Life After Death in a Small Town: Rural Community After the Decline of the American Small Town

by

Jennie Claire Ehrenhalt
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I. Personal Statement

To pass the time while driving across the desert of Utah, I spoke with friends about the current concept of community. We agreed on a few basic premises—people are more mobile, more independent, and freer than ever before. Advances in transportation allow people to be always on the move, going to places that at one time, for the average individual, were not conceivably reached.

The proliferation of modes of technological communication make it possible to keep in contact with those who, in the absence of face-to-face conversation, would never be seen or heard from again. The advantages of these types of communication are limitless—with e-mail, text-messaging, the internet, skype, instant messaging, and web-cameras, it is now possible to retain relationships with people one has not engaged in old fashioned conversation with in decades.

As the emphasis on communication with those who are not physically present has increased, however, contact with those in one’s immediate surroundings has come to be valued less and less. Walking down an urban sidewalk, one is surrounded by people, yet more people are conversing with someone somewhere else than are speaking to those walking beside them. As quotidian interactions are increasingly computerized—self-checkout at the grocery store, and voice recognition and touchpad telephone conversations, for example—we speak to fewer and fewer human beings. This development has contributed to the rise in an “awkward” phenomenon,
wherein we engage in fewer simple face to face conversations and more and more in virtual ones, therefore potentially losing the ability to benefit from physical contact.

Yet the question must be raised—how essential are all of these mundane conversations of face to face small talks in the first place? Are our lives richer, and more complete, when we order a McDonald’s Big Mac from a person instead of speaking our demands into a plastic speakerphone? It is undeniable that the small town experience of walking down the street waving hello to friendly familiar faces seen in every passerby is antiquated to the point of a cliché. People are less inclined to live their entire lives in a single town these days, and the effects of that shift are felt in ways that can easily be construed as positive, as well as negative.

Strong communities, however, are by no means dead. People have the opportunity to form communities built on common identities and interests, as opposed to those built by the bond of common experience—the bond on which so many small town communities rely. Members of minority groups who would ordinarily feel marginalized because of their race, religion, or sexuality, for example, now enjoy a greater opportunity to move away from their hometowns and find communities where they feel accepted and understood. Greater mobility creates a more viable option of exploring the options for community on one’s own, and one is provided with an escape from the conformity and narrow-mindedness that often accompanies the small-town lifestyle.

On the darker side, however, those newly constructed ideal communities where every member feels supported and safe are not always found, and are not always satisfactory, as they tend to encourage their own conformity. Some people
wander for the entirety of their adult lives and never find a place where they can belong. The solution for many of those people who yearn for a sense of community is to return to their hometowns, to a place to which they belong simply by sharing it with those who are immediately around. Small towns, however, haven't waited for the return of their prodigal sons and daughters. As their demography shrunk over the course of the twentieth-century as more and more people moved to bigger cities, small towns were bound to change too.

The aim of this project is to investigate some of the gains and losses that have resulted from the decline of small town community in the United States. Although one may easily argue that our sense of community is less strong today than at the beginning of the 20th century, during the apotheosis of small town living, it remains essential to consider what has been lost (or gained) in the transition away from small communities' values that were once indisputable and shared.

The investigation into these questions will be carried out through the examination of a small town community that still exists today, Centerville, Montana, in an attempt to uncover what constitutes a small town today when most buildings and people have left.
II. A Historical Introduction

The condition of small towns in the United States has been in flux throughout the twentieth century. At the century’s beginning, small towns experienced an apotheosis, where small-town values were lauded as the model for a thriving American community. However, this golden age was followed by a period of urbanization and industrialization, accompanied by a movement to cities and a negative portrayal of the small town lifestyle. This movement is seen in literary trends such as the Chicago Renaissance and the Revolt from the Village. The 1920s saw a flourishing of cities and urban life; however, the depression of the 1930s caused a reactionary back-to-the-land movement that held up the rural lifestyle of previous years as the “true American way.”

These intensive fluctuations continued with a similar degree of polarity for the remainder of the twentieth century. By the 1990s, small towns with a considerable, specific allure—a university, town hall, scenic vistas, or tourist attraction, for example—were surviving and in some cases even thriving. These small towns tended to have a notably larger population; in contrast, the tiniest small towns were drying up or withering away.

The intent of this project is to explore one of those tiny towns, examining the various factors that keep the community alive, and the sociological, ideological, and practical implications of those factors. Before beginning this process, however, it is important to examine the recent history of small towns, as a general conception of their progression is useful in understanding the place of a singular town in the comprehensive picture. What follows is not a complete narrative, but instead an overview of some of the trends that have contributed to the influence of small towns in American society today.
Small town living in the United States saw its heyday at the turn of the previous century, spanning from the 1890s and up through the first decade of the 20th century. In 1910, for example, 62 percent of Americans lived in small towns, as compared with 18 percent of the population in 1990.1 Author Richard Lingeman discusses this period of prosperity for small towns in his narrative history, Small Town America. He reasons that in many towns, stability derived from a mentally and racially homogenous population, wherein contradictions to the comfortable upper- and middle-class lifestyle were still segregated—“across the tracks, in Polish town (or Italian Town or Nigger town or Irish town) where the new immigrants lived, or off in the cities (259).”2

This golden age was made possible partly because industrialization had not yet disrupted the quiet charm of the human-powered bustle of Main Street. Lingeman notes, “The days of noisome fumes that fouled the air, threatening to strangulate Main Street itself, were still in the future (298).” Local transportation had not yet given up its charm, as bicycles passed by silently and the clip-clop of the horse-drawn buggy could still be heard. Before automobiles, the streets were still places of leisure, and residents strolled in the warmer months or sat in the park under gas-powered lamps.

Lingeman’s idealistic description of small town living during the first ten years of the 20th century—women on benches gossiping, children whizzing around on roller skates, families gathered about the piano, ice cream socials and serenaders regaling occupants door to door—is so picturesque that is it difficult to believe it could last, or even that it was ever a reality at all.

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If it did exist, it did not last for long. Increased industrialization and urbanization of cities led to a massive rise in urban population, as the largest cities expanded by 24 million people, or 80 percent overall—between 1900 and 1920. This shift was mirrored by a literary movement that critic Carl Van Doren coined in 1921 as “The Revolt from the Village.” Van Doren’s article, according to author Anthony Channell Hilfer, asserts:

Certain American novelists were attacking one of the most cherished American beliefs: the belief that the American small town is a place characterized by sweet innocence, an environment in which the best in human nature could flower serenely, a rural paradise exempt from the vices, complexities, and irremediable tragedies of the city.

The revolt, while far from a singularly unified movement, consisted of literary authors protesting the idealization and romanticization of small towns. They portrayed fictionalized versions of the towns of their youths as places that may have appeared serene and unspoiled upon first glance, but beneath the surface were riddled with repression, depression, conformity and despair.

One crucial figure in this movement was Edgar Lee Masters, who in 1915 published *Spoon River Anthology*. In his collection of poetry, each poem represents the epitaph of a resident in the town of Spoon River, a fictionalized location based on two Illinois towns in which Masters lived. By presenting each person’s life in an isolated

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3 Ibid. Page 327.
5 Ibid.
poem, Masters suggests that there is no common thread or collective identity holding the community together.\(^6\) Instead, asserts Hilfer in *the Revolt From the Village*, Masters’ souls are the victims of their sterile environment, and without a community they are never given a chance to achieve their potential for happiness in life.

