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Visual Ethnography: Using Photography in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes a new way to use photographs in ethnographic research. The method builds on earlier examinations of the unique properties of photographic articulation, interpretation and use, employing the inherent ambiguities of photographic imagery. Responses to ethnographic photographs of a rural farm community were recorded during group interview sessions and analyzed in relation to additional ethnographic data gathered in order to study sociocultural continuity and change across generations in farm families.

Discussions of photography in the emergent traditions of visual sociology and anthropology have been concerned with two principal areas: the use of still photographs as a methodological tool in social research, and the use of photographs as a means of presenting social research. The use of still photography as a research method has been fruitfully addressed by a number of scholars (see in particular Bateson & Mead, 1942; Becker, 1974; Byers, 1964; Caldarola, 1985; Collier, 1967; and Wagner, 1979).¹

Using pictures in social research requires a theory of how pictures *get used* by both picture makers and viewers. In order to use photographs either as data or as data generators we need to have some notion of how viewers treat and understand photographic images, whether those viewers are informants or researchers. Ruby (1973, 1976) has drawn attention to the pitfalls awaiting people who take up photography as a research tool with too little awareness of the social practices surrounding photographic production and use. The following discussion offers a theoretical foundation for using photography in qualitative research.

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Photography as a Social Transaction

Byers (1964) and Sekula (1975) have argued that American viewers typically approach photographs from two distinct perspectives. Byers refers to:

a historical two-headed view of photography as 1) an art and 2) a precise machine-made record of a scene or a subject. In the first view, the primary concern is the vision of the photographer-artist who uses the technology to produce a creative photograph of which the photographer is the "source." In the second view, the primary concern is the accuracy with which the subject is recorded on film, in which case the subject is the "source." (1964, p. 79).

Viewed as works of art, photographs are thought to embody the personal concerns of the photographer-artist. These concerns can range from the exploration of formal aesthetic issues to the expression of the photographer's inner emotions. Viewed as records, photographs are thought to reproduce the reality in front of the camera's lens, yielding an unmediated and unbiased visual report.

Approached from either of these perspectives, photographic meaning is conceptualized as being contained within the image itself. The photograph becomes a receptacle from which individual viewers withdraw meaning. However, these two perspectives fail to consider the role of the spectator in the process of constructing photographic meaning. The viewing process is a dynamic interaction between the photographer, the spectator, and the image; meaning is actively constructed, not passively received. Barthes (1964) characterizes photographs as "polysemic," capable of generating multiple meanings in the viewing process. Byers describes photography similarly:

... the photograph is not a "message" in the usual sense. It is, instead, the raw material for an infinite number of messages which each viewer can construct for himself. Edward T. Hall has suggested that the photograph conveys little new information but, instead, triggers meaning that is already in the viewer (1966, pp. 31).

The tendency to treat photographs as objective evidence ignores the convention-bound processes of both image making and interpretation. In order to benefit social research, the use of photographic methods must be grounded in the interactive context in which photographs acquire meaning.

Viewing photographic imagery is a patterned social activity shaped by social context, cultural conventions, and group norms. In order to

present photographs to informants for purposes of photo-elicitation, some foreknowledge of the respondent group's use of photographs is required so that methodological strategies can be planned, and the resulting data assessed within the context of informants' shared meanings. Studies of American middle-class approaches to viewing photographs and films provided a starting point for the methodological strategy presented here.

In his study of family photography, Musello (1980) found that his sample of middle-class "Euro-American" families approached photographs as "mechanical recordings of real events," not as symbolic articulations. The viewers he studied paid little conscious attention to the role or intentions of the photographer in the process of articulation. The use of family snapshot photographs within a "home-mode" context placed a specific behavioral frame around the act of viewing which excluded consideration of the formal characteristics of the image. Musello writes:

Meanings and interpretations are most often based on a belief in the photograph's value as a document of natural events and on recognition of its iconic referents. The photographic allusion is increasingly expanded, however, as viewers interact with the natural events depicted and draw references and significances from a broad range of events, experiences, people, and responses which they recall, derive from, relate, and attribute to the depicted contents. . . . The use of the home mode seems heavily reliant on verbal accompaniment for the transmission of personal significances. Photographs presented to others are typically embedded in a verbal context delineating what should be attended to and what significances are located in the image, and providing contextual data necessary for understanding them (1980, pp. 39).²

Custen's (1982) study of the way a group of young American middle-class viewers talked about a film immediately after the viewing experience provides additional evidence of the routine use of images as prompts for personal narratives. Rather than act as interpreters, attending to the formal messages embedded within the form and structure of the film, Custen found that viewers' talk about film takes the form of "talk *through* film": "Viewers tend to discuss how the film is meaningful to them in some context present in their lives prior to and apart from the movie" (1982, pp. 240).

Viewers responded to the film they were shown in terms of its level of realism by integrating elements of the film they considered personally significant into talk about day-to-day experiences and concerns.

In these studies, the interpretational strategy employed by viewers constitutes a form of "attribution" (Worth & Gross, 1974). Viewers

adopt an attributional strategy when they treat an image as a natural event rather than as a symbolic event, and they fail to consider the author's intentions guiding the structure and meaning of the image. Naive viewers who have not learned the cultural conventions that facilitate the process of interpretation may mistake photographic images for the objects and events they represent. Lacking a conscious awareness of the presence of a message, untrained viewers substitute their own immediate reactions for the author's intended meanings.³

These studies suggest that in group viewings, photographs elicit extended personal narratives which illuminate viewers' lives and experiences. American middle-class viewers routinely respond to photographs by telling stories that stem from specific pictorial elements which seem personally significant. Instead of responding to an encoded message, most viewers' responses reflect their own social realities. Thus, the social interactions surrounding the activity of looking at photographs provide an arena for studying the meanings viewers attribute to aspects of their everyday lives.

Doing Ethnographic Photography

My use of photographs in the ethnography of a rural Iowa farm community builds upon the contradictory nature of photography, a medium noted for its realism, yet routinely subject to multiple perceptions and interpretations. I consider photographs inherently ambiguous, their specifiable meanings emergent in the viewing process. This ambiguity is not a disadvantage or limitation; rather, the multiple meanings negotiated by viewers can be mined for the rich data they yield. Building upon the evidence that viewers tend to look "through" photographs, I have made use of the ways in which photographs are routinely used by middle-class family viewers in order to elicit reactions and information concerning community life which might otherwise never become apparent.

By making ethnographic photographs of community life and presenting them for discussion within family viewing contexts, I have tried to establish a "verbal context delineating what should be attended to and what significances are located in the image" (Musello, 1980, pp. 39). By eliciting this verbal context, I have attempted to gain access to meanings shared by viewers. In what follows I will discuss my use of photography and photo-elicitation as a method of gathering data. The approach I outline addresses the inadequacies of existing visual ethnographies discussed by Wagner:

In the first place, there are too few visual studies of people acting in natural settings. We simply have not seen enough of what people do and the physical contexts in which it is done. In the second place, we know too little about how people themselves see the settings and their activities. Even when we have images of the people in the setting, we have little sense of what they make of it all or of the images themselves (1979, pp. 286).

