural community can never be what it once was, despite all the restoration and preservation and revitalization efforts (1996:9). It may fit into some romantic grand scheme to resurrect hitching posts on the town square instead of parking meters, but even staunch preservationists would not want to take the village too realistically into the past to include manure in the streets from a horse-drawn economy. Still, gazebos or bandstands are symbolic artifacts of social function. They are places associated with music, speeches, and public oratory — nostalgia and patriotism combined. Other public spaces like the courthouse square may be designed as nodes or pockets of green space for resting or socializing that “introduce an element of centrality and enclosure, and in so doing attempt to influence our perceptions of Main Street as a safe environment” (Francaviglia 1996:174). One value of the town square is its ability to attract people (Kenyon 1989:13). Perceptions of being safe and pedestrian-friendly help encourage social use of public space. A thriving downtown provides a public gathering place while it stands as a symbol of unity. Thus, the town square’s future seems most likely to lie in social
and cultural development rather than restoration as an economic center (Kenyon 1989:17).

According to some theorists, a “triage” approach to supplying state and federal aid to economically struggling towns on a most-likely-to-succeed-comes-first basis will let these towns die a natural death, and the survivors will ultimately have to move to a larger regional center (Daniels and Lapping 1987:279-280). Bill Steiner claims that “many planners have virtually written off . . . any community under 2,500 people” (1992:26). The rationale behind this blatant economic determinism is that small towns cannot expect state and federal funds to continue to subsidize their public service costs. However, this notion of destiny does not take into account the strength of a community’s will to live. It completely ignores what Richard Cohen calls those “elements of environmental imagery, so critical in day-to-day identity and survival in a community” (1977:174). It fails to account for community sense of place or the power this symbolic identification can have for community action.

It is, after all, a community’s solidarity that commands its political strength and its ability to define and accomplish economic development goals. This idea of community self-image and community participation takes control out of the hands of fate or outside interests and gives economic development power back to the community. Not only can local efforts influence job growth, but “in smaller economies the incremental effect of effort is [even] greater than in larger ones” (Hirschl and Summers 1983:30, emphasis in original). Further, sustainable change is change inspired and controlled locally. This is important because it means that we cannot look at economic development of a small town in the same old way we always have. Rather than being at the mercy of economic development agencies or the whim of government decision-makers, communities can directly affect their own attractiveness to manufacturing firms and other types of business entities by anticipating physical requirements.
and by providing evidence of a community’s solidarity (Lloyd and Wilkinson 1985:26).

A revitalized or revitalizing town “can present a way of life that represents small town Iowa at its best. A decaying [downtown] hurts more than anything else. Tourists can see the run-down buildings and think that the people just don’t care” (Meek 1995:9). The way our downtowns look not only reflects how we feel about our community, but more importantly, it affects the way we interact within the community. “Architecture and design affect behavior and can enable us to keep a sense of our roots, a valuable asset in times of great social and economic change” (Francaviglia 1996:179-180). It is understandable, then, that preserving what was built at a time of major technological and social change, such as the industrial revolution at the turn of the twentieth century, could be so significant at another time of social and technological change at the turn of the twenty-first century.

A rural community’s vitality is not necessarily based on its population, its market advantages, or its spatial location in relation to competing towns. A “community viability analysis” concept considers social capital such as a community’s quality of life image and its horizontal or social linkages, churches and civic organizations. Citizens’ availability and their level of participation in sociocultural activities are important as indicators of the level of community solidarity (Mattson 1996a:17-18). While other aspects of a community work in conjunction with and contribute to its economic attributes, it is the aesthetics of a community’s built environment and the level of amenities such as municipal services, libraries, and social capital which first and foremost demonstrate a community’s vitality.

Jim Mountain thinks that innovative promotion is the key to renewal of economic and social activity. Self-promotion of a positive image highlights to its citizens and neighbors alike the unique, the special, and the exciting things about the town (1985:221). Charles
Rutheiser borrowed Disney’s term “imagineering” to explain this phenomenon as it is occurring in Atlanta, Georgia. Similarly, Francaviglia explained why the same approach by Disney was successful in parlaying small town nostalgia into a multi-million dollar tourist bonanza in California and Florida.

Historically, we can see the same thing in the Massachusetts Bay towns of the New World, where Pilgrims and Puritans attempted to recreate “their plain country villages” in the wilderness, hoping to “forestall the economic chaos which hovered over them in England” (Fries 1977:40). This notion is parlayed in the re-creation efforts of New England towns in recent decades to foster economic revitalization through tourism. Francaviglia compares the romanticization of Main Street marketing towns of the Midwest with these idealized versions of New England Villages. He says that historic preservation of the rehabilitated Main Streets has become an important “visual icon” which, with uniform colors and signage, paved streets and flower boxes, is a far cry from the reality of the “equine latrines” (dirt or mud streets littered with horse droppings) pervading the original (Francaviglia 1996:142, 144).

Disney and the Atlanta city boosters both were successful in their attempts to produce a town with universal appeal because they “intuitively knew that images were as important as substance” (Francaviglia 1996:157). You can apply this principle to small rural towns as well. Just as visitors to Disney’s Main Street USA are the “ultimate customers” (Francaviglia 1996:156), visitors to a revitalized, historically preserved Midwestern small town are the ultimate customers of the same type of social engineering that made Disney so successful. A revitalized Main Street or public square provides a visual icon to all, locals and outsiders alike, representing a thriving commerce, a community working together in harmony, and a place where all is right with the world.
As Francaviglia explains, "If looked at iconographically, the small town Main Street would then emerge as one of our most mundane and yet metaphorical places"; whether Disneyland in California and Florida or Eagle Rock in Iowa, "Main Street serves to remind us that all places are both real and imaginary" (1996:158-159) (emphasis in original). Thus, we strive to make Main Street 2001 look like an iconographic, idealized version of Main Street 1901.

Ending a collection of essays regarding Canada’s Main Streets, Jacques Dalibard entreats us to look at Main Street’s problems with common sense.

What exactly is Main Street? What does it do? What does it offer? Why was it successful for so long? . . . The trick is to realize, as Dorothy did, that there is no place like home: all the resources Main Street needs are already there, waiting to be used. The answers to Main Street’s problems are on the doorstep (Dalibard 1985:237).

While rural areas were once remote and marginalized, they were never independent of the wider regional economies. Exchange among towns and between small towns and the larger urban areas was never nonexistent. With better transportation systems, more potential employees in the form of displaced farmers looking for work, economic incentives from towns to attract new business like lower taxes and cheaper land, it has become practical for business entities to move away from urban centers and out into the countryside. This movement to small towns can be good for rural communities financially, but as is often the case, along with restoration and redevelopment comes urban encroachment and disruption of a community’s traditional sense of place (Lingeman 1980:441-442).

In adapting to a changing economic base and a changing social demographic, these towns look to achieve a balance between the maintenance of their small town character and the progress of their economic growth. David Lamb (1993:151) speaks of this challenge in
North Dakota: “It wants to preserve its character as an agricultural society that provides a stable environment, jobs and self-esteem . . . and at the same time, to strengthen its economy it needs to attract manufacturing, which in turn will bring in outsiders and perhaps create the problems other places already have” — slums, drugs, and poverty.

We live in a culture so longing for community that we imagine or “imagineer” community where there is none. Sense of place for a genuine place is missing in many modern lives as people move from country to town, state to state, coast to coast, and nation to nation. To feel that rootedness Nabhan and Trimble (1994) talk about, we have to search our experiences, both real and imagined, to find that which will fulfill our longing for community. Small-town life can be a symbol for all those things which we desire in a safe haven. We are easily led by our imaginations with words and phrases that symbolize for us all that is good and simple about country towns.

While die-hard urbanites may not be so willing to leave their world behind permanently, a stroll down Main Street is a welcome respite from reality, be it in the rural Midwest or in Disneyland. Yet it is not simply in tourism that sense of place advertising is most beneficial. Tourism may bring in added value through the dollars spent on food or retail goods, but it does little to sustain a desired level of community. Rather, exploitation of sense of place may be most useful when it attracts new blood and new capital investment. Small towns have often been unrealistically exoticized for their otherness. Yet it is this very otherness that could attract disgruntled urbanites in a new back-to-the-country movement.

In the past, there has been a tendency to see small towns as proto-cities rather than entities in their own right. This kind of Social Darwinian thinking encourages the idea that all progress is essentially good change that separates us from our more primitive beginnings.
Nevertheless, some negative consequences accompany all change. Policy is not just a political or economic process. It is a cultural process because agents of change have their own ideological goals that are different from those of the people they are trying to help—goals formed from biased, culturally-based assumptions of how the proposed strategy should work, not on how it will ultimately affect the culture of the group as a whole. As Foucault so aptly put it, people do not always know "what they do does" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:187).

Economic development is a high priority for the state of Iowa, and this is especially true for its rural areas as they struggle to reverse a downward trend. Chambers of Commerce and community leaders are actively promoting their communities in the hope of attracting new business interests and new citizens. Exploitation of a community’s sense of place or its historic public image is a tool they can use to lure potential investors. The leaders of the state of Iowa are not just looking to bring Iowa natives back home and keep young Iowans from leaving. In order to sustain economic growth, they believe that importing workers from other countries is imperative. These new residents will inevitably share a different ideology and will eventually alter the traditional sense of place. These changes and how communities adapt to them are increasingly valid issues for the future of small towns in Iowa.

