

## Imagining Rural Life: Schooling as a Sense of Place

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*I present the case of one reborn rural community populated by former urbanites. What lifestyle and values do these newcomers seek? In what ways do they locate or construct these values? In this study, a small private school provides the vehicle for adults and children to construct, communicate, and enact their idealized identities. The school provides a physical and imagined place where newcomer families negotiate their sense of rural place. The distinction between school and home values is explored as families express their identities associated with public and private lives. The school also becomes the symbolic site where the former urbanites contest their sense of rural place with their neighbors who are long-standing rural inhabitants. The predominantly upper middle class newcomers negotiate their sense of rural place against the backdrop of the primarily working class old timers' concept of rurality. Former urbanites' conception of rural community emerges as imagined and situational.*

In American and British education literature, "rural" designates an isolated region, often the now-fragmented remnants of a once flourishing farming community. Rural areas are characterized by low socioeconomic status (SES), disconnected from metropolitan areas and low in population density. Families have often lived in rural areas for several generations; newer families moving in are uncommon. Research of the 1980s and 1990s tells us that members of rural communities frequently express concern for the continuation of their lifestyle, which is threatened not only by out-migration of young people to metropolitan areas, but also by declining economic opportunities and closure of local schools through consolidation (Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; DeYoung, 1995; Fuller, 1982; Peshkin, 1982).

The region discussed in this ethnographic study contradicts the above definition of rural. Rural in this case involves previously urban families migrating to homes surrounded by land undeveloped with buildings and industry other than farming. The families of this study, in contrast to other rural families, migrated to the area from more populated regions, including large cities. Some families moved to the region from across the continent. Most importantly, many of these families represent a higher SES than "old-timers" and have chosen to live in the area not because of occupations in farming, mining, timber, or other historically rural occupations, but in search of a quality of life presumed to be found in the country. My purpose is to explore how these families construct their rural identity by building a small school.

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### Sense of Place

Significant scholarship has emerged in the arena of place and identity (Hummon, 1990; Lutz & Merz, 1992; Orr, 1992; Perin, 1977). Perin's (1977) seminal work on cities and suburbs in the United States provides scholars with a means of exploring those cultural values we take for granted. In her discussion of homeowners and renters, suburban sprawl and zoning regulations, she reveals cultural values of self, identity, and social relationships through our identification with place. Hummon (1990) builds from Perin's work to consider how place exists within cultural notions of community. Through our place of residence, Hummon argues, we form our world view and our understanding of other persons as well as ourselves.

Perin and Hummon consider the typically unobserved effect of place on ourselves and our world views; they seek to bring those effects to the surface. In his widely cited work, Orr (1992) argues for all persons, scholars and lay persons alike, to develop a more active understanding of place, including an intentional involvement with a place. Attending to place and the interrelationship between all of its parts comprises the fundamental work of living "sustainably." Orr contrasts "good inhabitance" with mere "residency." The former requires "detailed knowledge of a place . . . and a sense of care and rootedness," whereas the latter requires only "cash and a map" (Orr, 1992, p. 130). He demonstrates that some people achieve a deep connection with a place, while others merely pass through (albeit potentially for a duration of many years). Those who establish a deep connection, in Hummon's (1990) and Perin's (1977) conceptions, may define their identity through that place.

Of the authors discussed, Orr may provide the strongest statement on place as he observes a moral necessity

for actively engaging in one's place. Place, particularly a rural place, becomes more than an opportunity for learning—it is the central cohesion point of a life interconnected with other beings. He raises the philosophical question of what constitutes an ethical life. If a person has the financial resources to purchase a home and property, and that person chooses to have nothing to do with their neighbors (or the land itself), is that person merely fulfilling their right in the American dream? Or is that person living unethically? Orr makes his opinion abundantly clear: to live alone is a fiction. Our lives are inextricably interconnected, and to imagine otherwise demonstrates a lack of awareness of the wholeness of our world. Orr's philosophical and ethical concerns for place provide a potent backdrop for the people and region in the current study. To attune to wholeness and connectedness means, necessarily, to move beyond culturally prescient individualism in which parents make educational decisions only for the benefit of their own children, rather than for the benefit of all.