Waucoma, Iowa

In August, 1985, I began an ethnographic study of Waucoma, a rural farm community in northeastern Iowa. I had visited Waucoma a number of times, accompanying my husband on trips to see his grandparents who were still living on the family farm. My husband's mother and uncles had all left Waucoma, choosing occupations other than farming. Trips to the farm underscored my husband's perceptions of ongoing change; each time we visited the farm seemed less like the place he remembered. Renters planted the fields, the dairy operation ceased, and finally, after his grandfather's death, his grandmother quit raising chickens. Buildings were left to deteriorate or were razed. Weeds grew where there was once a barnyard. After hearing many stories about the apparent demise of Waucoma, I decided to launch a photographic study examining the nature of the changes taking place in this small farm community. The initial fieldwork was carried out from August through December 1985. During this time I lived in Waucoma with my husband's 90-year-old grandmother.

Waucoma is an agricultural community with a population of 308 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980). The area was settled in 1855 by Irish, German, Scotch and English and in 1883 the town was incorporated. The Davenport and St. Paul branch of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway arrived for the first time in May 1880. The town prospered—four passenger trains and two freight trains stopped in town daily. By 1900 it had grown to include a mill, a post office, four churches, two banks, two hotels, three livery stables, drug stores, hardware stores, grocery stores, schools, a town newspaper, and an "opera house." A box factory was opened in 1919, providing employment for many residents. The factory burned down in 1923 and its owners, sons of one of the town's founding families, decided not to rebuild (the family moved away sometime after the fire). According to many residents, these events marked the turning point in the town's prosperity.

Once a thriving commercial center serving surrounding farms, the

number of main street businesses has declined since the 1920s. The town has experienced a gradual reduction in population, from 457 persons in 1920 to the most recent figure, 308. The majority of these residents are retirees: farmers who have moved to town, merchants, and elderly widows. Residents often mention greater numbers in discussions of the town population at the turn of the century, and Marron (1976) reports a population of 600 in 1919. The railroad depot closed in 1972 and by 1976 the number of businesses and professional people counted among the population had diminished (Marron, 1976). Today the town has a small feed mill, a grocery store, a branch bank, a tavern, a fertilizer dealer, a grain elevator, a filling station, a welding shop, a beauty shop, two churches, two funeral homes and two insurance agencies. An attorney holds office hours one day per week, as does an optometrist, and a veterinarian resides in town. Waucoma has evolved from a relatively self-contained, self-sufficient agricultural community into a less clearly definable unit, economically and socially dependent upon surrounding larger communities and on more distant urban centers. The intermingling of traditional rural values with urban culture is clearly in evidence as Waucoma continues to undergo change.

The study addresses the following set of questions: As rural communities undergo structural change, how do farm families adapt? How do successive generations view their community? Are traditional values transmitted intact from generation to generation or is there evidence of significant cultural change over time? Do views of family farming change from generation to generation as family members' experiences are rooted in different historical times? What meanings do kinship, community and the notion of the "home place" hold for farm families? As small towns atrophy what sociocultural adaptations occur? How do residents maintain a sense of community as the community's spatial and cultural boundaries are reshaped?

Farm families were selected from the possible range of informants because of the historical centrality of family farms to the organization of small communities like Waucoma. The social and economic livelihood of the town depends on the farm families living beyond its boundaries. Farm families' patronage assures the solvency of town businesses. Their participation in the community's religious life, civic organizations and voluntary associations is crucial to the maintenance of these social institutions.

Photographing the Community

How and where to begin photographing requires some strategic planning, because the act of making photographs may serve as the commu-

nity's introduction to the photographer, her activities and her aims. Data produced during this stage of an ethnography require closer inspection later on—the status of initial pictures is uncertain, their value as data is determined during the course of the research. I followed Collier's (1967) suggestion and photographed the physical environment at the outset. A descriptive record of architectural and ecological features is likely to be less equivocal than other kinds of photographic documentation, and serves as a good starting point. Upon my arrival I began photographing the buildings in Waucoma and mapping the physical surroundings. I made my activities visible so that residents would become aware of my presence. While photographing the town, I observed ongoing patterns of daily activity. I included these observations in my fieldnotes, along with descriptions of my own photographic activities.

Seeing a stranger in their midst making photographs of *their* town piqued the curiosity of residents, many of whom approached me to ask questions about what I was doing. Initially they sought to identify me and understand my presence by pinpointing my kin relationships within the community. When they asked why I was photographing the town, I told them that I was studying Waucoma and the changes that had occurred over the years. Their responses took one of two forms: they expressed surprise that someone found Waucoma interesting or important enough to study; or they told me how worthwhile my effort seemed, considering the interesting history of the town.⁴

The camera itself became an important means of entering into the social life of the community, allowing me to engage in understandable, task-oriented activity in the course of observation. My picture-taking provided residents with an obvious reason to start up a conversation, and the longer I made photographs, the more people I met. I was able to move from photographing the environment to photographing public events as my contacts with community members multiplied. Residents came to expect me to appear with my camera at community events. Over time, I was able to ask and receive permission to photograph family activities as well. I became known even among families I had not yet met, and, with cursory introductions, I was invited to photograph them. Waucoma families welcomed me among them, expediting my fieldwork.⁵

From August to December, I kept fieldnotes detailing my observations, photographic activities, and the results of informal interviews. I also built an extensive photographic archive showing such things as the physical environment of the town and surrounding countryside, church, associational, and civic events, family activities, the organization of farm labor, farm auctions, and alternatives to farming (e.g. jobs

in manufacturing at a plant 25 miles away). I made work prints in my "field darkroom" (temporarily situated in the cellar of my farmhouse residence) in order to review the photographs as the work progressed. From January until July 1986, after returning home to St. Paul, I printed photographs which would be used for elicitation during interviews with members of farm families. My fieldnotes guided decisions about which photographs to print and which to bypass.

I made frequent visits to the community during the winter and spring, and began conducting formal interviews in August 1986. Separate interviews with members of different generations in five farm families were held. Interviews were conducted in groups whenever possible. The number of participants ranged from one (in the grandparent generation) to eight (in the third generation). I had spent several days' time observing and photographing each of the families during the previous year and pictures of each family and their day-to-day activities were a part of the documentation presented during interview sessions. Interviews were taperecorded and transcribed. Sessions lasted from two and one half to five hours.

Photo-Interviews

Interviews centered around discussions of the photographs. I prepared and assembled photographic sets representing locales, activities, and events which appeared to be significant to community members. I chose what to include and how to sequence the photo-sets on the basis of analytical inferences drawn from fieldnotes. The picture groupings were: 1) the physical environment, a photographic survey of Waucoma, 2) specific locales such as churches, businesses, or the community center, and the public events or activities which occur at these sites, 3) farm families, including different kinds of farm work, different ways of organizing farm work, family activities, events, and rituals, 4) the town's Memorial Day Celebration,⁶ 5) auctions, including a farm auction, an estate sale held by an elderly woman preparing to move into a nursing home, and a sale of the house and household goods of a young couple forced to leave the community in search of better job opportunities, and 6) work activities at a factory 25 miles from Waucoma which provided a significant source of off-farm employment for local residents.

Interviews were held at the homes of the respondents. I arrived with a box of pictures and a tape recorder, and I was almost always beckoned to the kitchen table. I told my informants that I would be showing them my pictures of Waucoma, explaining that I had tentatively ar-

ranged the pictures into groups organized according to what seemed to belong together and what seemed important. I stressed that I was trying to gain a better understanding of life in the community, and that the interviews were the key to that understanding. "I can't hope to understand in the short time I've been in Waucoma, the experiences you've accumulated during your lifetime," I told them. I explained that I wanted to write about Waucoma, and also to *show* people what Waucoma is like by using photographs. I told my informants that I wanted to ask a series of questions about the assembled sets of photographs: do these pictures represent things that are important about living here? about being a part of a farm family? which pictures are especially important? which are not? if you were going to show people what it is like to live here what else would you include? what kinds of things are missing? I invited suggestions for changes in the photo-sets I had arranged.