Serepta Mason’s epitaph, for example, begins:

My life’s blossom might have bloomed on all sides
Save for a bitter wind which stunted my petals
On the side of me which you in the village could see.
From the dust I lift a voice of protest:
My flowering side you never saw!\(^7\)

While small towns were portrayed as a center of misery and despair hidden behind a façade of security and simplicity, writers of the Chicago Renaissance were glorifying industrialization and urbanization. In poet Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago*, for instance, the anti-urban critique is answered by the celebration of industrialization and the notion that while there may in fact be crime and corruption in the city, it is a remarkably exciting place to live.

“So I turn once more,” writes Sandburg, “to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them: Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.”\(^8\) Additionally, Sandburg’s poem asserts that while this urban, industrial way of life may be crooked and

\(^6\) Ibid.
dirty, it is a more authentic representation of the human experience. For under the wrist of the city “is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the people (4).”

The writers of the Chicago Renaissance, which saw its heyday from 1910-1916, had all grown up in a small town and fled to the city where they published their works. Their glorification of city life proved to further increase the movement of the center of American cultural life away from the town and toward the big city.

In 1919, Sherwood Anderson published *Winesburg, Ohio*, a novel devoted to isolated characters in a small town and their own personal experiences of pathos and loneliness. *Winesburg, Ohio* addresses a community’s failure to provide outlets for expressing emotion and communicating personal depth to others beyond the typically superficial small-town chatter. In Winesburg, friendly, surface-level conversations are possible, yet deeper feelings never find a voice for articulation. Hilfer writes in *The Revolt* that the characters are continually “seeking to reach out, to break through the walls of emotional repression to express their inner voices to another human being. These attempts are always abortive, always failures, for these people are unable to define or explain their inner longings, however deeply felt (152-3).”

For example, in the story *Paper Pills*, Doctor Reefy records his thoughts onto scraps of paper and stuffs them in his pockets until they overflow; he then dumps the paper balls onto the floor. In an attempt to express his love for his wife he “reads to her all of the odds and ends of thoughts he had scribbled on the bits of paper. After he had read them he laughed and stuffed them away in his pockets to become round hard balls (21).” His wife dies, and his love for her is expressed in compacted bits that are stuffed away, left for incomprehensible and inconsequential. While the characters may be filled
with profound longings and aspirations, they cannot express these feelings and become trapped in a superficial environment that “cannot comprehend or honor the subjunctive (157).”

Sinclair Lewis’ *Main Street*, published in 1920, portrays the small town lifestyle to be similarly repressive, isolating and socially tortuous. As a parody of the dominant middle class, *Main Street* depicts small towns as restrictive and narrow-minded, with little tolerance for outsiders of any sort. Carol Kennicott moves to her husband’s hometown of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, with distinct dreams of modernization for the town. She is “not interested in rolled hose, petting parties, or bathtub gin; she [wants] to make the little town of Gopher Prairie a Better Place to Live.”

Her plans for improvement, however, are taken for pretentiousness, and the residents of the town ostracize her to the extent that she is terrified to walk down the street. Carol is ridiculed and socially rejected because of her clothes, her home, and her previous urban lifestyle. Lewis portrays the citizens in the small town of Gopher Prairie as backward, provincial, and cruel. In his amalgamation of realism and satire, Lingeman writes in *Small Town America*, “Lewis broadened his indictment of a middle western town to embrace provincialism, boosterism, materialism and all the other sitting targets of the intellectuals who had been raging against ‘the emotional and aesthetic starvation’ of American life (384).”

With the popularity of and focalization on the city, towns were the subject of literary criticism; they also underwent historically unprecedented changes. As towns became more modernized, conveniences such as radio, automobiles, newspapers, and telephone and telegraph wires all connected towns to the metropolis. As the town

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became a “ganglion of the city,” it lost some of its identity and independence, of which insularity and conformity were both a part.

Cities continued to flourish into the 1920s, as the 1920 census revealed that for the first time in history, more Americans were living in cities than in rural areas. With the American economy booming, industrialization exploding, and urban capitalism thriving, it was not until the Great Depression of the 1930s that small towns began to witness a small comeback.

When economic conditions deteriorated, people from rural areas who had traveled to cities in search of higher-paying jobs moved back to the country to work on farms or in their hometowns. This migration back to farms was not generally successful, however, as the migrants could not afford the additional land or equipment necessary to make the endeavor profitable.

Small towns—those with populations between three and ten thousand—continued to gain in population through the Depression, at a rate similar to the national trend. Accompanying this growth was an increased interest in American folk culture, and the idea that small-town folk were trusty, traditional, “true Americans”—people who could be idealized from a distance by those in the city.

This idealization of small-town values plays a role in Thorton Wilder’s 1938 play Our Town. Set in the non-specific town of Grover’s Corners, Wilder focuses on and appreciates the quotidian happenings in life, as well as its fundamental and formative events. The play is divided into three acts: “daily life,” “love and marriage,” and “death.”

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By setting *Our Town* decades earlier, in 1901, Wilder allows his audience to escape from the economic and political turbulence of the current time and to get lost in a comforting nest of nostalgia, where most characters are simple and innocent, hard-working, decent Americans.\(^\text{14}\)

In addition to portraying the universals of an ordinary life, *Our Town* suggests that it is the small moments in life, those that seem insignificant at the time, that we must recognize and appreciate. When one of the central characters, Emily, dies during childbirth at play’s end, she learns as a ghost that she can revisit one memory. She returns to her twelfth birthday, where she realizes the value of life’s singular moments:

> I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover’s Corners...Mamma and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking...and Mama’s sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. *She looks toward the stage manager and asks abruptly, through her tears:* Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute (100)?\(^\text{15}\)

Wilder’s message behind *Our Town* implies that life is lived too quickly, that humans never slow down the pace of existence enough to fully understand the beauty in the quotidian. While the residents of Grover’s Corners may fall victim to this

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\(^{14}\) Ibid. Page 260.

inevitability, Wilder’s play suggests that they come closer to living a good-hearted, honest existence than most. Thus Our Town praises the small-town values that had been so harshly criticized in previous decades, arguing that small town community can bring us closer to the traditional, simpler values that are neglected in the fast-paced, individualistic tempo of urban life.

Along with the strong presence of small towns in literature, case studies of the sociological intricacies of small towns experienced a revival during and after World War Two, as people sought atmospheres of stability, security, and escape from the cataclysmic destructions of the war. Carl Withers, writing under the pseudonym James West, published Plainville, U.S.A. in 1945. Imitating earlier models of general sociological study such as Lynd’s Middletown, Withers investigates the broad social structure of the town as well as its place in current American trends. “The present study was undertaken,” he writes in his introduction, “to attempt to learn specifically and in detail how one relatively isolated and still “backward” American farming community reacts to the constant stream of traits and influences pouring into it from cities and from more “modern” farming communities (vii).”

