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# Quality of Life Indicators in Two Small Towns in the Blue Ridge Heritage Area

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This paper describes an ethnographic study of two towns in western North Carolina's Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. My objective was to formulate indicators of quality of life in small mountain towns, and then design a survey based on them that measures the effects that HandMade In America (HandMade) a non-profit based in Asheville, North Carolina, is having on the towns that it works with through its Small Towns Revitalization Program (STRP). HandMade has kept records of quantitative data for the towns (new businesses, jobs created and lost, investments, etc.), but this step toward qualitative measurement is innovative.

I begin with the story of HandMade and its involvement with the establishment of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. Next, I describe STRP, as well as the ethnographic work I completed with this program to identify key themes for quality of life. Finally, I discuss my findings and their implications for the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area.

## HandMade and the Blue Ridge Heritage Area

HandMade has been involved in the effort to establish the Blue Ridge Heritage Area since the mid-1990s. Founded in 1994 in reaction to a widespread desire in western North Carolina to revitalize and diversify the economy, HandMade is based on the belief that the area needs to supplement industrial development in the region, a sector of the economy that is rapidly declining. HandMade promotes the "silent" crafts industry that already exists. Through a variety of programs to link crafts people together, increase community capacity, and promote both the natural and handmade resources of the area, HandMade hopes to make western North Carolina a national and international destination for crafts. After eight years of work, the organization, along with others, put the proposal for the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area together in 2002, and saw its establishment in November 2003. As this heritage area is new, it is still in the process of moving from paper to reality in western North Carolina. Recently, \$45,000 of heritage area money was allocated for HandMade's STRP; nine towns will receive \$5,000 each.

## Small Towns Revitalization Program

One of HandMade's best-known products is the guidebook to the region's galleries, craft studios, restaurants, and places to stay, entitled *Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina* (1996). This guide, now in its third edition, offers visitors and residents maps and directions for driving tours throughout western North Carolina. When first published, it was hailed as giant step for a region that had not previously linked these resources together for the benefit of both craftspeople and visitors. However, HandMade also received feedback from some towns that were not included, but were within the geographic area that the guide-

book covered. They wanted assistance promoting themselves too, even if they did not have craftspeople and galleries. Thus began the STRP.

Based on “mentoring, technical assistance, self-help, and learning from each other and from neighboring communities” (HandMade in America 2002), STRP is modeled after the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Program ([www.mainstreet.org](http://www.mainstreet.org)). It is a capacity-building effort in that the town residents themselves decide how they would like to enhance their community, and then participate in the steps required to achieve their goals. Towns have completed projects such as courthouse restoration, creek walk trails, and the establishment of a summer music series. According to David Quinn, director of STRP, the projects are often as much about making residents’ lives more pleasant as having noticeable economic effects (personal interview, April 16, 2004). However, the program has shown that as STRP completes projects focused on making residents’ lives and communities better, the “economic growth and well-being” of the community improves as well (HandMade in America 2002). Twelve towns are currently in the program.

The staff at HandMade decided that the best use of my anthropological skills would be to measure the qualitative difference that STRP is making in the towns that it collaborates with. Quinn recommended two North Carolina towns to be the focus of this study, as the scope was limited by time constraints. He selected Hayesville (population 300, on the state’s border with Georgia) and Crossnore (population 287, near Boone, North Carolina). Both of these towns are very active in STRP, so Quinn thought that their residents would be amenable to being interviewed. Although the towns are similar in size, they have significant differences.

Clay County, where Hayesville is located, has been experiencing a population boom over the past few years sparked by its location in mountains closest to Atlanta, Georgia. Retirees and second homeowners appreciate the scenery without getting too involved in the community. Vacationers take advantage of the nearby Lake Chatuge, mountains, and quaint downtown square. Once a farming town, the economy is shifting. Real estate is big business, as is building contracting; farmers are dividing up land to sell in housing lots for more money than they could get from agricultural use. Businesses are moving from the town square to the highway bypass. Some residents speak of recruiting big industry to the area, but many believe that the county does not have a competitive edge in attracting companies.