Then I gave them the photographs, group by group, and asked them to make comments. I did little to guide their responses, particularly during the first interviews I conducted; if topics were raised that required clarification, I probed for further explanation. I took this approach because I was most interested in the range of responses the pictures might evoke and the intergenerational comparison among them. These interviews were similar to family viewing situations described by Musello (1980). Although I had made and ordered the photographs, they were treated attributionally, in much the same way that family snapshots might have been approached. (Since pictures of interviewees, their friends, and their neighbors were among those presented, this similarity appeared to be enhanced.) Viewers attended to the content represented in the pictures, and used them as prompts for talk about community events, institutions, and social relationships. Neither the formal aesthetic properties of the pictures nor my intentions in making or ordering them were ever questioned or discussed. The only comments offered with regard to photographic articulation had to do with how "clear" or sharp the pictures were, especially in comparison with viewers' own pictures. A typical reaction was: "These pictures are so clear! You must have used a good camera!"

After the interviews I wrote fieldnotes describing them. I made note of the patterns that were emerging in the informant responses, and I compared the kind of responses generated by members of different generations. After conducting three interviews I was able to play a more active role during the sessions. I could draw upon data from previous interviews in order to probe for overlaps and divergences in response to the pictures. In this way, I began charting and comparing the worldviews held by members of different generations. Differing

attitudes towards the American Legion, for instance, emerged during discussions of pictures of a Legion meeting. The following is a sample of the kind of data generated in these interviews.

Example 1: The American Legion

While kinship ties establish the primary basis for informal interaction among community members, association membership provides formal mechanisms for interaction across families. Organizations like the American Legion are central to the social life of the community. Most of the town's World War II veterans belong to the Legion Post, while only one Vietnam veteran is an active member. As older members die, new ones do not take their places. Younger men are either preoccupied with farms and families, or feel bitter about their military experiences and shun the Legion. In addition, the interview data suggests that some townsmen do not share the patriotism felt by the Legionnaires and prefer playing golf to participating in Legion activities.

Legion members' ritual obligations include assembling at veterans' funerals throughout the year and marching to the town cemetery on Memorial Day, clad in their military uniforms (when possible), for a special ceremony. Members hold a business meeting once a month. After the formal business of the meeting is accomplished, members spend several hours together drinking and conversing. Legionnaires meet at the Belding-Fox-Slagle Legion Post, a large "hall" in the middle of town. Prior to its purchase by the Legion, the building was the town's Opera House. The Legionnaires have renovated the building twice, making it more suitable for their own and the community's use.

Because the building is the largest gathering place in town, the Legion generates revenue by renting it to community groups and individuals: public dances, private receptions, and agribusiness presentations are among the kinds of activities held in the hall. Groups like the senior citizens' club, the Boy Scouts, and 4-H hold their meetings at the hall free of charge, a community service provided by the Legion. Legion members rotate bartending and clean-up duties on a month-by-month basis; they agree to be "on call" to oversee rental use of the hall. The women's arm of the Legion is the American Legion Auxiliary. Auxiliary members' activities focus on aid to disabled servicemen, support of their husbands' Legion activities, and fundraising events, like the annual arts and crafts show, held each fall at the Legion building.

Within the set of photographs showing specific locales and activities there was a group of pictures made at the Legion Hall. The first part of these pictures showed a monthly Legion meeting. Included (Figures 1-6) were shots of members reciting the Legion pledge at the beginning of the meeting; Legion Post leaders conducting the meeting; members seated, drinking soda pop and beer; members drinking at the bar after the adjournment; Legionnaires standing at the bar, arguing. I showed these pictures to a retired farmer and his wife and to their son and daughter-in-law during two separate interviews. The retired farmer, Gerald, belongs to the Legion. His son, Tom, now farming the family farm, is not a member despite the fact that he is eligible as a Vietnam veteran. Gerald and his wife Lola, and Tom and his wife, Mary, did not always refer to specific pictures from this series during the course of the interview. The series elicited extended talk about the Legion and its place within the community. Their discussion is represented below.

Gerald age 59, and Lola age 58, Retired Farmers

Dona: These are pictures from the Legion Hall.

Gerald: There's Phil.

Lola: And Roy. (See figure 3.)

Gerald: Gene's Commander now I think, isn't he?

Lola: I don't know.

Gerald: I think he is. That's the only night you ever was to a meeting, huh?

Dona: Yeah.

Gerald: That one night.

Dona: They were discussing whether or not to renovate the hall. (Referring to figure 2.)

Gerald: Gee, something was going on here (See figure 6.)

Dona: They were having an argument.

Gerald: They must have been. Looks like Smith was madder than hell at me.

Dona: They were talking about farming and—

Gerald: Oh yeah. Smith got mad that night about something anyway. About renting more land or some darn thing. I don't know what it was about no more.



Figure 1.

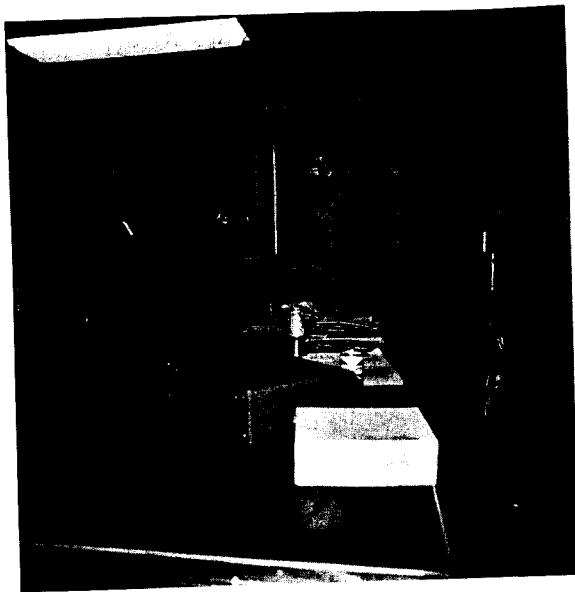


Figure 2.

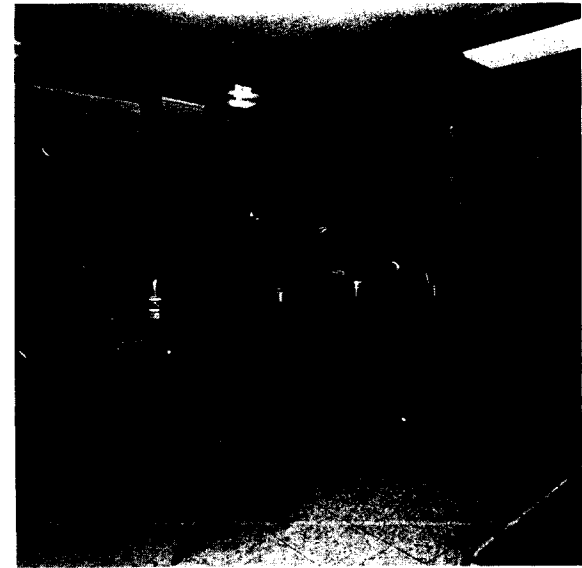


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

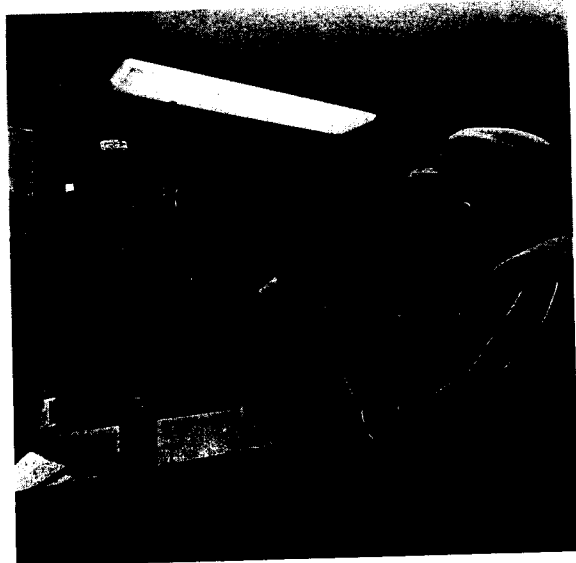


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

Dona: How long have you been a Legion member?