Orr and other authors do not ignore the contested nature of place as people construct different meanings of place and themselves in it. According to Lutz and Merz (1992), "different individuals in the same geographic place may have different views of or sense of community" (p. 42). Lutz and Merz go on to ask whether "without . . . rural schools can there be rural community?" (1992, p. 51). Certainly the studies exploring the effects of school closure suggest the answer is negative (e.g., DeYoung, 1995; Peshkin, 1982). While these and other studies explore the impact of school closure (primarily as a result of consolidation), the current study considers the impact of a school opening. I explore whether the introduction of a school might have both constructed a new rural community as well as disrupted the existing rural community. In the process, I consider the nature of our modern communities.

In this postmodern society, our communities are made up largely of re-placed persons who come from different backgrounds and experiences. They re-place themselves in new locations where they feel they can live a particular desired lifestyle and seek connection there. In the process, what they share within their group—sameness—gets privileged over their differences (Young, 1990). Between the group and outsiders, however, differences enable group members to put up walls to keep out those who hold different cultural values and practices. Those walls limit possibilities for growth and change, but the walls do not resolutely hold. Supposed differences are illusory and often permeable. A "sense of community" emerges, therefore, not out of what a group of people share in common, but out of the common enemy, outsider, or other. It is a reactive sameness, rather than a shared constructive experience. My particular concern is with the cultural construction of rural community that has been deemed in jeopardy.

### Reborn Rural Community

The American ideology of small towns and rural regions perceives these places to be simpler worlds that are slower paced, less prone to change, and more "direct, personal, and comprehensible" than urban locales (Hummon, 1990, p. 50). That ideology also includes images of rural decline such as the dust-bowl devastation of the 1930s, family farm foreclosures, and the gradual encroachment of suburbia onto former farmland. All of these images suggest that rural places are not as up-to-date either technologically or culturally as urban centers. In addition, much rural literature suggests that small towns and rural centers are in danger of disappearing (DeYoung, 1995; Peshkin, 1982; Rawls, 1990; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). The context of fear elicits an impulse for conservation rather than change, which accords with American cultural assumptions of rural regions as conservative and urban regions as progressive.

A different construct emerges as some rural regions have begun to comprise an alternate ideology. From this perspective, such regions may be places of new possibility. In reaction to perceived dangers, stresses, and the frenetic lifestyle of city life, middle and upper-middle class Americans have begun to look to small towns and rural regions. Exasperated with their city lives, these people have begun a reverse migration back to the land. With the influx of new money and energy, rural regions undergo a renaissance that is fueled by families who believe and want to enact the "nostalgic and romantic image of rural living" (Coward & Smith, 1982, p. 77). While that image may be mythical for more traditionally rural families, its salience is evident in the migrations occurring today.

Significantly, not all rural regions share salient demographic, economic, and cultural features. To differentiate these regions, Gjelten (1982) proposes a typology of rural school settings that includes the concept of a "reborn" rural region.<sup>1</sup> "Disgruntled city dwellers" flock to a reborn rural region, bringing with them urban values. These regions "are mostly in the scenic and tranquil rural spots, where there is much to attract a refugee population from the city" (Gjelten, 1982, p. 4). Urbanites admire the lower property values, lower crime rates, larger open spaces, and cleaner environment found in such rural areas. In addition, they expect to find a slower pace, less material lifestyle, and more personal interactions than they experience in cities. Urbanites grasp nostalgically for a putatively lost way of life:

Today's urbanites are missing something. We don't have the sense of community and perma-

<sup>1</sup>The other rural regions Gjelten (1982) defines are stable rural, depressed rural, high growth rural, and isolated rural.

nence our ancestors had. Qualities once taken for granted—trust and honesty, regional and ethnic heritage, clean air and friendly neighbors—are special treasures. As the news highlights the emerging global economy, many of us simply hunger for a supportive local network. We need to feel *connected*. (Ross & Ross, 1992, p. 15, emphasis in original)

When these urbanites move to the “outland” (Germer, 1993), they bring with them economic resource—to purchase, for example, an ailing farmhouse and restore it (Ross & Ross, 1992). In the process of restoration, they infuse capital into the local economy through purchasing of the home, hiring carpenters, and other crafts people, and making purchases in hardware stores and other local shops. “The newcomers have money, and are using it to transform the rural town into a new suburb—better schools, paved roads, rising real estate values and property taxes to match” (Rawls, 1990, p. 7). In a region of otherwise declining farm values or the loss of other industries such as mining, these urbanites may help keep local businesses alive. These transplants may also take advantage of business opportunities:

The new people moving in (to the reborn rural community) have probably *chosen* the community and therefore are likely to bring with them a positive attitude and a level of enthusiasm that may easily overshadow the spirit of the long time residents . . . If this energy can be harnessed to work for the betterment of the school, and it often can be, amazing improvements can happen. Many of the newcomers have talents and skills that can be put to good use in the school, whether the people work as paid teachers or as unpaid volunteers. (Gjelten, 1982, p. 8)

The newcomers bring new cultural values along with their money. Urban Americans prefer moving to a small town or rural region that is nevertheless close to an urban area where they can take advantage of a city’s resources when they choose (Hummon, 1990). Transplanted urban values include geographic mobility (the ability and the expectation of relocating one’s residence), diverse financial resources (investments as well as occupations), culinary tastes, and expectations of privacy. Prospective migrants are cautioned to be aware of local values and to adjust themselves to local ways by working with established cultural norms, not against them (Germer, 1993; Ross & Ross, 1992). While urbanites may adapt their values to more closely fit the local customs, in the process they also change those customs, a point that will be developed more fully below.

Gjelten (1982), however, suggests that urban transplants may hold a romanticized and nostalgic view of rural life which they then perpetuate. Nostalgia involves a “symbolic management of the present” that simplifies and ennobles particular practices and values while withholding others (Herzfeld, 1990, p. 319). In the region of this study, newcomers started school-based “traditions” which they felt expressed their conceptions of rural life. “Most [newcomers] bring their city ways with them, but they are also enchanted by the country, and as converts to the rural lifestyle, they are among the most zealous defenders of many traditional rural customs and institutions” (Gjelten 1982, p. 4). Local parades, tree-lighting ceremonies, and crafts-making are only a few of the “rural traditions” practiced by relocated urbanites. Such practices suggest a culturally conservative and paternalistic attitude of newcomers towards the rural way of life. Newcomers institute their versions of rural traditions, rather than adapt to customs already established.

The changes brought by disgruntled urbanites are not necessarily positive. New landowners may disrupt generations-old hunting traditions when they post “no hunting” and “no trespassing” signs (Rawls, 1990). Urbanites likely bring different religious traditions that clash with existing practices (Ross & Ross, 1992). Economic disruption can also result as urbanites purchase homes and land for premium prices and commence upgrades. When property values rise, “the next generation of natives can’t afford to live in their hometowns” (Rawls, 1990, p. 7). Newcomers are likely to sell their rural homes and move again, whereas rural families may remain on the same farm for generations. For those who remain, property taxes rise with property values.

“Urban” values can . . . create problems in traditional rural communities. In some reborn rural communities, there may develop a schism between the natives and the newcomers. There may even be two separate communities, each with its own set of values and ideas. As conflict develops between the groups, communication may diminish, and people may associate only with each other. (Gjelten 1982, p. 8)

In his discussion of 15 “small places” around the United States, Rawls (1990) compares small town newcomers with weeds that, like dandelions, “tend to take over” (p. 5). Despite advice to adjust to local ways, “the intention today appears to be to improve small places rather than adapt to them” (Rawls, 1990, p. 5). What constitutes improvement or imposition may well differ according to one’s cultural perspective.

According to Perin (1977), newcomers prompt “status re-negotiation” as their arrival affects the social position

of old-timer residents. She observed how such re-negotiation is carried out in zoning hearings and homeowners' associations. Perin's study focused on urban movement to then-newly suburban environs in which the newcomers' arrival signified their own increased status. From the perspective of the "old-time" suburban dwellers, their status is threatened by newcomers. Similar re-negotiation may occur in reborn rural regions. Established status hierarchies based on relationships, history, and age may be disrupted by income, profession, and education.

#### Participant Observation in Oakleaf<sup>2</sup>

My study in Oakleaf was conducted over 1½ years as part of a study of the local school. During that time, I volunteered at the school 4 days a week, substitute taught, and visited school members in their homes and other sites in the region. I attended and participated in as many school and community events as possible, such as a Thanksgiving pageant, camp-out, and roadside cleanup day. Much of the data were collected in 21 semi-directed interviews with local residents, excerpts of which appear below. Interviews were conducted at the individual's home, workplace, or at the school, according to the interviewee's preference. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2½ hours. I used a prepared list of questions to prompt the interview, but followed each person's lead as they recounted stories and shared artifacts.

#### Oakleaf Country School

Oakleaf is located in the Piedmont region of the southeastern United States. Oakleaf refers to a crossroads area marked by an elementary school, a post office, a grocery, and a doctor's office. It is located about 15 miles from Springfield, a university town of about 45,000 residents. The Oakleaf area lies in a particularly picturesque part of the county, which covers about 750 square miles and about 75,000 residents. The school is situated on two and a half acres of gently sloping hillside donated by a local wealthy landowner.