We need to understand a community’s sense of place within its own local social system in order to mediate the inevitable changes that will be taking place in the next century. If we can assume that a community’s collective core values and norms affect how it will act and react to economic and social changes, then decoding its sense of place is surely the key to preparing for the future. Small towns have the opportunity to become models of culture change. The important questions are, do they want to follow the nostalgia-based Disney
model, or do they want to create a more realistic and, therefore, more sustainable model?
How can a culture modeled on nostalgia be reconciled with the technology and ideals of the future?

To cope with its changing economic base, the community may employ economic development techniques which exploit its sense of place, hoping to attract new people and new business. While the rural community may be trying to maintain a sense of its rurality, it may or may not be attempting to separate itself from encroaching urbanization. The real challenge is to make the community robust enough, yet not grow so much that its growth overwhelms the community's traditional sense of place. It may be a community's desire to remain small that underlies its efforts, but these same small town values and rural quality of life may also be compromised by efforts to bring people and business in that will ultimately challenge the existing worldview. Ortner explains that although actors' intentions are primary, the resulting social change is not the intended consequence of the action. "To say that society and history are products of human action is true, but only in a certain ironic sense. They are rarely the products the actors themselves set out to make" (Ortner 1984:157). This then is the conundrum for rural communities: how to promote economic growth without destroying the internal dynamics that development is designed to protect.
CHAPTER 3. METHODS

My study takes place in the rural Midwestern town of Eagle Rock. The focus of this study is the town square and how it represents, in more than a metaphorical sense, the “soul” of the community. While the town square, with its central courthouse and surrounding shops, has traditionally been the hub of government, business, shopping, legal, and financial transactions, to the town’s people, the square represents much more than that. It is the focal point of the community, representing an imaginary ideal of what small town America should be and perhaps once was. My thesis will discuss how anthropological methods may be used to investigate these issues. It will discuss how anthropological theory may be used to understand the issues of cultural and socioeconomic change in the small rural Midwestern community of Eagle Rock.

Issues

There are several issues to on which to focus within the context of this study. One is historically, what the town, and more specifically the town square, was like in the 1940s, 1960s, 1980s, and now at the beginning of a new millennium. This involves what economic and social changes are taking place and how they affect each other. Thus, it is appropriate to look at what coping mechanisms the changing economic base and encroaching urbanization inspire, and what strategies the town adopts for negotiating the effects of those changes.

Another important aspect of social change is the resistance to changes taking place, including the cultural roadblocks inhibiting change. The demise or the survival of small towns may depend upon how strong is their commitment to resist change or how and to what extent they are willing and able to accept, mitigate, and adapt to change with innovations of their own. An integral part of a community is its sense of place. As this research centers on
a small rural community and how it handles the changes it is facing, the community’s collective sense of place is vital to any analysis thereof. It is also appropriate to establish how members of the community, as individuals, see themselves within the social context.

As this is a rural community, we must first understand the perceptual dichotomies of rural versus urban, country versus city, and small versus big. This will include such issues as why people prefer to live in small towns and what they perceive are the benefits and advantages. It also includes the political issue currently being hotly debated in this state as to why preservation of small towns is (or is not) important to the economic and cultural welfare of the state as a whole.

All of these issues ultimately affect the process of change. Thus, we must also learn what are the agencies of change and who are the change agents/implementers of change; who make up the resistance; what core cultural values are being most affected by the changes; and what the people themselves want in the form of change or change mediation. We can learn from these issues how sense of place might be exploited and/or disarmed to achieve the desired goals. No analysis of socioeconomic change would be complete without some thought on smart growth and sustainability issues, or how growth can be seen as a positive response to change without losing what is desirable about rural small town communities.

It is important to keep in mind that the agencies of change working here (Main Street, Chamber of Commerce, historical preservation committees, etc.) are, in large part, made up of volunteers, and thus the agents of change are a part of the group targeted for change. This fact complicates the issues and analysis, and makes the research even more interesting.

**Data Collection Procedures**

To understand how the town square functions, I considered how the physical space of
the square is designed to fit the social structure, such as availability and location of benches for seating, location and sufficiency of sidewalks and lighting, amenability to children's and teenagers' activities, and the like. I originally intended to do an in-depth quantitative study of the area, counting the pedestrians in each quadrant of the public square who used it during specific times of the day. I specifically wanted to look at Saturday because my own past knowledge of the town and elicited ethnographic testimony led me to believe that historically Saturday was the busiest and most social day of the week for the town square. This count was to include the visitors to the county courthouse, the courthouse lawn, and the businesses on the perimeter. But when I attempted a trial study on a beautiful spring day in 2001, I found that the only one enjoying the park-like setting was me. I saw very little activity in the quadrant of the square I had chosen for my count. From a subsequent survey of business hours posted on the doors of the establishments, I discovered that the few businesses that open on Saturday are closed by noon. After conducting my abbreviated activity count that particular Saturday morning, producing and analyzing an activity map of the data, and upon further consideration, I abandoned this approach to data collection.

However, I did conduct extensive research over a two-year period, during which time I compiled a large body of documents including local newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor containing information of local social happenings and discussions on topics important to the community. Other secondary data which informed this study include articles from the *Des Moines Register*, the local newspaper, farming magazines, tourism pamphlets, and Chamber of Commerce information. This unobtrusive form of data collection assisted in giving me a general feeling of the local ideology and worldview.

I collected historical and ethnohistorical documentation from visits to the Eagle Rock
Heritage Center, as well as interviews with people who remember how the town square was used in the past. I talked with people who recalled what the economic and social life was like in Eagle Rock, from the early decades of the 1900s to the present. More specifically, I learned what the public square meant to the town at that time.

My primary method of data collection was participant observation. I attended Chamber of Commerce or other community organization sponsored social events around the square such as the Thursday afternoon farmers market where local citizens bring garden produce, baked goods, and yard sale items to sell. During the summer months, local businesses take turns sponsoring evening events to follow the farmers market. These often include free food, which is a sure bet for a good attendance. These events afforded me the opportunity to mingle, ask questions, and observe.

I also attended smaller group-sponsored activities, such as the outing sponsored by the women’s group of the church to which one of my informants belonged. I attended a local community meeting in City Hall and fund-raising events such as the barn dance and hay ride sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. As I enjoyed impromptu get-togethers with old friends, as in all the above activities, I exploited the opportunity to gather information and insight as well.

While most of my primary data came from participant observation, I also scheduled semi-structured personal interviews with members of the community. I conducted person-to-person interviews of more than twenty individuals — local citizens, business people, and community leaders — some multiple times, regarding the issues outlined above. I began the interviews with an interview guide, a list of prepared questions and topics I wanted covered. However, rather than adhering strictly to the list in any specific order, I allowed the
interviewee some latitude to express themselves in their own way. This always led me to
information I otherwise would have missed. Such semi-structured interviews work well
when backed up by a predetermined list of questions to which the interviewer can refer when
needed. At all times I kept in mind those issues I particularly wanted them to talk about, and
in this way I was able to steer them toward the subjects I most needed them to cover.

In his book on ethnography, Michael Agar (1980:70) explained the difficulties in
formulating rigid, predetermined questions for an interview:

It’s not necessarily that ethnographers don’t want to test hypotheses. It’s just that if they do, the variables and operationalizations and
sample specifications must grow from an understanding of the group
rather than from being hammered on top of it no matter how poor the fit. You can’t specify the questions you’re going to ask when you
move into the community; you don’t know how to ask questions yet. You can’t define a sample, you don’t know what the range of social
types is and which ones are relevant to the topics you’re interested in.

Another important aspect of ethnography is capturing the emic point of view. Agar
points out that the people being studied come to the table relatively late in the process and
then only within the alien framework of the interview schedule set out by the researcher
(1980:68). Under this framework, the people are marginalized; they are denied their voice.
Bruner explains that it is important to tell the stories so that we can analyze them or put them
into a theoretical framework. Nevertheless, it is ultimately up to them to define or interpret
their stories for themselves. “By focusing on narratives or dramas or carnival or any other
expressions, we leave the definition of the unit of investigation up to the people, rather than
imposing categories derived from our own ever-shifting theoretical frames” (Turner and
Bruner 1986:9).

On many occasions, I found unstructured interviews were not only necessary, but also
quite informative. Unstructured interviews allow less control over the interview, but are still useful as long as they are relevant to some aspect of the research topic. To glean an understanding from the emic, or insider's, point of view, it is imperative that the researcher build a rapport with and gain the trust of the subjects of her investigation. In her ethnography about prostitutes, Claire Sterk explained the approach this way:

I wanted to learn from them and the best way to do so was by engaging in a dialogue rather than interrogating them. Only by letting the women identify their salient issues and the topics they wanted to address was I able to gain an insider's perspective (2001:18).

I found this method to be especially advantageous when talking to people in settings such as the aforementioned women's outing or when participating in more unstructured social situations. Often they opened the subject in ways I would not have thought of, and I was able to ask questions merely for clarification. Again as Sterk explained:

Had I only wanted to focus on the questions I had in mind, developing such [trusting] relationships with them might have been more difficult (2001:16).

Thus, I was still able to guide the discussion without the self-conscious awkwardness of a more formal structured interview.