Gerald: I don't know.

Lola: Ever since you've been out of the service. When was that?

Gerald: I don't know. (Gerald takes out his wallet and begins to shuffle through the cards and pictures collected in it.)

Dona: Do you have a Legion card in your wallet?

Gerald: Here it is. Nope. Here it is right here. No, that's not it either. It's in there someplace. I've got more kids' pictures in there than anything else. It's got to be in there. Here it is right here. Thirty five years. (He shows me his card, with obvious pride.)

Dona: What kinds of things do the Legionnaires do?

Gerald: Well. Memorial Day, they put on that whole thing. Then they furnish the hall for the senior citizens. (The Legion makes the hall available to senior citizens for the weekly hot meal program and for the monthly senior citizens' club meeting.)

Dona: They don't have to rent it when they use it?

Gerald: Oh, they pay a little bit, but not much.

Lola: Whatever they want, right?

Gerald: Right.

Lola: And they have the Booster Club meetings in there and . . .

Gerald: Anything, any town meeting. Like if something big goes on they have all the meetings.

Lola: And voting.

Gerald: Something big goes on, that's all donated. Well, voting gets paid for from the county. It's just a community deal. But it's going downhill too. We can't get our quota anymore or nothing. (At the meeting I attended twelve men were present. Figure 4 shows a small number of men amidst many empty chairs.)

Lola: We can't get any new members. (Their son's failure to join likely underscores this dilemma for them.)

Gerald: Well the old ones are all dying, you know. The young people don't want to belong no more because what do they want to join there for? "What do I get out of my money?" That's the way they figure it, you know. (Only one of twelve Legionnaires was under fifty years-old.)

Dona: What do you get out of being a member?

Gerald: Well you get buried, for one thing. Get a military funeral; but you get that anyway. See like this year the Legion is fifteen dollars, you know. So that this here post they might get a dollar out of it maybe. All the rest of it goes down to Des Moines. And then you're a Legionnaire. Then you get a magazine once a month and that little paper too, but that's what I mean, young kids ain't going to belong to that. What the heck, all you do is pay.

Lola: Here's the money. What do you get out of it?

Gerald: I don't know.

Dona: But it's important to you to be a member?

Gerald: That's right. As long as I served my country I might as well support that too. I mean what the heck, once a year if you can't even pay, it was only \$12.50, now it's \$15. I mean like young kids, they don't figure that's important. I mean what the heck do you want to belong to the Legion for—you gotta pay \$15 and then you gotta work all the time. What would they want to belong to something like that for? I don't know.

Dona: What kind of work do you have to do?

Gerald: Well see now, this month is our month; anything goes on, we got to tend the bar and if they don't clean it up, we've got to clean it up.

Lola: Then he goes to every military funeral. You have to have so many of them go and usually there's nobody who'll go.

Gerald: Like Lawler last time, there was three posts up there. Then you get three flags and three colors, and then different members come. But the same bunch goes every time, the same people every time. Just a certain few, about four or five of 'em out of about 60 of 'em. They gotta go every time. The rest of 'em say "oh I don't have time. I can't go. I gotta go here today, I can't go." So the same ones have to go every time. And I think they could maybe take once a year.

Dona: What's the difference between the people who go and the people who don't?

Gerald: I don't know, they always got some excuse. They're not interested in it or something, I don't know. We got a heck of a time to get four of 'em to go usually, and I don't think that's right, either, because even when we have a military funeral up here, not many show up. Memorial Day we don't even have a very good turnout. And everybody

should come for that you know. I don't know, people are different today, too much other stuff to do. You gotta go golfing today or I gotta do this or I gotta do that. So that's what they do. (Gerald is not a member of the country club/golfing network composed of upper status professionals, merchants, and "cosmopolitan" farmers.)

Dona: So, do you think it's important to do these things?

Gerald: Sure it is.

Dona: In a way is it like you're continuing your military service?

Gerald: Yeah, kind of, yeah. Tonight was a meeting so I should've went, but I didn't go. There ain't much going on now anyway. It was more fun going when that building thing was going on. Then there were more arguments. (The renovation of the hall generated lengthy arguments pro and con as to the wisdom of emptying Legion coffers and raising additional funds to finance the project. Figure 2 shows discussion of the issue.) Now ain't nobody comes anymore, about maybe five or six of 'em comes, that's all. Before that they'd get into big arguments—how do you want to do it, do you want to do it this way or that way.

Dona: So there's usually things like that happening—

Gerald: That draws people in, sure.

Dona: But before the renovation—

Lola: They used to take turns bringing lunch and stuff, and they'd sit there and visit, sit there, eat their lunch and have their beer and stuff and visit, and a lot more of them came then, too.

Dona: But no one's doing that now?

Gerald: No, I don't know.

Dona: Because I remember at this meeting I think when Wayne came in, in this picture, B60, he was asking where the lunch was. (See figure 5.)

Gerald: Yeah, right, right.

Lola: One night I made a whole crockpot full of maidrites (barbequed beef for sandwiches) and what'd they have, four packages of buns? And there weren't very many people there, but they cleaned them up. A lot of them would just come to eat you know, but not now since they quit meals. But it don't cost that much to have a little sandwich or something, you know.

Dona: Was there any talk about quitting it?

Gerald: All of a sudden one night whoever was supposed to bring it didn't bring it. Then it quit. So I don't know. If you brought the lunch then they'd ask you if you wanted to get paid for whatever it cost you to bring it, you know, they'd give you the money. But then if you donated it, it was so much the better. It made more for the Legion.

Lola: Doc used to get meat and crackers and stuff like that and take it to every meeting when he was commander. ("Doc" is the town's resident veterinarian and mayor. As a college educated professional, the veterinarian and his wife occupy high status positions within the community. A lunch of "meat and crackers" would be far less common fare than "maidrites.")

Gerald: They're always talkin' about what they, if they should put on another pancake and sausage or some deal to make more money or something, you know (the Legion sponsors an annual pancake and sausage supper to raise funds). That's about all it is, how much money they got left in the bank.

Dona: Do you enjoy being a member just to get together with people?

Gerald: Yeah, sure, right. You know, you have a little session, what the heck, this argument here, an argument there. (Refers to figure 6.)

Dona: Like in the picture?

Gerald: Yeah, right.

Tom age 35, and Mary age 34, Farming the Family Farm.

Dona: I have a lot of pictures here of things that happened in the Legion Hall. It seems like so many things happen in the hall, it gets so much use.

Tom: It's the only place big enough for a gathering, you know, of any size.

Dona: The first thing is a Legion meeting.

Mary: This is upstairs.

Tom: This is upstairs before they remodeled isn't it? (Referring to figures 1 through 3.)

Mary: A lot of PBRs.

Dona: What did you say? A lot of what?

Mary: PBRs (cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer).

Dona: Oh.