While interest in small town community may have been revived, Wither’s prognosis for the town was not positive. He observed tension between the insular community in the town and the outside world, and noted that the younger population received little advice about this wider world from adults, who still considered it threatening. Withers notes:

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[C]onflicts between the ‘old ways’ (here) and ‘new ways’ (here and outside) intensified. Conflict between ‘old age’ and youth intensified. Ridicule and contempt for ‘the hillbillies’ intensified, and the class structure became rigid. The leadership of old-style merchants failed, and lodges ceased functioning importantly. Neighborhoods and extended families lost much of their solidarity. (221)\(^\text{17}\)

While assessments of small town living at this time were generally more pessimistic than the studies of the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century, they were not always entirely negative. Marxist critic and novelist Granville Hicks recorded his experience in a village in upstate New York in his work \textit{Small Town}. Hicks criticized the surface-level amiability of village life, while also pointing out the benefits of what was becoming known as a rural, “backwards” existence. In the first chapter he notes, “In a small town functions often overlap, and as a result one can do two or three strokes of business in a single call (9).”\(^\text{18}\) Hicks goes on to describe how one Friday evening he was able to take care of a string of errands in one quick succession:

while making some purchases at the store, I got Mark Betterton to countersign several school district checks. One of these checks I took to the janitor, and since he is also a member of the board of assessors, I was able to raise the question of the exemption of a lot owned by the Community League. I stopped at the library to discuss with Lucy Sheldon not only library business but also the accompaniments she was to provide for

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
our sketch the next night. Then, when I picked up Dorothy up at the town hall, which
she and the Porters were decorating for the dance, Jane Porter, as an insurance agent,
handed to me, as secretary of the fire district, a liability policy covering members of
the fire company. (9)

Thus Hicks delineates some of the simple logistical and ordinary pleasures that come
from inhabiting a small town that persist in an era when the small town mentality is
considered to be in danger of extinction. The authors’ findings concerning their small
towns are often far from positive; yet it is noteworthy that the interest in small town
community experienced a revivification. People began once more to look for a
rootedness that was lacking in modern life, and they searched for it in small-scale
community life.

This interest can be seen in Small Town in Mass Society, a 1958 study by Arthur
J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman of a town they called Springdale. In Springdale, they
explain, the local government attempted to keep down taxes by hooking into state and
federal troughs, and soon the town was dependent on them. In addition, the business
class of Springdale took its lead from large companies that produced the goods the
business class sold, and the town’s dairy farmer’s relied on the federal government for
their milk-price support policies.

Despite this evident cycle of dependency, residents of Springdale still viewed
themselves as self-sufficient and autonomous, and scorned and condemned the corruption
and big-government of the city. The demonstration of this inextricable link from the
town to the city, from the rural to the urban, was revolutionary, as even the townspeople
were unaware of their situation. This ignorance was a result of what Vidich and Bensman called “particularization;” or, the practice of seeing events as separate, unconnected entities without putting them together to form generalizations or abstract thoughts.  

Vidich and Bensman also noted what they called the “middle-class revolution.” As the new generation attended college, they were exposed to new lifestyles, causing them to question, and often jettison the traditional values of their parents in favor of cultural and intellectual tastes that were morally, politically, and sexually more liberal.

As the economic and social influences of Springdale became more tied to the urban lifestyle, Vidich and Bensman showed that it was becoming increasingly impossible to live in a secluded, self-sufficient American small town, without ties to and dependency on the city. Whether the townspeople knew it or not, they were beginning to need the big city to survive.

As interdependency decreased the polarization between country and city, the two began to blur into one. The 1960s saw an explosion of growth of suburbs and urban sprawl. Farms were occupied less and less, and the Supreme Court’s “one-man, one-vote” ruling in the Reynolds v. Sims case of 1964 asserted that state legislature districts had to be roughly equal in population, thus ending the country’s control in state legislatures and Congress. Furthermore, President Johnson’s Great Society programs to ameliorate the problem of poverty focused on the urban poor, and the issues plaguing small towns were pushed aside as matters of secondary priority.

In the 1970s, small town living experienced another back-to-the-land movement, along with a moderate revival of small-scale community. Americans grew disillusioned with the urban lifestyle and sought out simplicity. With the rise in concern for the environment, many wanted to live more in touch with the earth, and searched for such a lifestyle in small-town community. As distrust of big government and big institutions grew on both sides of the political spectrum, a movement towards smallness became increasingly popular. Ecologists and conservationists fought to save unspoiled lands, and architects turned towards preservation and restoration of buildings instead of demolition and redevelopment.\(^{21}\)

Growth and revival in small towns that occurred in the 1970s, however, was entirely reversed in the 1980s, a time that “proved to be the most disastrous decade for small-town America in recent times.”\(^{22}\) The majority of counties lost population, with a net out-migration of 1.4 million people.\(^{23}\) As dependence on the city gained an increasingly irreversible permanence, the small towns that had been threatened were now in danger of complete extinction.

\(^{22}\) Alan Ehrenhalt, Small Town Prophets.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
III. Small Town America Today

Small-town America in the 1990s and the present day has witnessed a comeback in unforeseen ways. A town’s greatest chance for prosperity lies in its degree of specialization. If the town provides access to a university, proximity to a city, a scenic area, or a coveted tourist attraction, the town may discover ways to thrive economically; it may even retain its historic identity from the past. Without these assets, however, towns that were once lauded as paragons of supportive communities and traditional values get absorbed into larger surrounding towns, transform into drab, monochrome suburbs, or simply dry up and fade away.

Other towns rely on their own ingenuity, turning to their immediate resources as a source of survival. In parts of rural Montana, for instance, townspeople have created economic opportunity by producing commodities from local wool that was once shipped out of state, and by using roe from a local prehistoric fish to make caviar. They have additionally discussed possibilities for converting their abundance of empty, arid land into a hazardous waste disposal site.²⁴

In Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small Town America (1998), Richard O. Davies tells the story of one prototypical American small town that did not experience such good fortune. Davies tells of the building of a community in Camden, Ohio, its halcyon days of the 1920s, and the community’s decline—its “slow but steady loss of young persons, stagnation and aging of populations, the diminution of political clout, a

fading economic viability, and an increase in social pathologies.”

Davies notes the years of 1956-61 as a crucial time of economic and social decline, wherein a series of events out of the town’s control caused economic decline to accelerate, and a new kind of community emerged—one with little relation to or reminiscence of the “proud and vibrant one it replaced.”

By the mid-1970s Camden was a shell of its old self. Its business district was destroyed, and its two main resident groups were the elderly and the poor. Davies paints a bleak, often hopeless portrait of the current conditions of small towns, one where nostalgia serves as a primary method for passively preserving and appreciating the lost values of the past.

In *Far From Home* (1991), journalist Ron Powers examines two more small towns, each struggling, but for disparate reasons. Cairo, Illinois, once a bustling riverboat town, suffers from economic atrophy and the devastating race riots of the 1960s. After floods, epidemics, bankruptcies, Powers notes that what remained was “the gambling, the whorehouses, the racketeering, and the mutually loathing stare of two trapped races: the blacks up from the Deep South, the whites coming west from Appalachia, each a reminder to the other of the stalled journey, the paralysis inside the flow of time.”