The STRP group is called the Clay County Communities Revitalization Association (CCCRA). It has tackled projects of many sizes, including planting flowers around town, putting on festivals on the square, and refurbishing the distinguishing landmark of the county, the Clay County Courthouse. Although members of CCCRA are a mixture of locals and newcomers, many locals see the group as outsiders trying to change things.

In contrast, three hours to the northeast in Avery County, Crossnore has not grown in the last few decades. At a higher altitude than Clay County, Avery County is cooler in temperature and home to much of the state’s ski industry. Just off the main road to Boone, Crossnore can easily be passed by without noticing. It has a vibrant local history of education and medicine, owed to Eustace and Mary Martin Sloop, two doctors who came from the central Piedmont of the state to start a school and hospital in the early 1900s. The town was a center of Avery County’s business and nightlife in the 1940s and 1950s. Once home to a movie

theatre, general store, several restaurants, bowling alley, and hospital, businesses have closed or moved away. They could not compete with Wal-Mart and chain groceries in nearby Newland; more people owned cars and could go to Boone or Asheville for entertainment or services. The hospital was eventually consolidated with others in another part of the county. Today, The Weaving Room and Sales Store, both affiliated with Crossnore School Incorporated, are the only businesses in the center of town, and residents do not have many reasons to come to, or linger in, Crossnore's center. Although recently a restaurant opened on the highway to Boone and is well supported, Crossnore is a quiet residential community, made up of families who have lived here for generations. Gated communities and resorts in the region are encroaching, causing land prices to soar; however, the Christmas tree industry, visible on every hillside, is booming. Crossnore Community Enhancement (CCE) is the STRP program here. Although many residents think of it as a ladies' garden club, this group has not only planted flowers downtown, but also put on a July Fourth celebration, hosted weekly music jams and an annual Christmas bonfire, and created a town park and creek walk.

### **Methods of ethnography**

Through HandMade, I met residents in each town that directly participate in STRP, and asked these groups for a list of people to interview about living in their town and the STRP group's projects. Both groups provided lists that were diverse in age, gender, length of residency, and included "nay-sayers" (those who often oppose the projects that STRP committees work on) as well as supporters. Members of these committees contacted the people on the list to let them know that I would be contacting them. This provided me with an entrée into the community, without which this project would have been difficult. Everyone that I contacted agreed to an interview. I talked with thirty-one people in Hayesville and twenty-three in Crossnore. Interviews lasted from a few minutes to an hour and a half. I asked the same questions of everyone,<sup>1</sup> with follow-up questions determined by their responses. I also spent time observing daily life at the center of each town.

I was to use the ethnographic information that I collected to create a written survey assessing the ways in which STRP is affecting the quality of life of residents in all twelve towns. However, as I sat in numerous living rooms and kitchens talking with men and women, old and young, local and newcomer, it became clear that while there are similarities across the region, each town has its own set of resources and problems that dictates the concerns of its residents. Therefore, after recording and transcribing the interviews, and coding each one according to themes that arose in conversation, I came out with three different lists. One list was of themes shared between the two towns, which I used to create a common survey. The other two lists contained the items specific to either Crossnore or Hayesville, and these led to survey questions particular to each town.<sup>2</sup>

### **The indicators**

How does one describe the things that make life good or bad, or the things that matter? The approach I took was to talk to people, ask concrete questions, and then look at the themes that surfaced across interviews. I came up with 36 themes. Many of the themes are complicated, inter-related, and even contradictory—just like life itself. The fact that these 36

themes were evident in both towns suggests that they might be pertinent to residents of other small towns in the region. However, this is hard to tell without doing some ethnographic research in these other locations. Using the commonalities I found in my work, I grouped themes together to form indicators for quality of life:<sup>3</sup>

- Sense of history/heritage/culture
- Ties to community
- Environment/land
- Change/ “progress”
- Civic engagement/politics/policy
- Insider/outsider dynamics
- Socioeconomy
- Access to conveniences

Each town is dealing with different issues dictated by its location, demographics of residents, history, geography, and socioeconomic structure. Therefore I composed another list of indicators that pertain exclusively to each Hayesville and Crossnore. These are:

- **Hayesville:** Courthouse (emblem of county, future uncertain), conservatism of county commissioners, affordable housing, athletics (everyone follows high school teams), theatre/arts community, health care, library (good resource, communal space), transportation, role of town center, Forest Service land (way of protecting mountains).
- **Crossnore:** Relationship with Crossnore School Inc., Christmas trees (big industry), Highway 221 expansion (threat), Sloop Dam (historic site in disrepair), tax base (too small to leverage change).