Qualitative Versus Quantitative

Often social scientists are criticized for not being more "scientific" -- in other words, more quantitative. Social science, and anthropology in particular, is often unfavorably compared to the "hard sciences" of biology and mathematics. But according to Jared Diamond, there are other types of scientists who are not able to do statistical analysis or laboratory experiments. Astronomers cannot take down the Milky Way on Monday for a

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7 Public lecture given at Iowa State University on September 26, 2001.
week of controlled experiments by men in white coats and then replace it on Saturday. The Big Bang theory cannot be replicated without considerable cost to our quality of life. Similarly, men in white lab coats cannot replicate so nebulous a notion as sense of place anywhere near resembling a controlled experiment. H. Russell Bernard tells us that “controlled experiments have the virtue of high internal validity, but they have the liability of low external validity” (1995:60, emphasis in original). In other words, they do not explain phenomena as they occur in the real world.

Positivists — those who believe that a science of anthropology exists where all findings are precise and all results are replicable — reject the notion of intuitive interpretation. Karl Heider calls this the “illusion of positivism” and refers to positivists as “naive” (2001:85). Heider goes on to explain that facts (such as those the so-called hard sciences deal with) in a social setting cannot be discovered directly. Sometimes it may not be possible to duplicate the observation. When an event will only occur once during the course of the research period, there is no way to test the reliability of the data through repeated experiments. Heider tells a story about Franz Boas giving a talk on Kwakiutl funerary ritual. Someone in the audience asked Professor Boas “How many Kwakiutl funerals did you see?” to which he replied, “Only one, that’s all I needed to see.” While at first this statement sounds arrogant at best, Heider justifies the example by explaining that “the same language system, symbol system, and belief system were expressed in all Kwakiutl funerals and that although there might be some surface variations from funeral to funeral, one funeral should be sufficient to lead to the common underpinnings” (2001:84).

It may happen when participant observation is the primary method of data collection that during the research period only one instance of a ritual or social occasion may occur.
But, as the Boas story illustrates, it may not necessarily be fatal to the efficacy of the research analysis if other observations can prove the validity of the data. When discussing her fieldwork among chimpanzees and the problems of reliability generally associated with replicability and small sample size, Jane Goodall (1990:62) explained that “[i]n the wild a single observation may prove of utmost significance, providing a clue to some hitherto puzzling aspect of behavior, a key to the understanding of, for example, a changed relationship.”

Anthropology, with its holistic approach to research, offers a unique perspective to understanding social phenomena. Through participant observation with people in natural settings, anthropologists can contribute insights into group values and behavior in their cultural context. The cross-cultural perspective particular to anthropology may be used to explain multicultural diversity issues and how those behaviors affect a community’s sense of place. Perhaps Keith Basso summed it up best when he defined the task of the ethnographer of places:

To determine what these acts of expression purportedly involve (why they are performed, how they are accomplished, what they are intended to achieve) and to disclose their importance by relating them to larger ideas about the world and its inhabitants. . . . From time to time, when luck is on their side, ethnographers stumble onto culturally given ideas whose striking novelty and evident scope seem to cry out for thoughtful consideration beyond their accustomed boundaries. Making these ideas available in perusable form is a worthy endeavor on general principles, but where places are concerned it is apt to prove especially illuminating. For where places are involved, attendant modes of dwelling are never far behind, and in this dimly lit region of the anthropological world, — call it, if you like, the ethnography of lived topographies — much remains to be learned (1996:110-111).

Textbooks for beginning anthropology students tell us that not only is participant observation one of anthropology’s most and best used research methods, but it has been
liberally borrowed by other disciplines. For instance, sociologists, known for their quantitative number crunching of statistical data taken from large-scale surveys, have also been known to use anthropology’s favorite qualitative method for their studies to understand the context of the dynamics of the culture it is studying. Eric Wolf believed that an anthropologist’s theoretical discussions should be “grounded in cases, in observed streams of behavior, and in recorded texts” (Wolf 2001:263). There are certain risks associated with participant observation and personal interviews. Informant dishonesty, whether intended to misinform or intended to please the interviewer, can be a factor. Responses can be misinterpreted due to the researcher’s own personal bias. Yet these problems can be controlled for by multiplication of data, careful analysis, and a conscious effort to be aware of the baggage the researcher brings along to the field.

Summary

My study regarding the impacts of socioeconomic change on the community of Eagle Rock involves several specific issues. A changing economic base, coupled with encroaching urbanization, necessitates an analysis of coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies. Community sustainability requires striking a balance between securing economic viability and maintaining the community’s ideological, cultural, and value system. These issues all directly relate to sense of place. Over the last two years I have performed an extensive review of the literature on the subjects of small town socioeconomic change and sense of place, as well as how they relate to human landscape and geography. I also compiled a large body of documents through secondary sources such as newspapers and magazines, including historical and contemporary data that informed my approach to the research as well as my analysis and conclusions. Through participant observation and personal interviews, I learned
what issues the members of the community consider important. I learned what battles they
deam worth fighting for and which ones they prefer to leave behind.

Margaret Mead defined the essence of anthropological fieldwork this way:

Equipped principally with a way of looking at things, the fieldworker is
expected somehow to seize on all the essentials of a strange way of life
and to bring back a record that will make this comprehensible as a
whole to others who very likely will never see this people in their
living reality. The role of the fieldworker and the recognition that
every people has a culture, the smallest part of which is significant and
indicative of the whole, go together (2001:11).

I do not intend here to measure the economic and social changes taking place within the
community, nor do I attempt to quantify the changing relationships between the local region
and its people with the state and national society. Rather, I make qualitative interpretations
based on my collection of historical data, personal observations, and my subject interviews.
While this study is qualitative in nature, still I believe the data are relevant and the analysis
and conclusions valid.

Anthropologists spend long periods of time in the field, not the least of their duties
being to learn the language. Even if not a “foreign” language in the strict sense of the term,
every culture or community has a language of its own, its own particularities and peculiarities
associated with the way its people express themselves. I was raised in this community,
leaving it behind, except for family visits, some thirty-five years ago. I occupy a unique
position as a researcher in that I am already familiar with the community and its special
language. Studying my own society after a long period of time and distance could reflect a
little of both the emic (from the insider’s view) and the etic (from the outsider’s view), as I
am not strictly either one and yet a little of both. As Sterk observed, “[M]y role allowed me
to become part of [the community] and to build rapport with many of them” (2001:16).
We now live in a political and social climate where too many pundits are telling us that the rural part of our country, and more particularly our small towns, should be cut off from state and federal funding and allowed to die a natural and inevitable death. It is my intention here, using an ethnographical approach, to give the people of Eagle Rock a voice in this debate.
CHAPTER 4. EAGLE ROCK COMMUNITY

Here I am, where I ought to be.

Results and Discussion

The term "socioeconomic" was not developed by accident. Nowhere is the
interdependence of the social and the economic more clearly demonstrated than in our small
towns. In small towns the economic has traditionally driven the social. As farmers brought
their excess produce into town for sale or trade for other subsistence goods, they gathered
for social sustenance as well. For the ever-frugal farmer, the Saturday night trip to town was
the only social life they allowed themselves, and many took the opportunity to do so. Thus,
when a change occurred in the way goods and services were exchanged, it forced a change in
the way people socialized. Social behavior took on a new level of importance. Conversely,
then, it makes sense to look at how social behavior may have influenced the current economic
plight of the small rural community, and what this means for the economic development, or
redevelopment, of small towns.

Similarly, I see a community’s sense of place as a thread that binds the whole
together. Interwoven in the fabric of the community, the character of this thread and its
strength determine the character and strength of the community as a whole. With a
community’s economic base and social function changing over time, a community’s sense of
place may also be its most stabilizing force. How people feel about their community and their
place in it is indicative of how the culture will be reproduced in the face of socioeconomic
pressures. Passing on shared values, reinterpreting and reproducing core beliefs and cultural
rules, are all functions of community. It is the community’s collective sense of place that
gives these functions balance and symmetry. What is happening in the rural town of Eagle Rock is the result of this process.

The best place to begin an analysis of this process of socioeconomic change in Eagle Rock is its public square. Historically the public square has been the heart and soul of the town, socially, politically, and economically. Horace, a local businessman, described the town square of Eagle Rock as it was when he was growing up in the years preceding World War II. He recalled that “life was good.” It was the time of the Great Depression, an event that Horace said had a “great leveling influence” on the community’s economic diversity. He explained that everybody had to work together, with all efforts geared toward family and community survival. Even in the face of a depressed economy nationwide, businesses around the Eagle Rock square survived. There were retail stores in each building and the apartments on the upper floors were occupied. Farming was still the economic mainstay of the community at that time. It was not until the 1950s that farming began to decline.

Churches were the spiritual mainstay of the community. One elderly Eagle Rock native who grew up in a big family recalled how his mother and father every Sunday morning took shifts in taking half of the children to one church and then the other half to a later service at another church. There were too many children to fit into their automobile, and they only had one, so this was the only way they could work it that no one had to miss a week of going to a church service.

Saturday night was a big night for everyone to come to town to shop and socialize. Farming people brought their surpluses into town to sell to the local produce buyers. There were produce buying businesses on both the east and west sides of the square. Besides produce from farms, people who lived in town usually owned a double lot with a house on
one lot and a large garden, fruit trees, chickens, and a stable on the second lot. Horace recalls one lady who moved to town from the farm and basically "brought the farm to town with her." These people also sold eggs and garden produce to the produce buyers.