Tom: The Legion probably wishes they had a picture like this, a before and after picture. Now that could be a gag box too. You never know what could be in there, the way they're standing there grinning at Wayne's opening that box. You don't know what's going to jump out of there. (See figure 4. Waucoma residents frequently play practical jokes on one another. They range from gag boxes to relocating cars without their drivers' knowledge. In the interview with Gerald and Lola, this picture elicited a lengthy discussion of the recently discontinued practice of bringing "lunch" to Legion meetings. Gerald's and Lola's responses were rooted in first-hand knowledge of the group's activities, while Tom and Mary were unable to interpret figure 4 with reference to such "insider" knowledge.)

Dona: Well I think it was just more PBRs.

Tom: Could be (laugh). But that's not really a formal meeting is it? I don't think they even have a gavel or anything like that.

Dona: Well in the beginning they had a regular formal ceremony where they say the pledge. And this is, they are conducting business here. (Because he is not a Legion member, Tom does not know the protocol of the meetings his father regularly attends. This reinforces the inference that father and son have differing domains of community knowledge.) I remember the last time I was talking to you, you told me that you're not a Legion member, but you could be, right?

Tom: Right.

Dona: Why did you decide not to join?

Tom: The only reason I'd be a Legion member is for military funerals, because I want a military funeral for myself. (Tom and his father both consider military funerals to be important. Despite the fact that Tom does not want to join the Legion, the cultural value attributed to this ritual persists across generations.) But I could go up and march with them for any military funeral without being a member. They'd be glad to have somebody march. (Gerald made it plain that he thinks too few Legionnaires come to military funerals, and even though Tom is aware that he would be welcomed among them, he does not voluntarily attend military funerals with the older veterans who regularly represent their post.) But if I join for whatever the dues are, it doesn't amount to that much, then I get to go up and work. I gotta go up and when they have a dance you have to take tickets or you have to go and

be a bartehder or you have to clean up the next day or that night or something like that. And the main thing I suppose, you know, if they don't start gettin' some young people in, it's gonna fold up, too. In the meantime I just never joined.

Dona: So, what is the reason that you wouldn't want to work?

Tom: Well not all the time. I mean I could go up and I could tend bar or help anytime I want and nobody would care. If you want to volunteer to work, that's fine. But you'd be put on a schedule where you have to work this night or that night or what have you, and if you don't, something else comes up, you have to find a replacement. And I think they get a month of time. Well maybe in the wintertime you don't have hardly anything to do, but in the summer, maybe you'll have two or three wedding dances plus this or that, and you have to go up every Saturday night and maybe clean up on Sunday morning. (Tom's response suggests that he dislikes the constraints on his independence that Legion obligations would impose.)

Dona: Is it that you don't have the time, or you'd rather have control over the time that you have?

Tom: Probably rather have my own time. (Tom's notion of appropriate uses of time and Gerald's contrast. Their different places within the life cycle, beginning farmer with young children versus retired farmer with grown children, plays a part in shaping the nature of their community activities.) It's like right here, right now, I know how much work I have left to do outside that has to be done today and what could be done that I *can* put off, too.

Dona: What if they really needed people to join, or they'd fold?

Tom: Oh then I would, yeah. If they come out and asked me I probably would. (Tom's response suggests that he considers the continued presence of the Legion important to the community but he exhibits conflicting values in his simultaneous acceptance/rejection of the Legion.)

Dona: Are there many people like you who could join but haven't?

Tom: Well, there were a lot. Most of the kids that were my age around here all went to the service. (The military offers young people from the community a promise of steady income, some kind of technical training, and what seems to be a clear path out of the community to the world beyond.) There isn't anybody my age in that group in there. A lot of them aren't here anymore, but it used to be they'd have members from all over, like Ronnie in West Union. You know, the way it used to be he would have belonged here. Belonged, but maybe inactive or what have you.

Dona: Why would he belong here if he lives in West Union?

Tom: Because this is home.

Mary: This is home and he would know all these people and stuff.

Tom: Same way, I think Barney belonged for a while. And he lives in Cedar Rapids.

Dona: What about people who live close, so it would be real easy for them to go?

Mary: I don't think there is many.

Tom: Well Johnnie don't belong.

Mary: But he's about the only one I could think of.

Tom: Johnnie's got two purple hearts. He says, "they don't put food on my table. I don't need the Legion. I don't need these," [purple hearts]. He's real sour on the war. So they just kinda let him alone. (Vietnam veterans' war experiences differ from those of other war veterans and their contradictory feelings about their military service are manifested in a lack of involvement in patriotic organizations and rituals.)

Mary: His wife belongs to the Auxiliary, though.

Tom: Oh, yeah.

Dona: So she can belong, even though he's not a member?

Tom: He's maybe an inactive member or something, too.

Mary: Yeah, I'm not sure.

Dona: So then I suppose you could belong to the Auxiliary too if you wanted to.

Mary: I suppose I could. (Mary made it clear in the way that she answered that she had little interest in doing so.)

Tom: Uh huh. But I don't think there's any, most of 'em are gone. I don't think there's any right around here. (Tom's discussion supports the inference that military service routes young people out of town, often permanently, among members of Tom's generation.)

Mary: I can't think of anybody, other than him.

Dona: So he's the only person who could be a member who isn't?

Tom: Well there's got to be more than that. Some of the Koudelka boys and stuff were in the service.

Mary: Yeah, that could be.

Tom: They're younger than me, but I'm not sure. Well Adam is still in, but there's quite a few. You know, you read the paper, you see all the kids, you know the Hometown News where so and so was in or out of the service, or what they're doing. (The town newspaper regularly features a column devoted to "Hometown News" detailing the activities and accomplishments of young people from the community who are in the military.) But they don't pick up any new members up there.

Dona: How much older than you is Jeff? (Jeff is the single Legion member under 40 years of age, a Vietnam veteran. His family has lived in Waucoma since the town was founded, and over the years they have farmed and owned a variety of business enterprises in the community. Currently Jeff heads the family business, a small chain of hog buying stations headquartered in Waucoma. He also owns the local tavern. He employs many community residents, and his Legion membership may be part of a conscious attempt to bolster and solidify his position in the community. Jeff is a Legion officer, integrating him into the social life of men with whom he transacts business dealings.)

Tom: Three years I think.

Mary: Three years.

Dona: So he's a member and—

Mary: But he's about the youngest, I'll bet.

Tom: Yeah, probably so.

Dona: Do you think the Legion is important to the town?

Tom: Yeah, you have to have military funerals. She doesn't like them, but I insist.

Dona: You don't like military funerals?

Mary: Unh Uh.

Dona: Why not?

Mary: I don't like it when they play the taps.

Dona: How come?

Tom: It makes her cry.

Mary: Oh I just hate that.

Tom: You had how many, six uncles in the Navy or something?

Mary: I just don't like it when they play that, and they shoot the guns.

It always seems too final, and it's too hard on the women. I don't like it. I've been at too many military funerals.

Dona: But you're going to do it anyway?

Tom: Yep.

Mary: I'm gonna die first. I ain't goin' through that crap. (Despite the importance of military funerals within her own family and her husband's, Mary rejects this ritual, and does so with a display of emotion and vehemence.)

Tom: I said we went to sleep with that every night in the service for four years. They played that every night when you went to sleep. You get used to it.

Mary: I will never get used to that. (Here, the cultural contradictions so often expressed by younger community members, seem pronounced. Mary's disavowal of this ritual, which seems crucially important to her husband, differs from Lola's avid support for Gerald's patriotic activities.)

Dona: Are there other things that you think the Legion is important for?