Powers juxtaposes Cairo with Kent, Connecticut, afflicted not by atrophy, but by another phenomenon he calls “hyperprosperity.” As condominium developers pave over pastures and disregard small-town traditions, wealthy weekenders from New York are

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raising property value and taxes so high that the original residents cannot afford to live in their own town. Powers discusses the new highway that carried in wealthy New Yorkers by the droves, noting, “congestion was far from the severest consequence of the population surge into the small towns. The most ruinous costs were to the spirit—the very marrow and essence of town life. The urban flood tide was turning ancient New England communities into garrisons of strangers.”27

The destructive forces behind these changes are strikingly dissimilar. In Cairo, Powers describes racial lynchings at the turn of the century: a race riot in 1937; a cross-burning in 1952; and a brutal beating of blacks who tried to integrate a roller-skating rink in 1964. In Kent, Connecticut, on the other hand, residents suffered from the prevalence of illegal drugs, and pollutants, like septic sewage and detergents, that accompany the new development and contaminate the watersheds that flow into the lake. While one of the towns has been destroyed by poverty, and the other by invasive affluence, the results are similar. Both towns have lost hold of their former identity and no longer exist as they once were, due to socioeconomic factors outside of their control.

Not all contemporary portrayals of small towns, however, are as bleak. With the recent rise in popularity of localism and sustainable living, small towns have gained a new edge that they have never before considered. More Americans seek an understanding of the origin of and story behind their purchased goods, and a closer proximity to their production. Small towns can provide a local, small-scale economy that urban metropolises cannot.

The local and organic foods movement, for example, has benefited small-town agriculture and businesses. States such as Vermont have produced a number of companies, like Pete’s Greens and Vermont Soy, that have found success by using local ingredients in their products. The owner of the former, Pete Johnson, remarks, “Twelve years ago the market for local food was lukewarm. Now this state is primed for anything that is local. It’s a way to preserve our villages and rebuild them.”28

In Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age (1998), Michael Shuman describes examples of towns that are fighting back against the globalized chain-store economy, and delineates concrete suggestions about how small towns can revive their local economies and keep them intact. Shuman explains how more towns are refusing to be overtaken by Wal-Marts and are switching to local produce and manufactured goods, as well as pressuring banks to loan money to local residents. Shuman writes:

Going local does not mean walling off the outside world. It means nurturing locally owned businesses which use local resources sustainably, employ local workers at decent wages, and serve primarily local consumers. It means becoming more self-sufficient, and less dependent on imports. Control moves from the boardrooms of distant corporations and back to the community, where it belongs.29

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Shuman outlines a way for communities to develop a balance between the global and local spheres, in production, finance, and governmental realms. He maintains that communities must invest in locally owned businesses such as credit unions and community development corporations, and focus on “import-replacing” instead of “export-led development.” These actions will lessen the need to attract giant corporations to the town, upon which the small towns will likely come to depend.

With a set of concrete solutions and an optimistic yet realistic hope for the future, *Going Local* provides a more positive conception of the current condition of American small towns. While these three textual examples may tell varying stories, they agree on one fundamental fact—if small towns are going to succeed, it is ingenuity and planning that will allow them to survive.

While many towns big enough to have substantial business districts are experiencing a revival, these larger towns frequently place those smaller in size at risk of drying up and withering away. A 1996 article by Alan Ehrenhalt about the comeback of small town main streets notes, “Many of the tiniest [towns], a few thousand people or less, have all but gone under in the economic upheaval of the last two decades and have no realistic chance of scrambling back.” As self-sufficiency becomes increasingly difficult on a small scale, the towns with the smallest populations are unable to remain both prosperous and independent.

While questions concerning the conditions of contemporary small towns can be elucidated by examining case studies and issue-specific works, it is also helpful to look to the recent works of community studies, of which there is a rich field of investigation and scholarship. One of the most seminal texts in the community studies field is political

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scientist Robert Putnam’s article turned book *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*. In his central argument, Putnam asserts that civil society is eroding because Americans are straying more and more from their communities, families, neighbors, and the governing body—in other words, the organizations on a local level like the boy scouts and the PTA, that keep democracy alive, are wearing thin:

Television, two-career families, suburban sprawl, generational changes in values—these and other changes in American society have meant that fewer and fewer of us find that the League of Women Voters, or the United Way, or the Shriners, or the monthly bridge club, or even a Sunday picnic with friends fits the way we have come to live.

Putnam argues that democracy, the success of social institutions, and the quality of life are firmly dependent on networks of civic engagement, and that American communities are suffering as their members participate less and less. Instead, asserts Putnam, people are more likely to join national organizations such as the AARP, where, as with fans of a baseball team, ties are to “common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another.”

Putnam corroborates his observations with an abundance of statistics and facts—for example, while 72% of Americans socialized with their neighbors at least once a year in 1974, only 61% reported doing so in 1993. He offers little solution to the problem, as

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his most important observation lies in the notion that Americans are now less trusting, a shift which can be traced back to the lower “density of associational membership” and the erosion of social capital.

Ray Suarez, former host of National Public Radio’s Talk of the Nation, presents a similarly bleak thesis in his book *The Old Neighborhood*. He examines “the great suburban migration” of 1966-1999, and offers clues to what is sometimes labeled “white flight.” Suarez travels to cities and interviews community organizers, government officials, people who have remained in the city, and those who have left, to find clues about what has happened to the tight-knit urban neighborhoods of the past. He examines the larger institutional issues driving the flight, such as redlining mortgage banks, nose-diving property values, crime, an increased availability of cars and highways, and decaying public school, while also pursuing what he sees as a simple lack of honesty in people’s reasons for their move.

Pointing to America’s incapacity to deal with race, Suarez argues that white people do not want to live with black people, and that they will continue to move further and further away from the city if it prevents racial co-habitation. He interviews Regina Lind, who discusses Louisville in the 1960s:

Urban renewal had come and torn down half of downtown, and blacks started moving west. The minute that happened you could hear people saying it, adults, children repeating what they had heard at home, ‘The niggers are coming. The niggers care coming,’ as if it was the plague or something. The questions people
asked revolved around it: ‘When are they going to get here? What does it mean for me?’

While Suarez laments the loss of the tight-knit communities of the cities that in many ways resemble a small town, and many of the people he spoke to reported a similar nostalgia, almost all the individuals interviewed reported being glad that they had left, and that they were able to give their children a better life.

The interest in small town community in the United States persists decidedly to this day. Journalists, sociologists, and individuals with a variety of personal motivations continue to conduct case studies that contribute to the literature about small towns. While this literature disagrees in many respects, there is one consensus that is markedly clear: even if some small towns are staying alive, they are finding great difficulty in their quest to thrive.

Studies of communities prove illuminating in the search for the answer to questions of what Americans are searching for in a community today; what kind of progress are they making in that search; and, most importantly, what strides we should take to ensure the preservation and proliferation of environments in which residents are socially, personally, and communally fulfilled. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what people want and need from a home, it is crucial to examine the intricacies of community on the smallest level—places, for example with communities of one thousand people or less. Doing so will help to understand how

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community functions on a most basic level, and then project that understanding onto a gradually larger scale.
Part IV: Appendix

filming journal

1/1/09

Coming home to the suburbs puts this project in perspective, and makes me realize how this subject came to be personally important to me. Arlington, Virginia, with a population of a quarter of a million, feels like one big sprawling mass. Arlington has no downtown, and busy streets that are anything but pedestrian friendly. Growing up it often felt like a suburban wasteland, with no center and no place distinct enough to call home. Traveling everywhere in the car made me feel disconnected and detached from the one place I thought I was guaranteed to belong.