Oakleaf Country School is a nondenominational independent school founded in 1984 by parents. At the time of the study, 55 students attended kindergarten through fifth grade, in addition to approximately 20 preschool students who attended on either a 2- or 3-day schedule. The school first occupied one room and building; it has been expanded as the enrollment has grown to the present four classrooms, library, director's office, kitchen, reception area, and two sets of bathrooms.

Depending on enrollment, the school employs four full-time teachers as well as one half-time preschool assistant, and part-time art, physical education, music, and language teachers. The paid administration consists of a full-time

director, an office and financial manager, and an administrative assistant. Parents and community members make up the nine-member volunteer Board of Trustees.

The curriculum has been constructed by the teachers and parents over the years and may be characterized by a lack of textbooks and a proliferation of projects. Although the school day is scheduled according to subjects, the project-based curriculum often involves the integration of subject matter. Further, teachers frequently bring their multigrade classes together for joint projects.

The overall mood is relaxed, but focused. Teachers and students frequently call class meetings to discuss issues of discipline, social interactions, or other misunderstandings. They express the belief that time spent discussing and negotiating noncurricular concerns promotes a more positive and trusting environment for everyone. Instead of report cards, teachers write lengthy evaluations on individual students as well as the class as a whole. The concern is to evaluate each student's individual progress rather than to rank the class or the school.

#### *School as the Symbolic and Physical Center of Rural Community*

While the location of their homes contributes to Oakleafers' rural self-conception, the school provides a symbolic and experiential center of the newcomer rural community. The parents' motivation for founding the school rested on three concerns. First, public school redistricting announced in the 1983-1984 academic year required their elementary age children, including kindergartners, to ride the bus 45-60 minutes (one way) to school; the parents felt this distance too great for young children. Second, parents preferred their children to attend a smaller school than the new elementary school formed by redistricting. Third, parents wanted to play a greater role in their children's education than they believed was possible in the local public schools. They described feeling pushed out of the process of educational decision making because they were not education experts. For example, parents felt that the school board dismissed their desire to keep a small school because they could not prove that small schools were better.<sup>3</sup>

The physical setting of the school, school rituals, the school curriculum, and other school activities contribute to the rural construction of the school place. Newcomer families, whether they live in the nearby town, in a renovated farmhouse, or a subdivision, connect to a rural identity through the school. One family that lives in town

<sup>2</sup>Oakleaf and other place names and proper nouns are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup>Substantial scholarship to support these parents' opinions has emerged (e.g., Bell & Sigsworth, 1987; Howley, 1994; Meier, 1995; Ornstein, 1991).

expressed their reliance on the school to connect them to their rural environment:

You sense that [the school is] different and unique. The first time you set foot on the grounds you're looking at these log buildings that have been assembled. The whole atmosphere is a country school. And then you sort of associate the values of a country school as being solid and having a little more relaxed feeling about learning—relaxed in that it's not as dictated. I mean, those were all of the associations I had of a country school: being more connected to your place, your environment, and just the awareness of the trees, the fields and the views to the mountains. Just that whole sweep of view. You want to believe that it will have some influence on the kids when they're out playing on the playground, they're hearing the cows. It's all that sort of pastoral, romantic notion of things.

Set in that pastoral landscape, the country school focuses many family events throughout the year. Although no longer a parent-run school, parents continue to be closely involved with day-to-day events of the school. Through parents' involvement, the school is not only a place for children, but also houses the activities and needs of adults as they work together.

Some of the effect of the school emerges as a gestalt. Asked about the affective qualities of the school one parent commented,

When you drive by and you see the little Fourth of July parades, or other things. It kind of adds to that [rural setting]. You think, "Oh, that's really nice."

"Nice" because of opportunities for children and adults to socialize. In a statement reminiscent of distant prairie homes, one parent stated that her children rely on the school for social activities:

It's neat for the kids in this community to have a school that's here, because they are country kids and so it's hard to have playmates and things like that. They don't all have neighbors. So this is kind of their neighborhood and I think that's really important for them.

By overemphasizing the distances between homes, this parent justifies the role of the school as a "neighborhood" locus. She reinforces the rural quality by *not* mentioning daily car trips between houses, after school soccer clubs and dance lessons, frequent sleep-overs, as well as activi-

ties in town that provide children opportunities to play together.