On Saturday afternoons the farmers who brought their goods to sell also did their shopping at the local grocery and other retail stores located on the square. Horace recalls them driving into town in their Model A's. They left their purchases in the stores while they visited with their neighbors or went to "the show." The businesses stayed open sometimes until midnight waiting for people to come collect their bags. Compare this to my own observation last summer (2001) of the activities around the town square on a Saturday morning. During the approximately two hours I observed activities on the square, the courthouse lawn was completely lacking activity, save for me and the carpet cleaner working in the courthouse. Contrary to the stereotype that everyone in town knows when a stranger is in town because everyone knows everyone else, while I sat on the park bench on the courthouse lawn, watching people and writing in my notebook, not only did no one question my presence there, but the local newspaper reporter walked right past me without a word. Of course, word may have already spread around town about who I was and what I was doing there.

Originally intending to observe activities on the square in two-hour sessions during the morning and afternoon, I aborted the mission shortly before noon when a truck parked in front of my view of the only stores with even limited activity. Upon inspection of the front doors of the businesses on the square (which I should have done beforehand), I realized that those few shops that are open on Saturday morning, close for the weekend at noon. I was later told in personal interviews of local business people that the shops close on Saturday
because they “are in Des Moines with everybody else.”

On that date, the only social interaction on the square itself took place in automobiles. Cars drove onto the square, usually stopping at the bakery. Cars left the square. One lady tooted her horn and pulled up in her car beside another. They talked through open windows, cars running presumably to keep the air conditioning on. In the era of the drive-by, we now have drive-by socializing. A few pedestrians walked by and stopped to chat with the ladies in the car. What is significant is that all this took place in the hot sun, directly across the street from park benches placed strategically under the shade trees of the courthouse lawn.

Teenagers of the early twentieth century had their own social rituals. Horace recalled that young people performed a traditional promenade similar to what the young people still do on the plazas of Latin America. The boys would walk around the square going in one direction, while the girls walked around the square in the opposite direction, stopping to chat and flirt along the way, and all under the watchful eyes of the adults. This tradition apparently was not unique to the Eagle Rock public square or the Latin American plaza. As I was telling my own mother the story, she began to make circles with her index fingers in opposing directions and nodding her head. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that this was the way she and my father spent their first “date” in Lineville, Iowa, on a Saturday evening in 1932, in the summer after they graduated from high school. There was usually a carnival or some other type of entertainment going on as well.

These promenades were not unlike the rituals of my own teenage years in the 1960s. The promenade originated long before the days when teens took the family station wagon out on a Saturday night, driving around the square, stopping occasionally to flirt, always mindful of the three times around rule and the watchful eye of the town cop. However, the difference
is that the automobile became a part of the ritual and shops ceased to open for business on Saturday evenings. Yet the tradition and the heart of the ritual remains. Electra commented that when she was in high school in the late 1980s, they did not let the high gas prices stop them. Rather than go to the city park, those who could not afford gas drove to the square, parked, set up lawn chairs, and played frisbee on the courthouse lawn. In their own way they could still participate in the ritual of the promenade.

It would appear then that the end of Saturday night community socializing began with the change in the farming economy and the advent of modern distribution of farm products due to better transportation and the contribution refrigeration made to increase the shelf life of perishable goods. As stated previously, when a change occurred in the way goods and services were exchanged, it forced a change in the way people socialized. However, it is not that simple. Horace credited the radio for bringing people together in their homes and away from the square on a Saturday night during the depression and war years. The radio offered more up-to-the-minute reports of important world events than the local gossip on the square previously provided. Subsequently, television further influenced the demise of the time-honored tradition of Saturday night socializing on the square. While it may well have been the novelty of the invention that first brought people off the streets more than the wrestling matches being shown on television, soon The Ed Sullivan Show made television so popular that people stayed home to watch it, bringing to a close the final chapter on the traditional small town Saturday night. Thus, social behavior, and not just economic changes, was an important contributing factor to its demise.

Horace also explained how the community changed with the end of the war. The farming economy had begun to decline in the 1950s. By the time Horace returned to Eagle
Rock in 1955, he saw the beginnings of the consolidation of farms, with farmers retiring or selling out and moving on. With the decline in farming families, there was no longer a need for four grocery stores or multiple hardware and lumber stores or other types of retail.

Horace explained that the family business was not big enough to support both him and his younger brother, so he returned home to manage the business, and his brother went off to seek his fortune elsewhere.

This shift in the economy affected everyone. Local girls were often forced to move to the city to find work. One woman I spoke with explained that at the age of seventeen, as soon as she graduated from high school, she began to teach in a local school. At that time, the high school offered a special curriculum for teaching. She taught school until she married. Her friend told me that after high school graduation, she moved to Des Moines. She stated that this was the only thing young people could do. She lived in a rooming house on Locust Street in downtown Des Moines and worked in an insurance company office as a bookkeeper. She came home on weekends on a bus that stopped at the hotel in Eagle Rock. The bus at that time traveled between Eagle Rock and Des Moines once or twice every day. This was their only means of transportation, but it was regular and reliable. Both ladies recalled that they and other young people often attended dances on Saturday nights at the Ku Klux Klan building on the east edge of town.

Another lady, Rose, recalled times she spent with her grandparents on their farm near Eagle Rock when she was a child in the 1940s and early 1950s. She also remembered Saturday night as the time when everyone came to town to do their shopping. “Uptown” (the public square) was then still a thriving retail center. Along with the retail stores on the square, a creamery in town bought milk from the local farmers and in turn produced and sold...
butter, cream, and milk. She recalled that her grandmother loaded up her car with eggs on Saturday afternoon and they all drove to town to sell them. Her grandmother’s egg money was what she had to run the household from week to week. Three clothing stores and two “five and dime” or “variety” stores were where one bought the dry good essentials.

By this time, the automobile had superseded foot traffic. Rose recalled that mostly people conversed with each other while standing by or seated in their cars parked around the square. The buying and selling of produce began to die off in the 1950s, and soon afterwards stores began staying open Thursday evenings instead of Saturday nights. Rose recalled that they tried having planned social events on the town square such as band concerts or ice cream socials to draw people to the square and help support the businesses that stayed open. Rose stated that “It was a completely different way of life than we have now. Everyone’s in too big a hurry [today] to get their life over with.”

One important function of the traditional social rituals around the town square in the early years was to pass on the news of current world events when radio and television were not yet part of the local culture. This was especially important as the country was suffering from an economic depression and leading up to a second world war. Perhaps even more important a function was that of socialization. Current events were not limited to topics about the world outside Eagle Rock. Small town Saturday night was all about reinforcing and reproducing the local core value system and its social code of conduct.

Gossip has the unseemly reputation of being vicious and rendering only negative consequences, but gossip, in the form of urban legends, in reality is the natural conduit for passing on rules and norms of social behavior. Urban legends are powerful because they are believed to be true. By the time local gossip reaches the stage of urban legend, it may have
lost much of its factual veracity, but it is nevertheless often based on some actual occurrence. While the details of the story may change with time and telling, the intent is always to restore faith in the local code of conduct. One such story originates from a different small community than Eagle Rock, but it is still instructive as to the makings of an urban legend, and the value of its moral lesson for the proper way to act is undeniable.

A small town's local hero, a high school athletic star on whose talents were pinned all the hopes and aspirations of every young boy, went on to become a local university athletic star as well. In the prime of his college athletic career, however, he was killed in an automobile accident. The tale could have ended here with the moral of the story being that drinking and driving (and pulling out in front of a big truck) do not mix. But it did not end there. The parents of the boy owned a business in town, a convenience store/gas station struggling to survive among many others competing for business on the highway dissecting the town. After the accident, the business thrived as supportive residents flocked to patronize this establishment. A popular park was renamed for the fallen hero. When the parents decided that the athletic building being constructed at the new high school should have their son's name on it, again the town stood firmly behind them.

Then the news came out that the boy's parents had sued the driver of the truck that hit him in order to obtain the funds necessary to put their son's name on the building. The parents got their memorial, but within months their store was forced to close. Thus, the true moral of this story is that greed at the expense of an innocent party does not pay. While the people of a small community stand by their neighbors in time of crisis, they are also the first to censure when they perceive wrongdoing. The message this community gave to the athlete's parents when their actions went astray of the moral code was profound. More
significantly, the telling and retelling of the story of how the high school gym got its name will live on to repeat the message, not just of a tragic accident that took the life of a small town boy who made good, but of the inadvisability of giving in to the temptations of greed and excessive pride.

Similarly, Eagle Rock has its own urban legend in the making. One spring day a resident found the body of a newborn baby in his trash can just minutes before a scheduled pickup. It was not long before television news teams from around the state converged upon the town. While reporters spent a good deal of time and effort interviewing anyone who would give them the opportunity, and while these interviewees spared no adjectives about how shocking an event it was, no one would admit to the reporters of having the slightest clue who could have done this terrible thing. This is an example of the power a community can wield over outside interference. The immediate and automatic response of the local citizenry was one of circling the wagons against the intrusion of outsiders whose business they did not feel it was. For days the evening news teams reported that no one knew who the baby belonged to. There is little doubt, however, that soon after the discovery, many in town knew most of the details. When this kind of thing happens in a small community, it is a perfect opportunity to reproduce social values and norms. When the identification was finally made public until long after the news teams moved on to other stories, community-wide gossip bantered the story about with judgments made and passed on, transforming the event into a lesson in what is acceptable social behavior.