Feeling alienated and alone as most teenagers do, I began to romanticize about life in a small town. In a close community, I thought, everyone felt safe and supported by a group that understood and respected its members and was small enough to come together frequently, if only just for some casual talk. I saw life as simpler and slower outside of the city and my suburb, and I thought that it could fill an emptiness that was becoming increasingly strong.

Soon I was spending every summer in the outdoors. Whether attending wilderness camp, camping and working on hiking trails, farming, or teaching at an outdoor school in the middle of nowhere, I found the tiny fabricated communities to be more personally rewarding and emotionally fulfilling than could ever be possible in the urban and suburban world. From these communities I learned what it meant to form a
collective identity and evolve not as an individual but as an important part to a whole larger and more real.

Of course, I left all of these communities at the summer’s end and therefore was able to experience them as fleeting utopias, without considering practicalities like the cost of food or the deadness that accompanies the frigid winters. I still hold these experiences as my ideal—the perfect life to strive for that will be more fulfilling than living within the constraints of mainstream society could ever be. I see small towns as an extension of this dream, places where one can sustain a living without compromising a collective identity that is spiritual, as it reminds us of our capacity to be part of something larger than ourselves.

I want to pursue this project because I want to test my idealistic views; I want to determine whether or not there is any truth to the fact that people are more fulfilled in small communities because people can support each other in ways that those in suburbs and cities cannot, as essential parts of a common whole. I want to understand what makes some people prefer living in small towns, whether it is a conscious decision or merely incidental.

Finally, I have recognized a distinct threat to my idealism—small towns have declined over the course of the 20th century. If small communities become extinct, what does that say for the kind of communities that I was a part of during my summers growing up? I am not pessimistic enough to believe that the decline of small towns means the end to fulfilling communities, but the basic foundation on which its values are built is sinking lower and it’s hard to know how much longer its values can serve as an
example. I want to investigate if and how those values are surviving, long after the decline and arguable death of the small town.

(background- Dean and Nikki are Kristina’s step-dad and mom, whom I stayed with for the two weeks.)

1/04/09

Last night it was -17 degrees, so we drove down the hill to the bar instead of walking its extraordinarily few paces. The Centerville bar was built in 1904 during the mining boom, and every stool last night was taken. Men in flannel shirts muddy Carhardt overalls and bulging potbellies peered at the gambling machines that lined the back wall of the bar. When I asked Dean how many people lived in Centerville he said, “hold on, lemme count,” and fanning out his fingers told me, “27.” Besides a few men too inebriated to hold conversation, I was introduced to most people there and we talked a bit about the bar and what had brought them to Centerville.

I sat with Nikki as she pumped $20s into the gambling machine, and she told me how sports teams ran the high school, why they stopped going to church, the bar fights that had broken out and the beer bottles that had been thrown at her head while she owned the bar and tended it for almost a decade. She gestured towards a woman, Trudy,
screaming hoarsely across the bar and explained how she had put a restraining order against her, and described her tendency to hang women up on coat hooks when they made her upset. Trudy interrupted the conversation, putting her arms around Nikki and giving her wet sloppy kisses on the cheek repeatedly. Still screaming hoarsely, she talked about fights at the bar that had broken out between rival softball teams, and traditional chants that the “Coulee-ites” ritually perform.

Full, already opened and foaming cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon that I never ordered were brought by a hunched man in a tipped black cowboy hat that swallowed his eyes; the drinks appeared atop the slot machine I was sitting in front of. Unsure how to stop the anonymous influx of cheap beer, I admittedly had to pour the last few down the sink. It is easy for me, with my relatively wealthy upbringing, to judge these people as poor, uninspired, and depressed—they’re lives are strikingly less privileged than my own and their tastes are of the kind that kids from Wesleyan look down upon: processed cheese, football games, and televisions blaring simultaneously from every room. I will try, however, not to superimpose my liberal sentiments by judging their lifestyle, and instead think about the fact that I and many consider this a simpler life.

1:00pm

Walked around in the icy cold shooting some of the town. It may be partly due to the snow, but it feels and sounds like a desolate wasteland out there. White all around like you could fall right into it if you’re not careful. Whistling wind to chop up a deafening silence. This is not the small town I imagined in my dreams, where strollers walk up and down the sidewalks in front of storefronts with flour-dusted apron-clad grocers humming merrily inside. Either that kind of town is long gone, or it never really
existed. I’m beginning to think now that more what I’m looking into is not the survival of a small town, but life after its death.

1/5/09

Couldn’t make it to the hooterite colony because of snow drifts. Got a driving tour from on top of the coulees where the empty solemn white stretched on into a blank and dusty forever. Dean pointed out a rocky bluff where he and his friends used to get drunk when they were kids. “Nobody’d ever see ya; it was great.” Took a driving tour of the other towns where there are more abandoned buildings from the mining days. I need to remember to film them while I’m here.

We stopped in to see Dean’s mother and as we pulled up he pointed across the street, “My mom grew up in that red house there.” Pointing to the neighboring houses, “My sister lives right there. I got a brother who lives there, another right here, and another sister who lives right there. Got another sister in Tracy, too.” Dean is one of eight, and not one of them has moved farther than a couple miles from his mother’s house—the place they all grew up. Inside Dean’s mother fed me apple butterscotch cake and showed me books about the history of the gulch area. She got out some pictures of the centennial of Stockett, and a panoramic photograph of the town at the turn of the century, when the coal industry was booming.

Armed with some hefty reading material—the book includes the family history of almost everyone in the area—we began the two miles back to Centerville. Noticing that the towns all seemed so similar I asked if they were thought of as one big combined
town, but Nikki was adamant. “No,” she said, “they’re really all pretty independent.”
All between two and three miles apart from one another, I still have some trouble believing it, but I will try to take her word for it.

After a short break I was feeling energized and went down to the bar. I felt my greenhorn status consuming me as I walked in the door. Carrying conspicuous amounts of bulky equipment, I began approaching everyone directly. Going down the row of gambling machines I introduced myself, “Hi, I’m working on a project about small towns and I was wondering if you’d like to be interviewed today...” I could sense my immediate failure as the words left my mouth. I understood that this was not the way to get good interviews, but it was the simplest way I knew how to start. Bulbous black cowboy hats shook back at me. A lot of people laughed, “what do you want to talk to me for?”

Dejected, I sat down at the bar, which perhaps was the first move I should have made. The skinny ruddy-faced bartender in a Western shirt and cowboy hat didn’t want to talk. A very inebriated man next to me (who I later learned went by the name of Fat Bob) spit slurred expletives at my face, ranted about the f-ing media, and told me about his Vietnam wounds and how he self-medicates with alcohol. He got up in my face and apologized repeatedly, saying he didn’t mean to offend, that he didn’t mean to be a dick, and then told me I was adorable and I was going to get into a situation that meant something different to me than it did to the other person, and “fuck,” he said, “you’re going to get you’re pretty ass hustled real bad.”