According to residents, Oakleaf Country School provides a rural sense of place through its "character." The two original school rooms are log buildings, the driveway remains unpaved, and the playground is mostly open field.

I think I ended up being comfortable with Oakleaf initially from just the atmosphere of the place . . . The whole character of the place. The scale, the log buildings, the big oak trees in the playground, the views all around, it was just wonderful that you could see all around at the views from the windows . . . We being architects, and being very tuned into how the setting is and how it affects you, I think that was probably what initially caught my attention first, was the whole atmosphere of the place. The scale of it.

Schools members reveal great pride in the log buildings, which visually distinguish the school from others in the area. In fall of 1998, school members decided the students should have a playhouse on the playground and tapped in to the nostalgic sentiment in their announcement to parents and friends: "15 years ago, parents themselves built a log schoolhouse . . . Come back to [Oakleaf] with tools (or not!) and help us 'barn-raise' a genuine old log playhouse for new fun on the playground" (archival document, October 23, 1998). In the earliest years of the school, parents supplied most of the labor to build the school. This invitation to barn-raise reminds school members of that fact. While few families in the region ever participate in actual barn-raising today, these families know the phrase and its connection to rural and older ways. Yet they do not wish to simply return to the past, as the "genuine old playhouse" will be used for "new fun."

Supported by the physical setting of the school, Oakleaf's rurality emerges in school rituals, curricula, and activities. At the fifth graders' graduation and other annual events, students sing the first two stanzas of the Shaker traditional song "Simple Gifts:"

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained  
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
Til by turning, turning we come 'round right.  
(Blood-Patterson, 1988, p. 47)

The song contrasts markedly with the substantial materialism of students' families. Whether they live in reno-

vated farmhouses or newly built homes, they enjoy well-equipped kitchens, computers, fancy cars, and landscaped gardens. The school provides a refuge of simplicity as many material and popular culture items are not allowed in the school. Teachers (and parents) do not allow students to bring fashionable toys and clothing, particularly logo-ed items, to school. For these re-placed families, the enforced simplicity of the school symbolizes the imagined rural life as simple and uncomplicated.

The edict lies strongest against any forms of weapons including play guns and images of guns. One young boy in his first week at school drew a picture of a rifle, an image that is forbidden. His teacher allowed the image, however, not only because he was new and still learning the rules, but also because the drawing was of a hunting rifle and illustrated the boy's story about a hunting trip with his uncle. Hunting, while not condoned, is tolerated reluctantly because of its prevalence in local rural culture. Founding and later families expressed some desire to tap into that culture: "We were coming [to the school] to have our children just be a part of it and relish being a part of the community, to learn that this is their roots." "Their roots" does not refer to their particular family histories, but to a nostalgic remembrance of past generations' lives.

Other "rural activities" at the school include day hikes and overnight backpacking trips in the nearby mountains. Students keep a small vegetable garden on the school grounds. Once a year, students, teachers, and parents spend a day of fishing, painting, and crafts before camping out at a local 4H camp. The school hosts a May Day celebration in which students dance around a may pole festooned with flowers and garlands. These and other events link students to the local place through an emphasis on the outdoor environment and, at times, the daily life of the community (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

#### *Why Families Move to Oakleaf*

While the school serves as the locus of newcomers' rural lives, that school is situated in a larger landscape. A few families moved to Oakleaf specifically because of the school's reputation, but most school families moved to the area before choosing the small school. Re-placed urbanites name many reasons why they move to the Oakleaf region, including privacy, safety, a slower lifestyle, the physical setting, a "positive place" in which to raise children, and, in general, a desire to live in the country. They seek an improved quality of life that represents a retreat and a contrast from urban life. As one couple said, "We wanted to live in the country after living in the city for so long." A move to Oakleaf is a move to a better quality of life, according to these parents. They purchase larger homes and more property than they could afford in most cities. Notably, these newcomers have "picked" Oakleaf and its neigh-

boring town Springfield. They have the financial means to choose a particular location and a lifestyle of retreat.

The region these families chose is one of the more affluent in the county. While the median value of a single-family home in the county is \$111,200, within the Oakleaf census block the average house value is \$229,300 (1990 Census). Throughout the county, but especially in Oakleaf, local residents, newcomers as well as old-timers, report a significant rise in home values during the past 10 years. They "read" the economic status not only in their tax bills, but also in material goods. Residents observe a rise in family incomes evidenced by the higher quality of vehicles parked in the school lot. One parent commented that "there are more BMWs now."