Tom: I don't . . . Well this is too small of one, I think. In some of the bigger cities, if you need a pair of crutches, or a wheelchair, or something for the kids, you can go to the Legion and get it. I don't think they have that up here. 'Cause most of the time Bob Munch, one of the auctioneers around here, if he finds crutches or canes or anything like that on a farm sale or any kind of sale, he'll hold it up and ask if anybody needs it. And then he'll pay a dollar or whatever and mark it to himself and say, 'where's the closest Legion member?' and hand it to him. He buys it himself, 'cause there's not really too much resale on crutches. But give them to a Legion somewhere.

Dona: Other than that, in terms of other kinds of community functions?

Tom: Well they keep the hall going for anyone that uses it.

Mary: They're the guys that have to work on dance nights, you know, when the firemen have their dance and all that stuff. It's the Legion members.

Tom: If you want to have a family get together up there, they're the ones that have everything ready for you. If you want, they'll clean up or you can clean up, you're charged accordingly. So that, you know

they always have the place available. We used it for a family get together a couple years ago.

Mary: They have a lot of anniversary type things in there.

Tom: And if you're going to have a big party or something at home, and you're not sure about the weather, you can have it reserved and not use it, too. It's not a matter of having to pay for it; they're pretty liberal about it. Well OK, you had it reserved, but you didn't use it, so you don't pay. Maybe there's a small fee or something if they got to go and get the heat on and stuff in the wintertime for you. (Like his father, Tom draws attention to the public service the Legion performs by making the hall available to community groups and individuals. Even though Tom has made the decision not to become a member of the Legion, he acknowledges the important role played by the group.)

Comparing the responses of father and son to this set of photographs of an American Legion meeting draws out similarities and differences in the values held by members of each generation. Gerald avers the importance of membership in the Legion as an extension of his military service and an affirmation of his patriotism. Gerald's Legion activities give form to his commitment to the community, and he questions some of his peers' lack of steady participation in group activities. He wonders at their prioritizing golfing and other leisure pursuits above their obligations to the Legion and to their neighbors. He worries about the future of the Legion, given the younger generation's lack of commitment or interest.

Even though Tom maintains that he is uninterested in joining the organization, he is nevertheless intent upon having a military funeral, despite his wife's vehement objections. His responses suggest that his Vietnam experience has played a major role in shaping his political views, making him question the values represented by the Legion and its activities. The future of the Legion is likely to be reshaped by incoming members whose military experience is rooted in the Vietnam era, if in fact these younger men join at all. Perhaps later in the family life-cycle they will feel able to devote time to Legion activities. Otherwise, the post might be consolidated with posts in other neighboring towns, diminishing the central role of the American Legion within the local community.

The American Legion Post provides Waucoma residents with a vehicle for expressing their commitment to the community. It seems likely that the cultural life of the community will change as the Legion's membership and viability diminish. Unless there is an influx of young,

active military veterans, a new mechanism for community integration will have to evolve in order for cultural continuity to be maintained. Acknowledging this dilemma, one of my interviewees, a man in his 30s, made this cynical prediction:

I think pretty soon we'll have another one [war] and they'll be all Rambo and then the Legion will get another shot of good enthusiastic members . . . Yeah, some gung ho Legion members. At least something good will come of it.

Example 2: Using the Ambiguity of Photographs

In this interview method the photo-sets function like a semistructured interview schedule to create an ordered sequence of data elicitation and repeated use of the photo-sets provides comparability among the data obtained during each session. The photo interview is a forum for the active construction of meaning. Taking an attributional approach to the viewing process, informants respond with extended narratives and supply interpretations of the images, drawing from and reflecting their experiences in the community. The photographs themselves provide concrete points of reference as interviews proceed. Depictions of specific locales, events, and activities function as prompts which elicit detailed discussions of the significances of things represented. Because photographs trigger multiple meanings dependent upon the experiences of viewers, what is considered significant may take the ethnographer by surprise, leading to unexpected revelations.

My informants' responses to two photographs illustrate the usefulness of this method in generating data unobtainable through observation or conventional interviews. In my architectural inventory of Waucoma there were two photographs, presented to respondents as illustration numbers A1 and A5. As this numbering suggests, I saw these images showing the post office and an insurance agency as two separate, noncontiguous entities. However, community members saw them as one, linked by the people and events associated with them. The range of responses elicited by these pictures offered me new insights into community dynamics and the ideas different respondents had about events and relationships within the community.

The most frequent kind of response to pictures showing the physical environment of the town, especially among my older informants (over 50 years-old), was a history of different buildings, the businesses they housed, and their proprietors:



Figure 7.

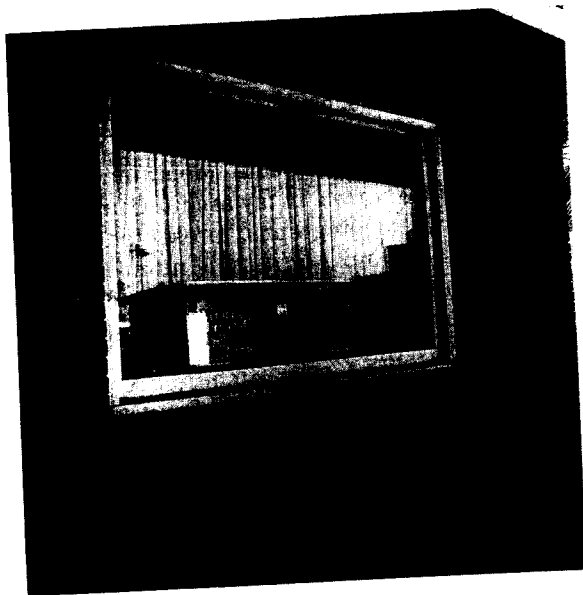


Figure 8.

Barb: . . . I remember when the drugstore and the doctor's office was there, and then there was a tavern where the bank is wasn't it?

Bill: Well, the drugstore, there was a drugstore, then the post office, or vice versa. Drugstore was first.

Barb: The drugstore, the post office went in where the drugstore was. After Burnside died.

Bill: Did it?

Barb: Uh huh.

Bill: Ok.

Barb: And then old Doc Freleigh's office was right along there.

Bill: That's where the bank is now; half the bank.

Barb: And then the tavern, right.

Bill: And the lawyers are where the drugstore used to be in the post office.

These two photographs elicited additional narratives. During the first interview I conducted, a hint of what seems to have been a well known controversy surfaced. Bill: "Well, Sloan built the building for his insurance agency, and then how they got the post office in there we never knew." This issue came up again and again, and was elaborated by others in the course of the interviews:

They pay pretty good rent for a post office and so when they moved them out of the hardware store, wasn't it? and into the bank . . . then this postmaster bought this building and made one end into an insurance office and made the back end into a post office so he could get the rent himself . . .

Ernie: Well, it wasn't an advantage when they moved the post office over there, I don't think, do you?

Ruth: Well, no, but they had to do it and they had to do it right then . . . because the wall on the other building was cracked. . . .

Ernie: He's [the postmaster] the only one that advanced through the thing.

Ruth: And he's really taken advantage of it too, I mean, because he can run his office and he can run his post office at the same time. . . .

Ernie: They put a double lock on the door so he can't go into his business you know.

Dona: Is that right?

Ernie: It's bolted on each side and then they, he had a telephone that they could talk insurance to and they've taken that one out just lately.

Dona: I heard that there was a door that he used to go from one side to the other.

Ernie: Not anymore. Somebody came in and put double locks on each side.

Dona: Who did that?