He was creepy and wasn’t helping the being in a new place where I stuck out like a sore thumb and was at least a foot shorter and narrower than most people, and part of me wanted to go into the bathroom and break down. I finally told him he was too close,
and he left. A tubby man in coveralls missing some teeth bought me a beer, though, and he and his dad were much more friendly, so I was able to recover soon. We talked about Kalispell for a bit, where I spent last summer. He told me that his greatest accomplishment is his kids, for sure, but that in Glacier National Park, “the most beautiful fucking place on earth,” there are places no other human being has seen. That, he said, was something truly great.

It seems colder with snow everywhere, and even more so in the dark. The black blends into the white and I think maybe I’ve left reality for a cold blank silence. Certainly my idealism has faded quickly in many respects. It’s true that everyone knows everyone around here, that there is community in that sense. But the TV is on constantly, usually multiple ones at once, and it’s hard to get away from the cacophony of Sponge Bog, Wii Hannah Montana and Law and Order SVU when there are only three rooms in the house. When it’s this cold, the only activities anyone seems to engage in are drinking and watching TV. But I’m not ready to give up my passion for small towns yet. Rural Montana is probably not for me. But I still enjoy the calm, the change of pace, the feeling that there’s a little more room to breathe.

It’s definitely hard to adjust. I’m used to the competitive college atmosphere where one’s self-worth is judged by how many meetings and extra-curriculars are attended, and lazing around watching an entire season of Friends in one sitting is not valued and, moreover, is never an option. Sometimes I like the busy style of life: if you can cram more life into your life then why not. So I don’t entirely understand my love of small towns where the pace is slower and fewer things get done in a day. But I hope that
being here will help me understand that conflict, and see that the community I’m searching for is not necessarily found only in a small town environment.

8:00pm

I’m ok with the movie being rough around the edges because I like that it’s self-aware. I like that I’m holding the camera because that’s what this is—a kid with a video camera going into a foreign place and asking questions of strangers. Profound, maybe not, amateur, yes, but worthwhile, I believe so.

What’s perhaps most frustrating is that there is so much I am learning off camera that simply cannot be included, so much that I experience and think jeez, this is why I’m making this movie, why in hell am I not filming this. But as soon as I realize it, of course, the moment has passed and the authenticity has been ruined by the fishing for the camera and the robotic beeping noises that entirely alter the nature of the moment.

The relationship between the hooterites and the townies is incredibly interesting. They’re extremely different peoples—the philosophy of the former projects passivity and purity, and the latter is rough around the edges, taking pride in a penchant for fucking shit up once in a while and taking no crap from nobody. They appear to be polar opposites. I think they respect each other for the most part; I’ve heard a good amount of townies remark about how nice they are when you go up to visit them. But there are other comments suggesting otherwise as well.

For instance, last night at the bar the cheery bearded man in overalls spoke for a good while about how the hooterites were going to take over the world. “We’re all worried about Iraq, Afghanistan, all that shit, but it’s not the Taliban—it’s those Hooterites that we got to worry about.” He maintained that they have way more colonies
than one might think, and that they are expanding all the time. “Eggs,” he said chuckling, “They’re gonna take over the world with their eggs.”

And today at the senior center Dean’s mother was discussing the sale of some property to the hooterites and she remarked that you could never get a decent price because “you know those hooterites, they want everything for free.” So there’s an interesting tension between the two groups, about which you could make an entire documentary for sure. But with just two weeks, unfortunately I’m not sure it’s something I am prepared to tackle. For now, the more general is ok with me.

8:30pm

Today was long and I am still kind of reeling. Walked over to the senior center with Nikki for lunch. First thing when we sat down a woman with a giant neck brace and lavender blush told me about operations she’d had on both knees, her hip, a gastric bypass (she used to weigh 400 pounds, but the other day she felt her cheekbones. Oh boy, she thought, what is that? I haven’t felt those in years!) and a thoracic replacement scheduled for next month. I wasn’t coldly received, but no one seemed particularly thrilled to have me either.

I bet they felt as silly being videotaped as I did taping them, eating their Salisbury hamburger steaks drenched in gravy on Styrofoam plates, discussing who in the area was stuck in a snow drift and who was going to go pull them out. The woman next to me told me she was one of 15 children, the baby, and she grew up in Sand Coulee in a two bedroom house. She spent 45 years in Arizona she said, but ran out of family down there and returned to her hometown to grow old.
I thought I would win them over by persistence, so I decided to stay for a round of cards. Little did I know that that meant pinochle and 500 for many hours into the late afternoon. I had no idea how to play 500, and I’m really no good at cards. A man with a shiny bald head who snapped his red suspenders and resembled a blueberry taught me on the fly through the toothpick he chomped on, but I had trouble and they did not have patience. I couldn’t tell if I was intimidated, embarrassed, or just inept, but I became quickly exhausted. I kept waiting for them to retire for their afternoon naps, but I was the only one who needed one. It must have been a defense mechanism against my failure at cards or at winning over the hearts of the seniors, but I could barely keep my eyes open. Over and over again they repeated the rules to me in backhanded tidbits, but I never really understood what was going on. But I stuck with it. My head reeled and I thought it would never end. Late in the afternoon, however, it did, and I was awarded a Reece’s square for my efforts. I hadn’t picked up much factual information, but my conception that the Montanans who stick around are all tough as nails was wholeheartedly and indisputably confirmed.

I hadn’t really processed that the reason I felt so sleepy was that I was shutting down, depressed and intimidated because I was not accepted into a circle of what I assumed to be meek and mild elderly folks. But at the bar afterwards, Nikki helped it all come together. “I would never stay to play cards with those people, nope. They scare me to death. Those women are gossip hounds and they’ll turn around and talk about you right behind your back. You get to go home in two weeks, but I got to live with ‘em.” And then I felt better, affirmed, like I wasn’t just being a shy and diffident child. It doesn’t help when old withered men in beanies call you “kid” and “little girl.”
Beanie man helped me out the most actually, and when I pressed him for an interview he said he could guarantee that the road to his house was icy and full of snow drifts that would make it impossible to me to pass. “Country living,” as I was told yesterday.

De-stressing drunk guys on weekday nights are considerably easier to talk to. Nikki knew everyone there—almost all men—and introduced me to them one by one. “You gotta meet him;” “oh here comes this guy;” “I gotta introduce you to that guy.” None of them particularly wanted to talk, but I did my best not to sound like the tool with the camera. After a few PBRs back, being the tool with the camera didn’t sound like the worst thing in the world and I began to embrace the idea. That’s when the idea of a self-conscious film hit me—why should I be trying not to be the outsider with the video camera when that’s exactly what I am.

There was no escaping so I decided to roll with it. I turned the camera on and people talked more than I was expecting and more than before. I missed a lot of “aaaayyy”s upon an opening door, a lot of the hearty chuckles, hugs, and smirky grins, but I think I got some of it on tape. So we’ll see. Just gotta keep working at it, keep lugging that dumb camera around, and I think it’ll all pay off.