8It is important to note here that this would not have happened had not a neighbor witnessed a girl placing a trash bag into his neighbor’s can and then later telling him about it. This is exemplary of the small town stereotype that everyone knows what his neighbor is up to, and will be discussed in more detail later.
The legal issues in the above incident were cloudy and ultimately not convincing enough to warrant prosecution. The girl’s punishment came later in the form of the words and actions of her peers and the public censure via local gossip and letters to the editor published in the local newspaper. There are at least two important lessons to be found in this story. One is all about teen pregnancy and the value of community and family support. Another is instructive in how a community looks at its social hierarchy. In this instance, the local gossip regarding this event often ends with a discussion of how the girl got off “Scott free” because of her family’s connections with the local authorities. Whether the facts indeed warrant that conclusion is not relevant to this particular moral of the story. What the story reveals is the pervading perception that, in Eagle Rock, it is not what you do but who you are (or who you know) that is important. A social hierarchy is at issue here. This is not an isolated theme, nor is it a new one.

The idea of social hierarchy related to social connections is a recurring theme in many of my interviews with citizens of Eagle Rock. One young man explained to me that he was able to return recently with his new wife to Eagle Rock where he grew up because of the opportunity for a better job than the one he had in the city. He went on to explain that his father is a friend of the owner of the business with which he is now employed. Further explanation revealed that, although he was in the same business in Eagle Rock as in the city, here he would be able to move up much faster than he would in the big city corporation. Thus, family connections in a small town may be even more valuable than in a larger arena where there are more job opportunities but also more competition. Having a “connection” no doubt secured this young man his job, where in a different context he may have been just one of many fish in the pond. Family connections, who you know, are an integral part of the
social and political hierarchy, with the social and political hierarchies being one and the same.

Accordingly, how “this town is run” is an important issue to the citizens of Eagle Rock. As one person told me, “Things haven’t changed since you lived here. It’s the same old thing with the same old people running things.” Other interviews speak to this sentiment as well, but the emphasis differs with the speaker. While some think they are being excluded, others feel they are left to do all the work. It may well be that “the same old people” are running things, but whether that is a negative or a positive depends on whom you ask. While to some the responsibility for the health and welfare of the community is seen as a duty acknowledged by a few willing participants, to others it is seen as a power usurped by the elite.

Dolly works with her husband in a family-owned business in town. She was instrumental in organizing the town’s booster club, and continues to be active in local volunteer efforts. However, she now prefers to pass on to others some of the work she has done in the past. The problem she related to me is that there are only a few who do most of the work. People do not join organizations or civic clubs like they used to, and the older ones are retiring or feeling burned out. Josephine explained that the Chamber of Commerce is made up of people in town who are willing to volunteer to do the work. However, she also stated, there are a few who usually have things their own way. As an example, she cited one instance where she brought to a Chamber meeting a possible solution to the debate for a return of the Fourth of July celebration. Although Josephine was merely passing on the public’s wishes as communicated to her by her customers, the response was an outright dismissal and admonition to never bring up the subject again. On that note, she quit participating in the local Chamber and retail organizations.
This issue of rejection was echoed in another interview as well. Asked if she felt she was part of the civic process, Ernestine reiterated that there was a “core group” that does everything. Furthermore, she is content to let them do it, as she does not feel that her input would be welcomed. She stated that friends who have attended the meetings told her they were ignored and that no one wanted to hear what they had to say.

In speaking about the volunteer organizations, Ernestine criticized that “they” do not finish any one project before starting on another one. For example, one particular historic preservation project has been going on for years now and it still is not done. “I wish they would pick a project and finish it.” Dolly concedes that it takes a long time to get anything done because of the slow, easy going, go-at-your-own-pace attitude. It is also hard to get a consensus with a small group of decision-makers because each one has his or her own pet project and own ideas about what and how things should be done. Exacerbating Ernestine’s frustrations are the frequent fundraisers for various projects which she feels, as a citizen and as a business owner, she is compelled to support. A similar sentiment was expressed by Electra, a young businesswoman who, although very involved in civic affairs, nevertheless complained that the constant quest for money with fundraisers was driving her crazy. Electra also voiced her disgust at the organizing of social activities, not for entertainment’s sake, but to solicit money donations for some project like the renovation of some old building she fears her generation will be stuck taking care of later.

One theory for why this socially-based political hierarchy exists is that those who are not born and raised in the community, no matter how long they have lived there, are not accepted members of the community with a legitimate say in civic matters. As seen previously in Chapter 2, this is a recurring theme in the literature. This notion is epitomized
in Wendell Berry’s characterization of *Jayber Crow* (2000), who may have only achieved eventual legitimate citizenship because he had been born in the town. In Eagle Rock, Ernestine mentioned that even though her family had been in the community for over twenty years, they were still considered outsiders. In speaking with one relative newcomer in town, I found someone who should have had the inside track on local social activities because of her job, yet refrained from joining one of the many coffee groups in town, she said, because she did not drink coffee. While other statements she made during our conversation gave me some indication that she felt alienated from the community, the fact that she left her office by herself for lunch was also instructive.

Another facet of this theory of outsider versus insider status lies in the town versus country dichotomy. One town person denied any division between country and town people in Eagle Rock, but had heard that it is a problem in other (neighboring) small towns where the country kids are mostly passed over for school sports teams in favor of the town kids. However, in an interview of a “country” couple, I posed the question of why they preferred to live in a small town. The immediate and emphatic response was, “We don’t live in town, we live in the country.” When I rephrased my question to include the greater community, their response was the same. “No, we live in the country — that’s different.”

They went on to explain that while they purchase a few necessities in town, they do their main shopping in the larger towns nearby. One might be tempted to interpret this as a desire for more diversity of choice or better prices. While this was a stated factor for them, it was not the most persuasive one. Instead, social and political hierarchy emerged as the predominant underlying theme. To emphasize their point, they told me a story of how local politics almost succeeded in preventing a new business from opening in town. With this
story, they illustrated the perception that outsiders are not welcomed to open new businesses that might compete with establishments owned by those who control the political power. People will take their trade elsewhere, and drive miles out of their way to do it, in order to punish a perceived abuse of power.

In the Eagle Rock community, then, the town’s boundaries are not merely political. The distance between town and country, despite better roads and more frequent business and social interaction, is still very real. But as Barth suggested, the continuity of cultural groups depends on the maintenance of the boundaries, and social factors must be ascribed to members of a group by the members themselves (1969:14-15). It is as much how they see themselves as members of the community (or not), as it is how others in the community see them, that determines their place in the social system. Country people identify with outsiders. More importantly, perhaps it is this perception of outsider status — this sense of their place within the social system — that allows them to maintain their “country” ideology.

One must not think that it is all divisiveness in a small community, however. I also observed a camaraderie among friends and neighbors. On one occasion, I offered to help Ben and Jill prepare their home for a party honoring their son and his new bride. Shortly after my arrival, neighbors came with pickup loads of potted plants from their own lawns and gardens to supplement the already showplace quality homestead of Ben and Jill. While the men went off to borrow tables and chairs from their church, the women began the pre-party early, and then everyone pitched in to get ready for the next day’s celebration. The spirit of cooperation was not marred by a sense of duty or work, but instead was one of having a good time with friends on a Friday night. This exemplifies how work can be redefined as social activity, while reinforcing traditional sense of place for the participants.
As important as are the community functions for reproducing the local value system and accomplishing good civic works, it is the community’s sense of place that gives these tasks a purpose and a focus. A community’s sense of place is defined by how its members feel about their community and their place within it. Some people have lived in Eagle Rock all their lives, having only rarely visited larger cities outside their Eagle Rock universe. I asked the people I interviewed why they chose to live in Eagle Rock — why they never left, or why they returned. I received a variety of responses that usually suggested some thought had been given to their decision. However, one former classmate surprised me by saying that after high school graduation, she just never left.

More predictable were the answers suggesting a choice had been made based on quality of life issues. Most of the comments regarding the benefits of living in a small town were focused on traffic congestion, crowds, safety, and the cost of living. One person liked being in a small town for “not having to be in that mess [the city].” Eagle Rock citizens feel that life is easier than in the city — “no traffic, no crowds, no germs with people you don’t know doing you don’t know what in places before you such as sneezing, spitting,” and otherwise spreading germs. The pace is slower and there is less hassle. “You may get frustrated sometimes getting behind some older person going slow, but the town is small enough you can soon go at your own pace.” Rose may have expressed best the universal attitude toward change in Eagle Rock: “We need to just slow down.”

To Josephine, the best features of Eagle Rock are safety and convenience. She “wouldn’t live or raise kids anywhere else.” Josephine has visited large cities, and she feels that “there is just too much going on there.” Della said she also considered the safety issue when she moved from the city to raise her children. At a public meeting held by the editors
of an urban newspaper to gather comments and concerns about small town issues, one man stated that he came back to Eagle Rock to raise his kids because it was “easier to keep track of them” where there are smaller, better schools and low crime rates. Another resident leaves her car unlocked and running in the winter while she shops for her groceries. Then she can get into a warm car to go home. A female business owner said she would never feel safe going alone to her shop at night if it were in the city, but she has no problem doing so in Eagle Rock.