Ruth: Federal authorities.

Ernie: Federal authorities.

Ruth: Federal Postal authorities I guess you'd—

Ernie: Federal Postal authorities. They've been up here and got something done.

Ruth: Because there've been complaints about it.

Ernie: And that he was doing more, well you'd go in to buy stamps and he would—

Ruth: Be on the telephone and make you stand and wait.

Ernie: I mean people would stand and wait then. The Lord never built any patience into me and I don't stand and wait.

This controversy came up in all but two of the twelve interviews. Whether these two informants were unaware of the controversy, or thought it inappropriate to mention is uncertain. A few interviewees acted somewhat circumspect while making reference to these incidents, saying things like: "I don't go and say anything 'cause I don't know if it's legal or not."

During interviews with younger informants ranging in age from 27 to 38, another narrative was elicited, in addition to the one discussed above. Looking at the photograph of the insurance agency (figure 8) one younger viewer, 35 years-old, concentrated on the sidewalk in front, looking to see if tire tracks were visible, providing evidence of late night escapades.

Tom: That's rubber on the sidewalk, yet. They used to back up in front of the post office with cars at night, and they rubbered on the sidewalk. It's just wide enough for a car.

Dona: Is that right?

Tom: That was kids' entertainment in the evening, after everything closed.

Dona: Can you see that on this photo? (figure 8)

Tom: That's basically rubber there, I think.

I had never noticed the black stripe on the sidewalk, visible in the lower right hand corner of the photograph, nor had I seen it while walking on the sidewalk itself. I was aware of the importance of cars in the community, in terms of the technological and social changes they had wrought, but the importance of cars as a source of entertainment had not become salient to me.

This reference to the tire tracks led me to probe for more data about the recreational use of cars during subsequent interviews. A photograph of the fire station received this response:

Jim: In front of the fire station, that's Uie territory.

Dona: What's a Uie?

Jim: Doughnuts. Power turns, or whatever, on ice or dry pavement.

Paul: Sometimes it starts out to be a U and it ends up being a couple of doughnuts.

Jim: I think the most I ever got was three times around.

Dona: Someone told me about rubber tracks on the sidewalk outside the post office; that's the first thing that came to mind when he saw that picture. When you do doughnuts, how do you do it? You don't just come down and do it and leave.

Brad: You just do. Tell them in Waucoma you're there, you got your car there.

Jim: Some of them would just show their car off I think.

Becky: Yeah. In the summertime.

Ed: They do them there and when they do them down in the intersection in front of the bridge or in front of what used to be Blong's hardware, they just burn to a blue smoke in that intersection.

Jim: Yeah, that's dry pavement . . .

Brad: You have to have a really good car to do that in the summer.

Ed: You can do that out in the country, but it's a hell of a lot more fun to do it in front of the fire station.

Jim: It's so much more graceful to do it on snow . . .

Dona: Do you still do it?

ALL: Yeah.

Becky: We still do it on the ice there.

Jim: I like doing them, but I don't do several revolutions anymore. I just kind of broadslide, you know, just kind of slide around and broad it and try to make it come out of it cool. So you try to be more controlled as you get older. We used to go down there and you'd just go down there kind of fast and then just oooooohhh! and you'd spin, and you'd spin. You'd be totally out of control.

This subtle cue which I had missed, the dark stripe on the sidewalk in the corner of a photograph, generated data illuminating an aspect of life in Waucoma which had been invisible to me. Although I had heard people speeding through town late at night, screeching their tires as they went, I had not fully considered the significance of cars as recreational devices. In addition, it became clear that there is a correct way to do doughnuts or lay down rubber tracks, a notion of appropriate style, and a sense of the aesthetic dimensions of the activity.

Without the photographs as prompts, these data might not have surfaced during interviews. Almost all of the younger informants discussed cars when viewing these photographs, suggesting their salience for members of this generation. None of their parents or grandparents made explicit reference to cars as recreation. Instead they focused on the pragmatic ends served by their cars or pickups: the shopping trips to nearby cities and towns where prices are cheaper and the range of consumer goods is broader, or the ability to run errands quickly when machinery breakdowns occur. Older residents offered their recollections of the auto showrooms that once occupied space on main street, as they recalled a more prosperous era in the history of the community.

Two brothers, looking at figure 7, spun yet another tale about the community. Their parents were aware of the series of events they recounted to me, yet the story did not emerge during my interview with them. Perhaps its details seemed too embarrassing to the older generation.

Ron: And the post office (laughter), when they built it that time, oh, what'd he do to Richards? Richards was running the bar.

Bob: Oh the septic tank.

Ron: Oh he cut the septic tank off on him (laughter).

Bob: That was a joint septic tank.

Ron: So, uh, (laughter) well the sign got broke off a couple of times.

He'd blame people coming out of the bar and he was really raising cain about that. Then he went and cut the septic tank off. Well they had a *bigger* stink going on around (laughter), doing one another and everybody. It was like the great feud going back and forth, you know. It wound up in court somehow finally, didn't it?

Bob: I don't know. I wasn't around then.

Dona: Who was involved in all of this?

Ron: Well it was the guy that was running the bar at the time. He works for Lynch Livestock now. But anyway, one thing led to another, and they got into something about, I think he dropped his dram shop insurance with him is what happened. You know, it's insurance bars have to have, 'cause he could get it someplace a lot cheaper. So he cut the septic tank off on him (laughter).

Bob: That's a small town mentality, you know.

Ron: So anyway, you know, they got in a big stink. It finally did wind up, I think they settled it out of court or something. All the things that went on you know, during that time, you know, they'd wake up every morning and somebody would have, how would you say, urinated on the front door stones, and it would run underneath the door all the time (laughter). I mean they kept that kind of stuff up and there was a lot of little things. Like he had some shrubs he planted out behind the post office, and it turned out it was, it belonged to this lot, so Freddy just took 'em over in his yard (laughter). And he got somebody to come down and survey and all, and he found out that the eaves hung over into his parcel. Technically that building was over too far, if you really want to get down to the nitty-gritty about it. They finally kind of settled it out, it's all quiet now. I think they agreed to let him hook up to the sewer or something, I don't know, unless he put a septic tank of his own in or whatever finally came of it. They settled it eventually.

Dona: Did they settle it in court?

Ron: Well it got down to the point where there were lawyers involved in it all.

Dona: That seems amazing.

Ron: Well it was pretty hilarious when it was going on. Everybody was out, you know, he's a jerk, we're going to take care of him . . .

Dona: I imagine everybody knew all about this?

Ron: Oh, of course everybody knows everything else, and stuff like that. I mean that was the highlight of the year for most people (laugh-

ter). I mean, it was just, you know, dad would go down and he'd check up on it and all you know, come home and report daily what was going on, what was the latest round. Such a power struggle (laughter)!

Ron's discussion of this incident suggests that many town residents were aware of the feuding back and forth. Men who were attempting to "take care" of the insurance agent urinated under the door of the insurance office to express their disregard for him, an act which seems relatively unsurprising, considering residents' penchant for practical jokes. According to Ron, his father was aware of this feud, and Ron's telling of the story suggests that they all relished his father's trips back and forth from town because he would bring home the latest information on these daily events.

Ron was the only person who told me this story. He seemed to fully enjoy recounting its details, laughing devilishly as he reexperienced it in the telling; he acted almost as though he was sharing a kind of naughty secret with me. His willingness to talk about these events may reflect his relative lack of integration into the community's sense of solidarity. Ron, 27 years-old, recently returned home to farm with his father, after three years of non-farm employment in a small city 60 miles away. Ron's experience living in a larger community has given rise to a more critical view of his home town. He made it clear to me that he feels detached from rural customs and behaviors, as a former "urban dweller." Through his vivid depiction of this local controversy Ron expressed his own sense of superiority. Perhaps Waucoma residents who have committed themselves to living and raising their families in the community feel less comfortable divulging details of such pranksterish, destructive behavior.