Nikki has been kind of like the political narrator so far. She told me about how there’s not much to do after high school graduation, so a lot of kids go down to Wyoming and work on an oil rig for 26 dollars an hour. Then they come back and are making not even close to that here and don’t know what to do with themselves. Troy, who is Cliff’s son on film, told me that he had done that and that he was considering going to Alaska
with a buddy to work some more. He said they worked two weeks on and two weeks off, and I got the feeling it was an exhausting, laborious job.

She also talked about how gambling has become a big problem in Montana, after it was legalized in the 1980s. Because casinos don’t have liquor licenses which are limited, they have beer and wine licenses which are unlimited and therefore casinos sprout up everywhere in town and in the state. She said often it’s old people who go the most frequently, because they’re retired and have nothing else to do. She told me about a friend of hers who was a deputy sheriff and mismanaged funds because she spent so much on gambling. “She kept taking out more and thinking she’d win it back, taking out more and thinking she’d win it back, and so on. She spent two years in jail and certainly wasn’t sheriff when she got out.”

A white pickup pulled up to the bar and Nikki and the three men next to her leaned down, peering at the wheels to see who it was. You couldn’t see anyone; they were looking at the rig. Is that so and so? They asked. They threw out more names. “Out here,” Nikki told me frankly, “we tell a person by their vehicle.” As she drank more she opened up further, talking about coming to Centerville from Great Falls when she and Dean married and how it was difficult to infiltrate the small community and the family. “Dean comes from a big family, there’s eight of ‘em,” she said, “and so they’re used to someone doing something for everyone else.” She described how his mother would come over to bring him dinner. “This is what Dean likes.” “But I already made dinner.” “This is what he likes.” “Ok...” “She still cooks for him,” she said, “but now she takes it down to the bar and he brings it for lunch.”
“Dean was a bachelor out here until he was 41,” she said; his sisters would come twice a month and clean his house. His brother down the road would order his checks. “I said you’re 41 years old and you don’t even know how to order checks from the bank? But now he does it himself.”

1/7/09

I definitely get frustrated when I am not able to capture every single little thing on camera, because in so many ways those are the most important, but I am also realizing that it’s just not possible. It’s the subtle gestures that take one second, that everyone gives to everyone else, that let you know that everyone really knows ever-y-one. Or, two people will be sitting near each other at a basketball game and won’t acknowledge each other, and then one will call the other by their first name and it will become evident that they’ve known each other for years.

I filmed the school yesterday for nine hours, pretty much straight. I was mentally wiped. There are around 220 kids in the school, which runs K-12. It really struck me to see little five and six year olds running around at the ankles of burly high school football players. That’s something I certainly never experienced when I was in school. Spoke to some kids who said he had been there since the beginning. By the end of the day I almost felt like I’d been going there all my life, as I recognized almost every face I passed.

By the time I was ready to settle in for the quadruple-header basketball games, I got that small town no-escape sinking feeling where you realize everyone in the room knows you. Sure I stuck out, but it was one of the few times I’ve been intimate with that
desire for total anonymity that so many people speak of. I always considered it to be overrated, but last night after a long day’s work I understood it perfectly. Learned a ton and my head reeled. Figured out some things about camera angles, when to move, adjust, zoom in and out. How important it is to be consistent.

7:45pm

There’s one really important tension that struck me just as I was driving back home through the open edges of nowhere in the dark. I came from an interview at Eddy Hakola’s house and while there were certain things he seemed to have no opinion about, one conviction was clear: nothing is left here. People are here because their families are, and nothing is really growing or evolving. I think he would agree with Ted Richards who said flatly that this is a ghost town.

But then there are younger people who disagree, who think there is a real community holding on, where people know each other and take care of each other and that there is a lot of value in that. I agree that there is value in that and that to a certain extent Americans have lost that mentality and that we are worse off because of it. But driving home I thought to myself, I really can’t figure it out, is it totally dead, or is there something here that is valuable and that is not going anywhere anytime soon? And then I realized that that is a possible central conflict of the film.

Drove around the ranch lands past Stockett on top of the coulees for a good three hours this morning. Quiet, open, blank, peaceful. Looking at that open space is kind of like glancing superficially at the communities—there’s nothing there. Is there not, though, value in that emptiness? I believe we truly lose something when we fill everything up; our minds get cluttered and we forget where we came from. It’s not a
commodity and it has no economic benefit, so I think in places like big cities we lose
sight of the openness of our roots and take much for granted. Just because there’s
“nothing” there, doesn’t mean it’s worthless.

I think that’s why I want to use the open fields as a way to divide up the movie
and provide a continuous thread. These spaces really exemplify the issue of whether or
not there is value in the openness, and if it is something we should be fighting to
preserve.

1/8/09

Ham and bean soup at Seniors today, more interviews, more mentally wiped. For
some reason race came up a lot today. Joan Yatzsko, Dean’s mom and president of the
senior center, started talking about how it doesn’t bother her that Obama is a “colored
man.” She said so he’s got a different color skin, what’s the difference. “I’m not, oh,
one of those what do you call ‘em,” she said, “but my dad, he was the worst. Oh boy, he
would refuse to drive down the street if there was a colored man, he’d drive clear the
other way!”

She and her listeners laughed and I was amazed at how behind things felt. “No,
we don’t have too many coloreds out here,” another woman said. “I was in Pennsylvania,
though, and at the malls and things, they were everywhere!” They named one or two
colored men they had known and talked about how they’d been real nice. “And then you
got those, what do you call ‘em, Iraqis with the turbans,” said Joan, “I don’t like those.
Oh no, I’d prefer the coloreds to those.”
After they started playing cards I drove down to the American bar, open since the turn of the 20th century. With the country music blasting and the wooden shack of a building on top of a windblown grassy coulee I pulled in thinking boy, I could get used to this. Somehow the air tastes more real, and the reasons for that is a mystery that is pushing me in this project, one that I haven’t found any answers to, and one that I will continue to chase for the rest of my life. The people out here love the area because it’s their home; I grew up in a huge suburb of the capital of the United States. It makes sense that they love it, but why should I? Dunno. Dunno, dunno, dunno.

It was awkward when I stepped into the American, wide-eyed, and the four old guys that Nikki told me would be there were sitting around a high table and there was nobody else in the place. I felt partly like John Wayne stepping into an open air saloon, and partly like an octopus in the Mohabi desert. Then I mistook one of them whom I had seen at the basketball games for one of the guys at Seniors, and that did not get things off on the right foot. And then I always explain what I’m doing and that never gets good responses, never. But that’s ok. I sat with my back to them for a while drinking my Busch Lite (I asked for PBR [which gets puzzled looks from everyone out here, it’s called Pabst] and the bartender said oh yeah, you’re that girl who drinks Pabst, I heard about you, I don’t got any Pabst and I said gee does word travel fast out here).

Finally one guy said “well when do we get interviewed?” So I said you want to be interviewed, well that I can do. So they shot the bull a little bit—after a good hour and a half of talking I turned the camera off and talk of the election started. One man said he’d written in Hillary, the other said he didn’t vote. They kept saying, “yep, big changes happening round here. I never thought I’d see a colored president in my day. A woman
president maybe, but not a colored one. Not that I have anything against ‘em, or nothing.’ Talk of catching truck-fulls of ‘illegals,’ ‘Arabians,’ and those ‘those people in Detroit who’ve got those pins stuck in their heads, what do you call ‘em, yeah, Indians.”