### What does this mean?

After preliminary analysis of these data, I am left with three main points. First, these small mountain towns find themselves in the midst of change on many levels. If they are to be the keepers of the heritage that they embody, more support is needed from those who value this heritage. Second, the key to the survival of these towns and those similar to them may be found in the intangible “sense of community.” Third, the dynamic between insiders and outsiders is a powerful one that will shape the local atmosphere as the region becomes more accessible in a variety of ways.

One of the main reasons that this area of North Carolina was designated a national heritage area is that it, along with other areas of Appalachia, has been relatively isolated and fostered unique cultures, arts, and communities. This is a time of change not only economically, but also socially and culturally. The region is not as inaccessible any more; new highways, television, and the internet bring in the world; jobs are moving to other countries; and differences between generations are noticeable. It is important to understand the elements that contribute to quality of life for the residents of the area; a pervading theme is heritage. Although the area has been designated a national heritage area (giving it value on a national level), average people living there are not generally aware that this heritage area exists, nor does the designation affect their lives. As livelihoods and pastimes change, it is imperative for the region to recognize the heritage it possesses, but recognition alone will not fill the eco-

conomic gaps left by factories and a changing agriculture base. As national attention turns to the heritage of western North Carolina, the best tactic for residents may be to encourage community-based tourism development. Tourism may be the brightest star on the economic horizon, but it must be undertaken with care.

Sense of community is hard to define, hard to pin down, hard to create. However, one thing the interview data suggests is that a primary contributor to satisfaction is a feeling of belonging. This issue has two levels to it. First, for a variety of reasons, mountain social life developed to focus not on the community as a whole but on “reference” or peer groups (Weller 1965). As residents become more mobile and new people move into the area, these reference groups are fading, but are still a part of mountain culture. It is helpful to recognize this cultural history in looking at these communities and the ways in which various elements work together. Second, both of these communities used to have more community gathering places and events. As community development agencies look at this region and try to help it economically, I suggest they look at ways of creating more person-to-person contact, as well as spaces, places, and opportunities for informal community interaction. HandMade recognizes this link between the social and the economic health of communities, stating in its annual report that as communities grow stronger so do their economies and general well-being (HandMade in America 2002). This is the key to both small-town survival and the preservation and evolution of the heritage of the area.

The insider/outsider dynamic is one to consider when assessing the region’s heritage. In the past two decades, the world has opened up in a way that we have never seen it before. People can live where they want to and telecommute, as well as have multiple homes, and isolated areas are more physically accessible to visitors as our automobile and highway technologies become more refined. People from the Northeast and other parts of the country are moving into western North Carolina. They are met with a variety of attitudes, dependent in large part upon the attitude with which they approach these mountains. Heritage is perhaps the one thing that these disparate populations can unite behind, although it may have very different meanings to the two groups. Those who define this heritage wield a lot of power.

## Endnotes

1. Questions asked of all respondents were: (1) What do you like about living here? (2) What is difficult about living here? (3) What are your hopes for the future of this town? (4) What are your fears for the future of this town? (5) How are people’s lives changing here in the past few years? (6) Why do you think people choose to live here? (7) What is important to residents here? (8) Are you familiar with the STRP? What do you think of it?
2. The survey results have not been analyzed at the time of this writing.
3. I used the method of “pile sorting” to put these themes into eight indicators. Pile sorting involves writing each term on a piece of paper and then grouping like terms together.

## References

- HandMade in America. 2002. *Building Community through Craft: HandMade in America Annual Report 2001–2002*. Asheville, N.C.: HandMade in America.
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