The ease of living issue was brought home to me in an interesting way. During my visit to Dolly’s office, about half way into our interview, she received a phone call from the repair shop that her car was ready. As we were the only ones in the office at the time, she left me in charge with the request that if anyone should come into the office, I should make a sale. Before I could review my notes, she returned remarking that “it doesn’t take long when you live just down the street.”

Another incident reinforced the stereotype of small town trust and honesty. Frank lives on a farm several miles from town. One morning he drove to Eagle Rock to purchase his weekly groceries. When he returned home, he discovered that he was missing several of the items he had purchased. He called a friend who lives in town and asked her to retrieve the missing bag of groceries for him. He would get them from her the next time he was in town. She gladly agreed to do so, but when she got there, no bag was unaccounted for. Concluding that someone else must have taken Frank’s bag of groceries, the store clerk asked her to call Frank to identify the missing items. When she had done so, the clerk gathered the items and sent her off with the bag, an apology, and no charge for the groceries. Where else but in a small town? This is the stuff of which urban legends are made.
Another plus to living in a small community is autonomy, the ability to be your own boss and make your own business decisions. Della and her husband own a business in Eagle Rock, and after many years of hard work they now feel able to take time off whenever they want to. Horace and Dolly indicated that they too are able to travel and enjoy their time away. Ernestine, in her early fifties, states that she is at the age where she likes the small town life and not having to work too hard. There was a time when she was enthusiastic about fixing up her shop and adding to it, but now she is more focused on maintaining her current customers and less interested in increasing her business.

On the downside, the negatives cited clearly relate to privacy issues. Della is a resident who grew up in the country, lived in the city for several years, and returned to Eagle Rock to marry a local boy and raise her children. Her response to my question of why they liked living in a small town was: “Because we’re moving to the country.” Ben and Jill, who already live in the country, are thinking of building a cabin in the woods for their retirement. Interestingly enough, Horace and Dolly choose to get away to a remote place far away from people when they vacation. Della explained that, as far as small town life went, “I hate that, because everybody knows your business and they know what you do even before you do it.”

However, others feel differently. Rose recalled that it used to be that everyone knew everyone else in town. “If you got a hangnail, someone would be at your door to see if you were okay.” She thinks this was a good thing. She stated, “Nobody knows their neighbors any more.” Rose bemoaned the fact that this social change comes with the economic changes happening in the community. She attributes this change to the current prevalence of two income families, along with working and shopping outside the community.

Other reasons for living in a small community are related to family. One young
couple stated they live in the wife’s hometown to be near her family. She said she could not imagine being away from her sisters and her mother, especially since she was expecting their first baby. Another young man cited wanting to be closer to his parents, brothers, and sisters whom he had missed while living in the city. He and his wife were moving into a house only two doors away from his parents. While many stated they wanted to be close to their parents or siblings, others felt that they had a responsibility to be near their aging parents who were now in a position to need them close by. Jill told me she thought that I would find this to be true with most of that generation who still live in the community.

Yet the problem remains that younger people are generally forced to make the choice between being stuck in a job at the local factory or to move to a larger city or even another state to make a living. Residents of Eagle Rock go to the community college in a neighboring town to learn a new skill such as computer training, only to remain underemployed in the factory. One couple said that their children live away from the community in cities where they can have careers. Another couple stated that their children would like to return to live in Eagle Rock if they could find comparable jobs. As well as a lack of affordable housing, one interviewee explained that her income was insufficient to satisfy the bank to obtain a mortgage. A substantial lack of quality yet affordable housing is closely related to the low wage employment the community has to offer.

Another problem occurring regularly in small towns is the competition for shoppers with large urban centers. When people want to find more choice, cheaper prices, or are just out for “recreational shopping,” they drive to Omaha or Des Moines. When asked what improvement they would most like to see in Eagle Rock, the response was unanimous: “More retail.” Many suggested that more competition would be healthy and make for better
shopping with cheaper prices and more choices. Josephine, a business owner herself, agrees that Eagle Rock needs more retail stores. The town is dead on Saturday because everyone goes to Des Moines.

Josephine and others contend that being open on Saturday afternoons is not profitable for the stores. However, she would like to see the retail stores begin to open Thursday evenings again. Josephine stated that, living in Eagle Rock, she doesn’t need very much. However, she would like a women’s clothing store and a shoe store in town. Those are two main things she cannot find locally. Most things like appliance or car parts you can get for your customers overnight if you really need to. She conceded that there are businesses in town that either do not bother or do not know how to go about getting next day delivery on things they need, and they make their customers wait. Other types of business residents would like to see are “five and dime” stores, affordable clothing and dress shops, a butcher shop, another pharmacy to compete with the existing one, and a specialty foods or deli shop.

However, the other side of that complaint is that people do not support their local businesses. Horace wrote in the local newspaper chastising the citizens of Eagle Rock for not shopping at home more. He said that he saw no need to go outside the community, where he could find anything he really needed. An editorial encouraged shoppers do their Christmas shopping at home. Dolly agreed that it is pretty much true that you can get everything you need at home because, living a small town way of life, “you don’t need as much stuff.”

As to the competition from larger cities, Josephine stated that “Interstate 80 just killed us.” Horace concurred, stating, “Being so close to I-80 is both a blessing and a curse.” On the one hand, people have easier access to the city, but when they shop at city malls and
discount stores, that limits retail business at home. Shopping at home might not be as cheap as at discount stores in the city, but you get much better service from local retailers if something sold locally breaks down. One business owner on the square indicated that they will only service what is purchased locally. It is not good business to extend service to what is bought cheaply at the discount stores in the city. In his newspaper article, Horace warned that if people do not start buying locally, they no longer will be able to, and without retail the rest of the town will also dry up.

One issue retailers have to contend with is that most people in town, but especially the elderly, do not have much money, so retailers have to keep their prices low to have any business. A cheaper cost of living was often given as the positive trade off for low wages. Asked why someone would remain underemployed at the local factory when they could make better money in the city, one person answered that it would cost more to live in the city (and presumably negate the increase in income). Other amenities, such as more entertainment or social opportunities, did not appear to be a part of the equation.

One of the younger participants at the above-mentioned town meeting stated that the urban newspaper, which serves the entire state of Iowa, should do more to promote small town living and small towns in their paper. But this notion of marketing the community must be carefully weighed against the risk of inadvertently converting the community into something it does not want to be. This young man also commented that what attracted him and his wife to leave their big city home and move to Eagle Rock was its low growth and development. Upon hearing the suggestion that young people were leaving Iowa for higher wages, he remarked that in Iowa we do not need a lot of things or high salaries to buy them. “One California is enough.” This sentiment echos throughout my interviews in Eagle Rock.
One elderly lady, when questioning the wisdom of some of the economic development efforts, complained that they were trying to make Eagle Rock into a big city, and she did not want it to be a big city. She also complained that most people in town could not afford for it to be. Ernestine remarked that if she and her husband want to be in the city, they can go visit one.

Selling nostalgia is a popular way to attract business, be it for tourism or for someone looking for a place with those elusive “hometown” family values in which to invest time, effort, and money. This is what makes suburbia so popular, and the nostalgia — a sense of place — for people who grew up and (with selective memories in tact) remember the good old days when life was simpler. However, they do not necessarily want to give up the good life they have somewhere else. Recall Horace, who took over the family business while his brother went off to seek his fortune elsewhere. The brother did find fame and fortune in the big city. I asked Horace if they ever wished to be in the other’s place. He said they have each sometimes kidded, tongue-in-cheek, that the other got the best deal. Mostly, said Horace, it is his brother who says Horace is the lucky one and that he misses the small town in which he was raised. However, it is the Eagle Rock of those good old days of their youth that he is remembering, Horace believes, and not the town that it is today.

However, Eagle Rock is taking the initiative to secure its future by, among other things, fixing up its public square. Most agreed that people should fix up their buildings. As Ernestine explained, “When people see a downtown that looks dead, they think the town is dead.” The town is working hard to make its public square a prettier, safer place to be with preservation of its historic buildings and a complete infrastructure update. New underground pipes, new street surfaces, and additional landscaping promise to help meet this objective.
The Main Street program is giving a boost to local business owners who want to fix up their buildings with financial aid and grants. Based on rumors about new trees and old-fashioned street lamps, one business owner was eagerly anticipating the improvements. She stated that she was glad she had invested in a remodel of her storefront because it had made a huge difference in her business. Another business owner liked the fact that building owners were sprucing up their storefronts because it made the square look better and more inviting to customers and potential businesses alike. One criticism, however, was that building owners should also fix the upper stories of their buildings. Missing or boarded up windows are not very attractive.