Although many Oakleafers purchase homes in subdivisions, they consider their lifestyle to be rural, not suburban. House designs mimic subdivision homes built around Washington, DC and San Francisco suburbs to the extent that the same developer may have built the homes. Home lots, however, are larger than typical subdivisions surrounding cities. In addition, Oakleaf subdivisions lie adjacent to farms and estates, not on the edges of cities. In their more remote locations, former urbanites enjoy a degree of privacy hitherto unknown, while benefiting from positive interpersonal relations with neighbors.

My husband wanted to be somewhere he could run up a power saw at midnight and no neighbors would complain. And I wanted to be someplace the kids could walk to neighbors' houses. And there would be people wanting them to be visiting. (A parent)

Many newcomers share this parent's desire to be a part of a community, which she expresses as a place that provides both privacy and cooperation. Privacy results not from a lack of interaction with others, but in a quantity of physical space separating one home from the next. In sharp contrast to the close proximity of urban neighbors, the low population density in Oakleaf ensures a buffer between houses. Yet the distances are not so great that a child could not walk to a neighbor's home to play. Significantly, this parent notes that her children would be welcome as "there would be people wanting them to be visiting," a further allusive contrast to an impersonal city in which neighbors may not know others on their block, or in their apartment building.

These relocated urbanites express the desire to "get away" and "escape," yet they are not seeking lives of solitude. They seek a community of active engagement with others, and report that they have found it in the rural lifestyle of Oakleaf.

Newcomers seek to escape the city without giving up all city conveniences. Oakleaf's particular location suits

these families well. Although a family may live on 20 acres that backs up against a wilderness area, they are only 20 minutes from Springfield. Cultural events such as restaurants and the arts, as well as professional opportunities, are readily available in Springfield. Many families also work in town, enjoying an easy commute along two-lane country roads. Oakleaf seems to offer the best of both worlds, as one newcomer couple explains:

- husband: In comparison to the metropolitan area we came from, and grew up in, this is heaven.
- wife: Plus we have the advantages here of having, because of the university, cultural things and—
- husband: Good medical facilities—
- wife: —perfect advantages because of the great outdoors, and, you know, the city is not too far.

Oakleaf newcomers usually buy small farms or homes situated on several acres of land. Some families buy old farm houses that they refurbish; others purchase newly built homes, often custom-designed. While they may keep a few cows or horses, or pasture the land to qualify as a farm for tax purposes, no newcomer family considers itself a farming family. Tending a garden or keeping a horse are pastimes, not careers, as primarily white-collar professional occupations provide their primary income. In Oakleaf, newcomers continue their professional occupations such as health care providers, architects, university professors, investment bankers, designers, and engineers. However, while Oakleaf newcomers do not consider themselves farmers, they did move to the area to live what they consider to be rural lives.

#### *School as Symbolic Center Excludes Old-timers*

Although the school's role as the locus of rural culture imagines rural life as simple and romantic, this representation satisfies transplanted urbanites. Oakleaf newcomers embrace the school as an idealized rural setting in which everyone works together to construct buildings and enact rituals according to the seasons. Yet this nostalgic rural image does not speak to the lived experiences of rural old-timers who have experienced crop failure, mining accidents, and loss of farm land in this and other rural regions. As newcomers construct their imagined rural lives, they displace the rural lives of old-timers.

An Oakleaf parent who married into an old-timer family describes the older way of life through vignettes:

Folks take their time, and respect one another, and don't rush at the red lights or the first one out . . .

Who walk into the store and don't expect you to drop everything and wait on them immediately, or come out to the gas pump when you're in the middle of waiting on five people. These folks have the respect to know they have to wait their turn, that it's all going to be there in the end.

Old-timers in Oakleaf shop at the local grocery and deer check station that is stocked with bare necessities, defined by one old-timer as beer, ammunition, baby diapers, and feed for cows. The dark, overstocked store contrasts with the well-lit, clean school next door. These two buildings represent the two communities which live intertwined. The school is the center of the newcomer rural life, and the store is the center of the old-timer rural life. While some newcomers may stop by the store, they are not wholly welcome as they don't "take their time" and "wait their turn." Likewise, some old-timers may send their children to the country school (about 5% of the annual enrollment), but usually withdraw them at the end of preschool in favor of the bus trip to the public and free kindergarten.