Conclusions

The data I analyzed suggested that members of each successive generation have become increasingly integrated into the values of urban mass culture. The penetration of mass media into rural areas and the increased mobility of rural residents has collapsed the spatial distance that once separated urban and rural cultures. The different views exhibited by Gerald and Tom concerning the importance of Legion participation exemplifies the gulf separating members of these generations. For Gerald, active participation in the Legion seems natural; involvement in local social institutions (more numerous in years past) is a part of everyday life for rural residents whose activities have

been centered in the immediate community. Tom's military service took him away from Waucoma as did his subsequent non-farm employment in a larger town. Younger people like Tom are able to compare the life they lead in Waucoma with other life experiences and their mobile lifestyle places the local community into a larger frame of reference.

Tom, like Ron, conveys an aura of detachment from the concerns of local community life. The comparatively low level of social participation I found among members of their generation suggests that the level of social solidarity has decreased among younger community members. Rural residents who have embraced the dominant urban culture and its values do so with some regret; the narratives prompted during interview sessions often contained wistful reminiscences and stories about events that could only take place in a rural community where neighbors know one another intimately. Many younger residents exhibited a tension created by the simultaneous pull of conflicting value systems. The exchange between Mary and Tom with regard to military funerals exemplifies this tension: this ritual holds significance for Tom but he is unwilling to make a commitment to the Legion like his father has done. Tom's lifestyle, influenced by his experiences beyond the boundaries of the local community, threatens the viability of the rural values he clings to.

The mobility of the younger generation is underscored by the importance its members invest in cars and pickup trucks. Not only do these vehicles expand the borders of the community, but they also provide forms of recreation. Young people who spend much of their time travelling from place to place in search of leisure activities and consumer goods do "u-ies" and "doughnuts," making the time spent on the road a source of amusement. Rather than immersing themselves in the obligations of small town life, younger residents of Waucoma look elsewhere for forms of entertainment validated by the dominant culture.

Photography's Contribution to Ethnography

Because photo-elicitation generates extensive verbal commentary, use of this interview technique yields several benefits. Informants responded to photographs of their community, neighbors and family without hesitation. By providing informants with a task similar to a naturally occurring family event (i.e. viewing the family photo-album), some of the strangeness of the interview situation was averted. Interviewees often responded directly to the photographs, paying less heed

to my presence and the perceived demands of the task than in more traditional formal interview settings.

In making photographs for this research, I have attempted to construct "a record about culture" (Worth, 1980). It is not the photographs themselves which inform, but rather, the analysis of them. The photographs show concrete details of everyday events, activities and the contexts in which they occur, and provide data about community life. The analysis of the images is informed by insights gained through ethnographic fieldwork and informants' responses to the photo-sets. Operating from the assumption that the photographs I made are not inherently "meaningful," I sought to study the meanings they held for different viewers in a community. Photo-interviewing, used in conjunction with traditional ethnographic methods of data collection, enhances our ability to understand the meaning of everyday life for community members.

My use of photographs in ethnography implies a presentational strategy which brings their multiple meanings into the foreground. By presenting photographs with a written text which draws attention to informants' varied responses and the role of the photographer as an elicitor, viewers' proclivity to treat these pictures either as mirror images of their subjects or as aesthetic objects might be redirected. The yield of such an approach would be twofold, giving the reader/viewer a way to understand the culture of the community under investigation, as well as a way to understand photography as a medium of communication. This approach addresses the recommendation made by Wagner:

... that the dialectic between the use of photographs to study human activity and the study of photographic imagery itself be kept alive. This involves a commitment on the part of those involved... that they will use images as well as entertain questions about what they mean (1979, p. 294).

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Reference Notes

1. Unfortunately, less attention has been devoted to issues surrounding the presentation of photographs produced as a part of ethnographic research. *Exploring Society Photographically*, an exhibition and catalogue organized by Becker (1981), Wagner's *Images of Information* (1979), and Ruby's critique of still photography in anthropology (1976) raise important questions about how viewers approach and interpret photographs not primarily intended for formal aesthetic appreciation.

2. This response to family photographs differs from responses to photographic narrative identified by Messaris and Gross (1977) and Pallenik (1976). Musello argues that the family context orients viewer response towards "a process of personal significance and attribution" (1980:39), overshadowing the influence of any previously learned interpretive skills (Worth & Gross, 1974). As a result, these viewers ignored the fact that family photographs are constructed cultural artifacts, and looked through them to the family significances they generated.
3. Groups of American viewers have been found to move towards an "inferential" strategy of interpretation with the acquisition of increasing sophistication and competence in a symbolic medium. These viewers treat the image as a communicative event requiring the interpretation of a structurally embedded message, intentionally encoded by the creator of the image.
4. In either case, all seemed somewhat amused to find a young woman from the city dedicated to studying their small community. Over time, and with demonstrated persistence they viewed my endeavors more seriously.
5. The following incident exemplifies community members' helpfulness. One morning I stopped in at the office of the feed mill (what one informant called the town's "loafing shack"). When I mentioned my interest in taking pictures of harvesting, the mill owner suggested a farm to visit. I couldn't get there, I told him, because I had no car. He responded by taking me there himself, and he waited until he could introduce me to the farmer who was busy combining his corn. After a brief time photographing, the farmer invited me to dinner (noon) with his family, and later that afternoon his wife drove me home.
6. Each of the small towns in the surrounding counties holds a community celebration of some kind on an annual basis. These celebrations help to establish the town's local identity and also lure scattered community members back, reuniting them with the friends they have left behind. Waucoma residents consider Memorial Day an important holiday, both for its patriotic meanings and its integrational social functions.

Photo Albums: Images of Time and Reflections of Self

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ABSTRACT: The advent of popular photography has allowed ordinary people to visually record their view of themselves and the passage of their lives. Photographs not only record events but also allow the maker to group them for presentation in a structured manner comparable to verbal narratives, most commonly in photo albums. We examined more than forty albums created by amateur photographers in order to investigate the psychological and social functions of photo albums and their value to scholars as documentations of social life. Albums are intensely personal; they create a relationship between the presenter and the viewer; the audience is small; the possessor plays an active role in the album's presentation; and there is an accompanying verbal narrative. This narrative is crucial to the understanding of the album. This paper explores the structure of these narratives and their role in creating the meaning of the album. In the absence of a possessor/presenter, a narrative can be constructed by determining the type of album being examined and establishing the personal relationships and themes within the album. We suggest devices and procedures for reconstruction of such a narrative in the absence of a presenter.

In the 150 years since its inception, the practice of photography has spread widely throughout modern society. It has become integral to a wide range of practical activities and institutions, including science, medicine, art, crime control, advertising, insurance, politics, intelligence-gathering, journalism, and education. One of the tasks which confront the sociologist and cultural historian, then, is to assess the way the practice of photography has affected the way we understand ourselves and our world, and the way we engage in life.

Thanks to its sophisticated scientific, technological, and commercial substructure, modern photography has the appearance of a very simple process and product, but even a cursory look behind the scenes suggests that the process of capturing visual appearances is enormously complex. The images produced are "perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern." (Sontag, 1977, p. 5) Analytically, if we are to understand its impact on modern life, we must begin by posing the question of how

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