Not everyone agrees with the value of historic preservation, authentic or not. As supportive as Ernestine is about cleaning up the square, however, she does not agree that they should be required to take the buildings back to their original design. She opted not to request any of the available Main Street grant money because of that condition attached to it, and without the financial help, her business profits are not such that they will support the expense of a remodel. One woman in her twenties stated that preservation of the old buildings is ridiculous. What she thinks is needed is something for young people to do to keep them in town. She said it will be left up to her generation to take care of the renovated buildings, and no one in her generation cares enough about that kind of thing so it will just go back to ruin again anyway. She disagrees with wasting so much money restoring something “people didn’t care enough about to take care of in the first place.” An older couple expressed nearly the same sentiment, differing only in that they felt the money could be spent more responsibly for other community needs such as social services for the elderly. Neither saw the value of historic preservation as an attraction to the town or an effective economic
Taking a lesson from the past, local businesses, in conjunction with volunteers in the Chamber of Commerce and Main Street organizations, are attempting to bring people to their square with various social activities. One success story is the farmers market. Weather permitting, every Thursday afternoon during the summer and fall, people bring their baked goods, jams, jellies, fresh produce, needlework and other hand made items and set them out on a card table on the courthouse lawn. One business owner believes that, although new things tend to catch on slowly, the farmers market is getting better every year. That is the problem, she also stated, with new ideas — they do not allow enough time to succeed before giving up.

Ernestine recalled that one summer a few years ago, in conjunction with the farmers market on Thursday nights, the “Courtyard Capers” brought in big crowds. Every week a different church group sponsored the entertainment for the Capers. However, Ernestine thought that the churches were all relieved when they no longer had to do it. Currently during the summers, local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce sponsor different social events after the farmers market on Thursday evenings. One such event I attended (2001) was a mock hillbilly wedding played out on the courthouse lawn. As they waited in line for the all-you-can-eat supper at the corn dog stand, “wedding guests” were entertained by a group of local musicians playing a keyboard, a fiddle, and some jugs. The musicians and the “preacher” waited for the “bridal couple” on a hayrack hitched to an ancient tractor. A mule was tied up and waiting for them to make their getaway. The weeping “mother of the bride” brandished a shotgun to make sure the wedding took place. After the brief ceremony, the guests were treated to a “reception” where the happy couple served home made ice
cream. As one guest put it, free food always attracts a crowd.

It was one of those rare July evenings in Iowa when the temperature and humidity were both blessedly lower than normal. Whether it was because of the weather, the entertainment, or the free food, people really turned out for the occasion. The shotgun wedding was once necessitated by the compromising of a daughter’s virtues by a young man’s amorous attentions. In the act of spoofing an old-time tradition, these townspeople were not making fun of their unsophisticated past. In truth, they were celebrating it. In their performance, they were reinforcing the old time family values, acting out lessons of virtue and responsibility and honor. But while these social events bring big crowds to the square on Thursday evenings, the shops still do not take advantage of the opportunity and open their doors for business. Josephine said that she would consider being the first to do so when her son was out of school, but until then, her family is her first priority.

Summary

Thus, we can see many changes in the way Eagle Rock socializes and does business. In the early days of the twentieth century, when doing business and socializing were interdependent on a Saturday night, shops on the square would not have considered being closed. The businesses and the community depended upon each other for survival. Things began to change with the automobile, radio, and television. New modes of agricultural production after World War II began the change of the way food was produced and who produced it. Finally, the interstate highway system drove what threatens to be the final nail in the coffin. Yet we can also see that many of the stereotypical small town values are still working in Eagle Rock.

People still care about how their town is run. They volunteer their time, their talents,
and their dollars to making their town more attractive, safe, and comfortable. Civic boosterism is alive and kicking in Eagle Rock. People may complain about one thing or another in their town, but they circle the wagons around one of their own when an outside force comes to interfere or judge. Like a parent defending an errant child, no one else had better say anything bad about their town. People embrace the autonomy of living in a small town. They do not want to be told how to live. They can choose how they will run their businesses and will not be dictated to by some outside force. Similarly, customers want to have a better choice of retail shops, but they do not want to be told they cannot go to Des Moines discount stores and shopping malls.

When people live in a small community, there are few secrets. When people live so close to each other, they need to maintain a certain distance between them in order to respect each other’s privacy. Yet it is the sense of community in Eagle Rock, the friendliness and goodwill toward each other, that is so beneficial in times of stress. It is this community spirit that makes them willing and able to rally to each other’s defense or aid, that goes far beyond mere civic duty. The small town stereotype is that “everybody knows everybody.” The fact that this is not literally true does not negate the fact that it is metaphorically true. This sense of a place of brotherhood, then, may be the reason why several people in the community of Eagle Rock recently (2001) offered to donate a lung lobe to a man who was desperately in need. Sense of place does not emerge in a vacuum. All of the elements discussed above contribute to the creation of what is a community’s sense of place. And while sense of place is the essence and the source of a community’s strength, when it is expressed in a community’s social activities as well as its built environment, sense of place offers a powerful image to outsiders.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

'The fullest and best ears of corn hang lowest toward the ground.'
The test of a community's worth is not its census, nor its size, nor its material worth, but its populace, the people that live within its confines, and the kind of sons and daughters it turns out.

In the past, when a farming community was more isolated from outside influences, the community was not only much more self-sustaining, it was more socially nurturing as well. When everyone worked within the local community, people were able to socialize during daytime working hours. Local business owners gathered regularly at the coffee shop. People gossiped while shopping or doing business at the courthouse or the lumberyard, and farmers stayed in town on Saturday nights to socialize. What comes to mind are the frequent scenes from the fictional television town of Mayberry in The Andy Griffith Show. Mayberry's fictional businessmen gathering at the local barbershop to gossip, in essence, were reproducing and reinforcing the town's view of the world.

Things have changed, and towns like Eagle Rock share little more than a cursory resemblance to Mayberry. People still gather in their particular groups at the local restaurants for their daily coffee ritual. However, many townspeople now regularly work outside the community. With large distances between a community and its people comes a greater sense of individuality and privacy that precludes taking the time to gossip with one's neighbors. Spending more time in an urban environment changes attitudes and interests in local affairs, and some people are just too busy and too tired to participate. Commuters who do not have the time to be involved in community affairs or the lives of their neighbors may not feel they have an investment in the community beyond a financial one in their homes. Without this essential investment in the community, they have fewer resources to fall back on
in their own times of need. As in Millfield, “People like to think of themselves as having a community spirit, but their work, shopping, demands of kinship, work around the house, and need for time to relax all take precedent over the need for neighborly relations and communal activities” (Melko, et al. 1994:56).

In my visits to Eagle Rock, I often got the impression that not everyone enjoys the small town way of life. Some (such as Della and her husband, who live in town and plan to retire to the country, or Ben and Jill, who already live in the country and want to build a cabin in the woods) would prefer the anonymity of isolation to the community of small town life. Others, especially young people, regret the lack of exciting things to do. However, it appears not to be what people like about living in a small town so much as it is what they do not like about a big city that is important. They couched the most often cited benefits of living in a small town in terms of what small towns are not. They are not crowded, not noisy, not traffic-congested, not crime-ridden, not expensive, not impersonal (although more than one complaint was made about everyone knowing everyone else’s business), and schools are not full of gangs, drugs, and bad teachers.

In addition to the crashing of symbols, and to continue the musical metaphor, no place is more in need of blowing its own horn or beating its own drum than is the small town in competition for economic development resources. The current trend in community planning and economic development is the Main Street movement, where the focus is on revitalization of the downtown area. This incorporates the historic preservation of its old buildings with revivals and reproductions of social occasions that once formed an integral element of life on the public square. In Eagle Rock, the Main Street program is working hand in hand with the Chamber of Commerce, local business owners, and volunteer
organizations to make the public square present a unified front and a vision of a socially valuable and economically prosperous community.

While some residents questioned the benefit of putting money into refurbishing a dilapidated old building, it is apparent in my interviews that the people of Eagle Rock generally appreciate a cleaned up version of their downtown, if not necessarily a historically accurate replication of its original *turn-of-the-century* form. Each person I spoke to of the town's preservation efforts performed their own internal cost/benefit analysis: they weighed the costs of adhering to strict historical preservation standards against the potential benefits it might bring. Business owners on the square weigh the cost of sprucing up their *store fronts* against the benefits they might gain from an enhanced image of prosperity and success and whether or not the extra patronage it might bring would pay for the changes. The conclusion I reach is that any value placed on historic preservation is as much for its own sake as for an economic development tool.

In my research in Eagle Rock, I discovered that some townspeople feel disabused at being "nickeled and dimed" for donations to community-sponsored projects such as the historic preservation of the opera house. They also feel that they are not included in the decision-making process and that there are only a few in control who favor their own pet projects. Yet when an event like RAGBRAI⁹ came to town, as it has twice in its twenty-

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⁹RAGBRAI (an acronym for the Register's Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa) is an annual event that has taken place in Iowa every summer since 1973. What began as a dare between two Des Moines *Register* feature writers to ride their bicycles across Iowa and report on what they saw from the seat of a bicycle, is now a fixture in the hearts and minds of Iowans. It has grown since its inception, with as many as 13,000 riders of all ages, from every state in the union, and from many other nations. With intense international media coverage, RAGBRAI has gone from a fun thing to do on a summer vacation to an important promotion tool for the State of Iowa in general, and Iowa's small towns in particular. It is...
nine year history, the townspeople volunteered, en masse, to help with the event. Those who did not initially volunteer their time or homes or services, usually did so when asked. It was not that they were not willing to participate, but perhaps more that they did not know what they could contribute to the venture. Vital community activism occurs when the whole community is actively involved.