While the buildings symbolize the community rift, economics appears to be the underlying cause of the strain. With the influx of newcomers, a higher economic standard of living has been introduced. At one time, many locals were employed in farming. Today, newcomer residents enjoy business, law, and other professions. They do not work their land, but work in an office. Newcomers recognize the economic shift:

There's an influx of middle class, upper middle class people that build \$400,000 houses and have two cars. Twenty years ago Oakleaf was a town where [people were] lower middle class and probably 40% or 50% of the people at that time, their parents were born here. And 30% of the people still farmed on a part-time basis. You know, raised cows or had a huge garden or even a field that they cultivated. So that's been lost.

Some old-timers may have been considered well-off financially, but they were not considered different from "regular folk." As one Oakleaf parent who married into an old-timer family recounts, old-timers who were well-off financially were also integrated into community life: "[My husband's] grandfather . . . owned a big farm. He was the affluent member of the community. A 300 acre farm. He was just a regular guy [who talked about] 'How many groundhogs did you shoot this year?'"

Attracted to the area, the number of newcomers has risen each year, causing property values to rise. Significantly, newcomers benefit in this environment.

It sounds pretty crass, but one thing that I like about the school being here is it does put a very good light on this community, and my property value just zooms right on up there. I mean, we bought the piece of land we have for \$30,000—25 acres—and the bank tells us that with our \$75,000 house on it that it's now worth close to \$300,000. Well, I think that this school is . . . one of the factors that makes the property values go up.

This newcomer parent enjoys the rising property values because she, like other newcomers, expects to sell her property and move in several years. At that time she will enjoy a strong return on her property investment. Old-timers who have lived in the region for generations do not expect to move on. Rising property values for them signify increased property taxes. The same parent observes that, "a lot of the old-timers don't like that because their property values are also going up and they haven't done anything. It's not their fault that all these old hippies and nouveau riche or whatever are moving out here . . . If you're just standing there, then your taxes are going up." Because of rising property values, younger generations of old-timers can no longer buy land. "Foothill county is no longer the place to go if you want to homestead." Higher land prices are less of an issue for newcomer families who typically arrive in the area after establishing a successful career and a healthy bank account elsewhere.

Throughout these economic changes, the culture has shifted as well. "I'd say it's kind of a rural area but it's changed, is slowly changing into a semi-rural, gentrified suburb." A suburb, with its closer connections to city than country implies busyness and hurriedness, qualities which are not valued among the rural old-timers (Perin, 1977). Furthermore, suburbs imply shopping malls and national chains of stores, rather than locally-owned businesses such as Jaeger's Store. While the school founders were still planning the building, some locals expressed concern that the school would trigger a process of gentrification and development, and that a "McDonald's" was sure to follow. One parent remembered those early days:

[There was a zoning hearing] to allow a school on this property, which had just been a cow pasture. And there was opposition . . . Some of the neighbors complained that traffic would be increasing in the area, that it would change the rural area, or the rural character of the community that allows the school, and a lot of other things would come in.

The rural lifestyle may become "lost."

[A parent] wrote . . . to a Bob Dylan tune, some funny song about how people are moving, you know people are moving and it's changing. I think [Oakleaf is] becoming a much more affluent area than it was when the school started.

Newcomers' greater economic power puts old-timers at a disadvantage. The strongest objections raised to newcomers may echo the sentiments of a colonized people.

My husband and his family . . . moved into a Black neighborhood on a road where there was no traffic. They used to sit on the porch and watch the seldom-seen cars go by. Now it's a highway and their Black neighbors are clearly in the minority. Or at least, the farmers are in the minority. There is, it's not an animosity, but there is a feeling among the natives of this area that they have been put on a reservation.

#### Disrupting and Excluding Rural Ways

Oakleaf newcomers construct their rural identity through the local independent school. The school place symbolizes those rural qualities desired by newcomers: beautiful and peaceful open land, hand-constructed buildings, and land-focused rituals such as May Poles. Yet rurality is romanticized and nostalgic, in which families enjoy open pasture but few rise before dawn to milk a cow. The imagined rurality is not wholly naive as newcomers are fully aware that their reborn rural region has many elements of suburban or even urban life.

It really has a suburban flavor in that a lot of the people, most of the people that live out here do not make their living off the land. And that's the difference. There are a lot of big farms but principally the owners do something else. So that feels different to me than the rural which I really grew up in. We had a dairy farm and we worked the land, and so I felt like that was rural. But again, here, since most of the people that live here don't use the land to earn a living, it doesn't feel rural, like I'm used to . . . The kids get very upset when somebody says they live on a farm.