They then went on to talk about how there are more Democrats than Republicans in rural areas and small towns, because working people are Democrats. I told them perhaps they were right, after reminding myself that Democrat doesn’t necessarily mean liberal and those who vote that way can have racial prejudices or political incorrectitudes too. I’m not sure anyone’s ever heard the term PC out here and that’s ok with me; it’s a good wake up call and an important change from Wesleyan. I wish it were beautiful springtime for filming outside instead of muddy slushy melting snow. But this is what I have to work with and I will deal.

1/9/09

Another concern—how self-reflexive should the film be and in what respects? I want it to be clear that I don’t have the intention of making an aesthetically beautiful thoroughly polished feature film, because under the circumstances that is very far from possible. I want it to come across that I am an outsider with a camcorder filming what I can. But on the other hand, I don’t have the means to make it a documentary about me making a documentary, either, as that would require more cameras than I have arms to operate. So it’s going to need to be somewhere in between; something that alleviates the awkwardness of the windshield wipers in the car showing when I’m supposed to be
filming beautiful unadulterated shots of the (slushy, muddy) Montana ranching countryside.

For instance, there are times when someone being filmed at Seniors addresses and speaks to me; during a card game for a while I am in the center of the frame. I would like to incorporate those shots somehow, but it might be odd if there’s just the one and the audience might think whoah, what is that doing in there? Perhaps the answer might lie in the narration. I could narrate a personal statement bit at the beginning, to frame the film and to give a better understanding of my approach to the project. That way I could be framed as a subject, and thus when I appeared on screen later on it wouldn’t seem weird. Additionally, it would be a way to sneak in some shots of Lee Highway and my suburbs that I had wanted to do anyhow—though I’d have to wait until Spring break to get them done.

9:45pm

Went to another quadruple header of basketball games and felt like I was a member of the town already. Sat with Dave Marco from the American the other day and his wife, and looking around the gym I figured I’d interviewed about half the people in the place. It was remarkable. It also made me feel a little claustrophobic. It was really interesting to get the outsider’s opinion today from the Cutlipps and Elaine; both agreed that they were outcasts and weren’t included in any of the town “cliques.” Everyone had been painting such an idyllic portrait of how nice everyone is and how much everyone takes care of everyone else, so it was a real wake up call to hear the other side. Elaine, who grew up in Sand Coulee but lived in Arizona for 45 years before coming back, said besides losing the Cutlipps for neighbors she would move into town and never look back.
That to me was an incredibly striking statement, as I’d never heard any of the other interviewees utter anything like it.

Everything is swarming around in my head all the time and I think I’ll have to let it be still for a while. At least, I’ll try.

I seem to be telling two different stories. One is about the chronological history of the town, and the question of whether the area is a collaboration of ghost towns or a cluster of small communities that are persisting against the odds.

The other story is the one I’m more personally invested in, whether small town community and its values have survived in the aftermath of the death of small towns. I want to know if small town values can survive without the town. The answer, I am finding out, is yes for better and for worse.

As both of these questions contain a lot of contradictions, and both are somewhat wishy-washy, maybe I can combine them by taking something from each—first, the town is dead. There’s nothing here. The small town community and its values, however, is hanging on.

What’s really important to note and what I just found out from a pretty negatively-toned interview with Kristina and her friends, is that certainly all of the bad parts about small town values are present out here. The gossip, the deceptive sincerity, the drugs and alcohol because of boredom, it’s all here. And I suppose the good is here too, with their (brief) mention of walks and the quiet and so forth. These girls perhaps
serve as a testament, in spite of their negativity and because of it, that even without the
town the small town life lives on.

I think the main point that I want to come across in the documentary is that even
though small towns have declined, small town community has survived and at least out here, it does not seem to be in any real danger. How I will communicate that I shall not worry about too much for now.

10pm

This afternoon Dean took me up on top of the coulee where you could watch the open sky stretch on into forever, to the hooterite colony. I got a tour of the chickens and saw the cows being milked and saw the inner-workings of the slaughterhouse. I was fed homemade rhubarb wine with a hunk of sausage and white bread by a man in a black pointy bonnet.

I’m not really sure what I think about the hooterites. They own almost all of the land on top of the coulees, wheat fields that stretch on infinitely. When we were up there I understood why they call it big sky country, wide open blue that spills into snowy mountains far off in the distance. The colonies are very traditional, with the women cooking and cleaning and making all the clothes and the men with different specified jobs that correspond to their names. In other words there will be Joe the egg-man and Paul the pig-man and Pete the shoe-man and so on. I was almost tempted to think of them as a different species. They dress all in black and pointy bonnets and jackets with pointy shoulders and the women wear long black dresses to the ground. They speak German to each other and so have pretty thick accents but it doesn’t sound like a German accent it kind of sounds like something else entirely.
In one way it seems like a simplified existence, one that I’ve been searching for in the making of my movie. They work all day and are entirely self-sufficient, producing everything they need for themselves and selling the rest. On the other hand I don’t think I could spend my days cooking and cleaning; I’d want to be working with the animals and whatnot so I don’t suppose I could be very happy. And it’s all voluntary, although it kind of feels like Orwell’s 1984 or a cult with their possession-less houses in dormitory fashion and the linoleum floors.

I’m not sure how the hooterites fit into my movie, or if they can, but it is certainly relevant as intentional communities was one of the original topics I wanted to study. Their areas are quite remote but that is in large part due to the fact that they are the only ones who can afford to buy up that much land and consequently have no one around them for miles. They definitely subvert the system, though, and I was thinking as we toured the slaughterhouse that after an industrial collapse these people would be just fine. That is something for which I have a very large amount of respect.

1/11/09

I drove out to see the nearby towns of Belt and Highwood, Montana, and coming out of the mountains I descended upon endless open fields and the sun was setting so everything was gold and open like looking at the ocean where you can just about see the curve of the earth and you know you’ve arrived in big sky country. I’ve never had much of an appreciation for country music but after this past summer and now I crank it up and staring out at the wide open spaces when I’m completely alone I understand it because it
makes me feel alive. In those moments I understand Montana perfectly, I live it and forget that I’m here for two weeks as a certain breed of tourist.

p.s. I think I’ve had “Ain’t That America” stuck in my head for the past week straight.

1/13

I’m starting to see a trend where I repeatedly win over my interviewees. A lot of the old people are always skeptical of my project and think I’m a bad guy. I can feel very distinctly that they don’t like me and it makes me nervous. This morning Toots asked me if I was working for the government. I explain my project at the beginning and they don’t care. Then by the end they ask me again because now they’re interested and it becomes clear that they weren’t remotely listening the first time around.

I think it’s because I pull out the old fashioned business about the importance of hard work and face-to-face communication and playing outside and all of that. I go for the sentimental stuff because that’s what I’m interested in and I can see it in their eyes that they’re beginning to care. But I fight that resistance and skepticism every time, and it’s scary and I just try to push through it. By the end of the interview Toots was telling me about the love of Jesus Christ showing me the ornaments on her Christmas tree and giving me a great big hug right there in the kitchen.

1/14

So tired. So ready to come home.