The issues of social hierarchy and the town and country dichotomy are also important to the fiscal vitality of the community. The politics of a small town may not be so different from those of larger cities. However, the smaller size puts the political process under a much stronger microscope. The autonomy of the small town is no more. In the last few decades as better transportation has drawn patrons to the larger urban centers, one of the significant blessings for local business has been that of customer loyalty. As illustrated by the withdrawal of support for a business as a form of public censure, public opinion can be very powerful. Businesses can no longer afford to have their customer loyalty undermined by class distinctions when it may be all that stands between prosperity and a going-out-of-business sign. Working together on events such as RAGBRAI brings the whole town together, merchants and citizens alike, for a common goal, and these are the kinds of things that make a difference in how people feel about themselves and their place within the

estimated that 199,150 people have pedaled 13,125 miles in 28 years. For this kind of exposure, small towns across Iowa campaign for a place along the route, and, if chosen, produce as much hospitality-in-a-box as they can muster, turning churches into dining halls and clearing parks, pastures, backyards, and bedrooms to give riders a place to shower, party, and sleep. The one-time economic boom in the short term is valuable, but the long-term economic benefits of displaying its assets are what each town hopes for. (Source: www.ragbrai.org).
Therefore, community leaders may need to work even harder at generating citizen involvement in community activities.

Along with sprucing up the physical aspects of the downtown, the town might also incorporate new ideas for spicing up the social life of the square. The planned activities such as the farmers market and the summer Chamber- and business-sponsored events on the town square have been a good place to start. That these events are so well-attended and successful is proof that they have a positive impact on the community.

Some politicians believe that the problem with Iowa public policy is the "rural-urban split" in the state legislature. The problem as they see it is that the rural faction is not willing to give in to the urban. The Des Moines Register's political columnist, David Yepsen, has suggested repeatedly in his columns that Iowa should centralize its services. He advocates indiscriminately consolidating rural school districts, despite the problems with busing students long distances. He and many others argue for consolidated court services along with the elimination of most of the ninety-nine counties, regardless of the distance people would have to drive to get to those services (including the elderly who make up a major portion of rural Iowa and who most likely cannot or should not drive those distances). Yet they also want to redirect road funding from the rural areas to where the larger population warrants, in their opinion, better roads.

However, it might make more sense for the state, including its legislators and its political columnists, to encourage and support the growth necessary to keep our small rural

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10I was gratified to read this same sentiment in Richard Doak’s editorial (Doak 2002) in The Des Moines Register, subsequent to my having written my own thoughts on the matter in this thesis.
communities sustainable. It is small communities that can relieve the congestion and crime and traffic of the larger urban centers. My research in Eagle Rock makes one thing abundantly clear. Rural and small town people live there for a reason. It is obvious something is keeping people in Eagle Rock. People would rather stay underemployed in the local factory than go to the city to work in a more satisfying or better-paying career for which they may have been trained. Others cannot conceive of another way of life that might make living in the city appealing. It is clear that the citizens of Eagle Rock would be among the first to complain about having to live in one large urban area in the middle of the state with the hinterlands abandoned by all but a few hired farmhands to work the corporatized land.

While they may say that their reasons for choosing to live in a rural small town are based on a lack of city vices, it may be what they do not say that is more significant. Midwesterners, especially those with a multi-generational standing in the community, come from a breed of people who had to be independent, self-sufficient, self-righteous, and tough to turn a prairie into farms and towns. Succeeding generations inherited not only a love of the land, but more importantly here, a tradition of making their own decisions about how to live, how to run their businesses, and what to do with their property. Traditional economic and social values are still firmly entrenched in the rural way of life. The pioneers, our rural ancestors, were those malcontents who disliked living in the city and being subjected to city morals and values not consistent with their own. That it is not likely to change any time soon.

Some experts recommend a triage approach to giving federal and state funds for services to only the small towns that are doing well and allowing the rest to die. However, there is another strategy we should consider. Our small towns could be a valid resource for a
balanced dispersal of economic and population growth. Iowa could grow without overburdening any one existing community, large or small, and still allow our small towns to maintain their populations and employment. Decentralization is not a new idea. People have been moving out of the inner cities and into rural areas since the invention of the streetcar. In the 1970s, a back-to-the land movement brought people out of the cities for a brief rural renaissance. However, this movement now usually takes the form of suburban sprawl on the contiguous farmland or swallowing up edge cities nearby.

The reasoning behind the theory of people living together in clusters is for the more efficient provision of public services. Understandably, it is more efficient to provide public utilities, fire, and police protection, etc., to people living in close proximity. However, at some point growth, and its accompanying social problems, negates economy of scale. If the entire state of Iowa wishes to retain its core values and rural flavor, while staying in step with mass society and modern technology, then achieving a healthy balance between small town communities and larger urban areas could be the key to essentially having our cake and eating it too. Iowa could grow without the overcrowding of any one community or the stresses of overpopulation in some cities and the decline and death of some small towns. This, of course, is an ideal.

While the Interstate road system may be causing a competitive disadvantage for Eagle Rock, it may also be a blessing in disguise. Eagle Rockians are now able to travel to the cities for city culture, while still being able to live in a community where their quality of life expectations can be met. Anita Walker, Director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, reported in a newspaper article (2001) that in a 1998 survey, 1,200 high technology workers listed “community quality of life” as the second most important factor in looking for a job
We are living in a new era of the "Information Age." Small towns have an unprecedented opportunity to thrive in this new age. Indeed, America's small towns may just be her best kept secret. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center tragedy, some experts began arguing for more decentralization of America's corporations. Suddenly, not having all your employees, records, and assets located in one place makes sense. People are not as eager to work in high rise buildings they now consider to be targets. One potential advantage is telecommuting, where people work in remote places and in their own homes. As an example of how this can work, the son of one Eagle Rock family moved recently from the big city to a house on a nearby lake, where he is able to do his job via computer connections to cities all over the country.

High speed Internet access is an important place to start. Letters to the editor in The Des Moines Register have been calling for high speed Internet access in rural areas to encourage economic development. Insurance businesses and banks, for example, are now being required by their home offices to use this service. Citizens of Eagle Rock have expressed their desire for this service in articles written in their local newspaper. It appears likely that Eagle Rock's efforts to get high speed Internet access will soon be successful. This, combined with lower building rents and a "community quality of life," could go a long way in attracting Internet-related businesses and make telecommuting more appealing.

Jackson talks about the value of working at home, within one's own community "where everyday domestic needs can be satisfied by the people who live nearby" (Jackson 1994:145). Now more than ever, how a town markets itself is critical. What towns like Eagle Rock can do is work together to make their town the most attractive for people who
no longer see urban life as tenable. Accordingly, building on nostalgia, historic preservation, and quality of life issues, Eagle Rock is today promoting its special sense of place as a marketing tool. Take, for instance, the words placed in souvenir “country crocks” sold by the Eagle Rock Chamber of Commerce:

[The county surveyor] platted the town around a ‘rare square,’ as the [Eagle Rock] square is unique in having a center street entering each side of the square and an exit at each corner. This type of closure gives our square a sense of place and its unusual form is rarely found in the Midwest. It is the only known square of its kind in Iowa.11

While these words convey literal information about the square’s features necessary to envision it, it further delivers the message of its one-of-a-kindness. Consider, too, the way prose about historic preservation is employed to promote the vision of a desirable community, as illustrated in a pamphlet produced for an Eagle Rock architectural treasure: “[Eagle Rock]’s imposing landmark opera house represents the proud and confident pioneer vision of early settlers,” followed by “Main Street is [Eagle Rock]’s volunteer-driven organization committed to economic revitalization.” Our senses are bombarded with impressionistic, value-laden terms for strength, commitment, dedication, and vitality.

Our sense of place is our reference point, our tie to the landscape of our shared experiences. Our fairy tales, urban legends, and folklore — our stories — are culture-specific and culture reproduced. Thus, we see the way phrases or words (Main Street, historic preservation) and visual images (historic buildings, bandstands) project a community’s sense of place and its small town values. It is a community’s shared sense of place that enables it to

11Indeed, this “Lancaster square” with streets intersecting in midpoints of each side of the square and slightly narrower business lots on blocks surrounding it, is the only courthouse square of this design in Iowa (Schmiedler 1998:15).
adapt with change. For this reason it must be understood and nurtured so that it can be used to promote and market the community to others. If, as Fries (1977:45) suggests, our small towns were founded on the Puritan legacy of “intense localism sustained by a convergence of political, social, and moral values which were both historically and experientially rural in nature,” then Eagle Rock today is investing in that same set of traditional, rural values to both maintain a traditional sense of place and grow in strength and security in its role within the global society.

In his essay on the geographic flatness of the Midwest, Michael Martone relates his dislike of the metaphor “Heartland” because to him this term implies that there is something exclusionary, secret and hidden, like a buried treasure. He prefers the metaphor of the landscape as a canvas, where “[i]n the flatness, everywhere is surface” on which can be painted the images which force us to “live in our eyes, in the outposts of our consciousness, the borders of our being . . . . Beneath our skins, we begin to disassemble the mechanisms of how we feel. We begin to feel” (Martone 1988:32-33). If our landscape is a canvas, then we have creative control, a sort of poetic license to redefine and reproduce our own unique sense of place as we wish it to be and as we wish it to be experienced by others. In the face of great socioeconomic change, maybe now more than ever, “we cannot escape our need for reference, identity, or our pull to the landscapes that mirror our most intense feelings” (Erdrich 1988:44).
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