Despite the apparent disjunction between newcomers and old-timers, newcomers assert their construction of a rural identity is in solidarity with old-timers. While newcomers could have brought in shopping malls, modern construction, and other indicators of nonrural life, they chose to adapt their lifestyle to be more in accordance with existing rural values. They contrast their adopted lifestyle against the long-established rural gentry who send their children



to elite private day and boarding schools. However, the reborn rural community presumes the perspective of the newcomer and implies that changes are good. Progress and growth become the normative assumptions of rural place.

What happens to those residents who are not part of the new community? Old timers are not a part of redefining the rural region; they are excluded from the process. While each year two or three old-timer families send their children to the school, they assert that they are not part of the school community. Their exclusion is partly by their own choice, partly because they don't feel as welcome, and partly as they don't have the income to support private school tuition. These families usually leave Oakleaf Country School at the end of preschool. In several ways, old-timers' lifestyles have been disrupted and they lack the economic and political ability to assert themselves. Their way of life is changing without their input or consent.

The people where I live put up "no hunting" signs. My road was prime hunting grounds for the old people who were hunters. The whole hunting shelter area is shot [because of no-hunting signs] . . . I think there were more deer killed on our road last year by cars than by hunters. So . . . the older families either are finding that they cannot build here because it's so expensive, or they cannot hunt where they used to hunt, or something. Some way that they had is being disturbed.

### Conclusion

Throughout the newcomers' construction of a rural way of life, they develop a community which, by its nature, excludes old-timers. In education literature, as well as everyday discourse, community typically refers to culturally prevalent notions of positivism and simplicity: "In ordinary speech for most people in the United States, the term *community* refers to the people with whom I identify in a locale . . . a community is a group that shares a specific heritage, a common self-identification, a common culture and set of norms" (Young, 1990, p. 311, emphasis in original).

However, Young also provides us with the necessary counterpart to a group banding together. She continues:

In the United States today, identification as a member of such a community also often occurs as an oppositional differentiation from other groups, who are feared or at best devalued. Persons identify only with some other persons, feel in community only with those, and fear the difference others confront them with because they identify with a different culture, history, and point of view on the world. (Young, 1990, p. 311)

Oakleaf newcomers gain *within* their own group through the construction of a rural community. At the same time, their actions negatively impact old-timers who are, by definition, excluded.

Aware of this exclusion, the Oakleaf Country School and its newcomer families have been and continue to be concerned to establish links with the old-timer community. Their efforts are emblematic of wanting to dispel their own outsider status and provide value, not merely hegemony. The results of their efforts have been mixed. "I think that most of the community has accepted the school. I wouldn't say that the older faction of this community has embraced it. But accepted it." A sigh of fatigue and powerlessness may be heard in the old-timers' acceptance of a new rural identity of which they are not a part.

The effect of Oakleaf Country School on the old-timer community may resemble efforts to construct charter schools in both rural and urban areas. Our nation's history has been one of internal migration, as well as immigration, and we are therefore familiar with cultural clashes between those who came before and those who have just arrived. These communities change as economic bases shift and bring in new populations. While much of rural school literature has explored the effects of school consolidation and closure, the impact of a new school opening does not appear to have garnered much study. Such an omission is understandable given the lengthy and extensive history of communities losing their local schools. However, given the conjunction of a back to the land movement, charter school legislation, and an economy that increasingly allows white-collar professionals to work in rural areas rather than urban areas, the cultural tension between newcomers and old-timers is unlikely to go away and may instead increase. Rural identity may be increasingly constructed in local schools, as Oakleaf newcomers built their own elementary school to symbolize and centralize their cultural notions of community. Rural school researchers, like their urban counterparts, need to attend to the cultural shifts and tensions which frequently accompany population changes. Who will control these new schools? In the case of rural schools (and, thereby, rural identity), they may be taken over by newcomers with more financial resources than those folks who have lived in the regions for generations.

In the meantime, newcomer rural identity in Oakleaf is not about conservation, but about expansion. It concerns a selective retreat from urban bustle to a nostalgic and romanticized lifestyle. The newcomers' rural lifestyle appropriates rituals and visual trappings of rural life, without the less savory (in their eyes) aspects such as shooting ground-hogs, chopping firewood, or milking a cow. In their designer homes, these newcomers look out on the rural landscape and simply enjoy the view.

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