

## Chapter 5: Analysis

When it comes to rural communities, outsiders usually label them negatively as poor and undereducated. Because rural communities are small, it is easy to notice these issues when you look at them from the outside.

I started a photo project in a rural town called Sweet Springs, Missouri in 2019. When I first visited this town last year, I also had this stereotypical impression regarding rural communities. The only things I saw were cracked streets and abandoned houses. However, after talking to some community members, I realized that some aspects of rural communities might be overlooked by outsiders.

To improve my understanding of rural communities, I conducted two rounds of photo-elicitation interviews with eight community members in Sweet Springs. I was curious what community members think about the stereotypes of rural communities and if they think these stereotypes are fair.

The interviews were carried out individually. I interviewed each subject twice with two different collections of photographs (appendix 2, figures used for photo elicitation). The photographs used for the first round of interviews were taken based on my first impression of the town. After the first round of interviews, subjects pointed out several important things about their community that were missing from my photographs, such as the church, farm and school.

In the second round of interviews, I chose the photographs that represented important aspects of their community for community members. I discussed with them the stereotypes of rural communities and their impression of their own community. In the end, I tried to figure out if my photographs portrayed their community fairly in their eyes.

Concluded from two rounds of interviews: community members agreed with the stereotypes to different degrees, but they don't think these labels represent the whole situation of their community. They thought these stereotypes only showed the superficial aspects of their community and didn't go deep into the insides of their community. In this specific community, the members expressed that the inside of their community is its people. They believed that they created a sense of a big family in their community, which is safe, caring and support

### *Influence of personal background on interpreting photographs*

Subjects reacted to photographs based on their own specific backgrounds. Since the photographs used for the first round of interviews were taken according to my initial stereotypical impression, many of them contained empty, cracked streets, and dilapidated or abandoned buildings. However, when community members looked through these photographs, they did not react in a negative way.

Among these photographs, “the Colonnades” (figure. 1-9) was chosen by six interview subjects. “The Colonnades” are famous historic buildings in downtown Sweet Springs. There used to be many businesses inside the buildings which are now vacant.



(Figure. 1-9)

However, when my interview subjects looked at this photo, they did not regard it as an empty building. Most of them liked it a lot, especially elderly people, many of whom recalled personal stories about the buildings. Jane Perkins owned a business inside “the Colonnades” with her husband around twenty years ago. “This is the building that my husband and I ran the youth

center out of in 2000. We painted this, this used to be pink, and we painted it gray back then.” Perkins said, “There’s used to be a little beauty shop right there. And there was always, I can remember being a kid and going in there, and there was always like all these women sitting under these dryers all the time.”

Also, since a local couple Bill and Phyllis Koch are renovating “the Colonnades” now in an attempt to bring some business back to town, some respondents, like Janet Scott, expressed that they see hope through this photograph.

The photograph of an abandoned house (figure. 1-4) was only chosen by Tammy Johnson, Sweet Springs’ Police Chief.

When other respondents could not even recognize where that building was located, Johnson recognized it immediately because she remembered that when the building was fully occupied, she had made many arrests there.



(Figure. 1-4)

### *Missing but important*

Community members pointed out some important things about their community that were missing from the photographs in the first-round interview.

Firstly, they mentioned that they would like to see more photographs of their churches. The population of Sweet Springs is 1,484, but there are seven churches in town. I noticed the large number of churches before I started my research, but I didn’t realize the importance of

religion for community members. After getting this feedback from community members, I started taking photographs of different churches in town.

Respondents also mentioned the school at Sweet Springs. They think that Sweet Springs has a very good school system which they are proud of. Lindsey Good went to a high school in Marshall, Missouri, but she didn't like it. She prefers a small school with a small group of students. Now, her kids go to school at Sweet Springs, which she is happy with.

“We have a good school system, got good teachers that are from here, and it's a smaller group of kids at school. And so, they all know each other, and they're all close,” said Good.

Some respondents also mentioned that farms should be included, because they are an agricultural community.

These missing but important aspects of the community of Sweet Springs were my blind spots. Through the first round of interviews, I discovered these aspects and started photographing them for my project.

### *Stereotypes versus insiders' impressions*

To figure out if my photographs represented the community in community members' minds, I chose fourteen different photographs for the second round of interviews. These photographs included community events, people's activities in churches, farm and abandoned things. Besides photographs, I also listed four stereotypes I found, and discussed these stereotypes of rural communities with my interview subjects.

I told them the four stereotypes included:

- 1) **High poverty rate;**
- 2) **Lack of infrastructure,** such as public transportation, water supply, etc.;

3) **Limited sources of education.** Many rural schools are faced with local fiscal limitations, which cause a limited range of curricular options, and makes it difficult to attract high-qualified teachers;

4) **High rate of health problems,** due to the limited access and high poverty rate, people who live in rural areas have more health problems, like chronic disease, disability, and obesity.

Firstly, we looked through the photographs used for the second-round interviews. Similar to the first round, they talked about what they saw in the photographs. Second, I asked them what words they would use to describe their community. All of them chose positive words. “Caring”, “support”, “safe and quiet” were mentioned most frequently. Finally, I explained the four stereotypes to them and asked them what they think of those stereotypes surrounding rural communities, compared with the current situation in Sweet Springs.

All of them agreed that most of these stereotypes exist within their community, especially the high poverty rate and lack of infrastructure. However, they thought those stereotypes only focused on surface-level aspects of rural communities and ignored the more personal aspects of their community, which should also be acknowledged by outsiders.

Kris Raven, pastor of First Baptist Church of Sweet Springs, said, “I think these elements exist, but I don’t think it’s a representation of the town.” Raven thinks the more important part of their town is the intimate relationships among citizens.

Michelle Fuehring, the city clerk, also stated that the inside of their community is important for people to see. Fuehring said the inside of their community is its people. “We’re a very caring community and we are a community that is striving to grow,” said Fuehring, “We’ve got enough of us that are dedicated to see, we don’t want to lose our hometown, our small town. We’re working hard to make it better and bigger.”

Jane Perkins thinks these stereotypes are correct to some extent, but there is a trade-off for people: “The trade-off is, they can leave their house unlocked, they can leave their lawn mower in their yard, and they don’t have to worry about people running off with. See, the trade-off is you have security and you have connection in a small community,” said Perkins.

Janet Scott said she thinks that although these labels are negative, they describe the community accurately. But Scott also thinks that they cannot represent the community’s entire situation, “I want people to see the good thing about living in a small town,” she said, “I don’t want these to define us.”

### *Visuals change stereotype*

As an outsider of the Sweet Springs community, I tried to overcome my original stereotypical impressions of rural communities in my photographs. Through the first round of interviews, I was able to better understand the important aspects of the community, which helped me to correct the direction of the project.

There was only one photograph showing the people of the community (figure. 1-7) in the first-round interview. It got the most comments, because community members thought it represented their community. Lindsay Fogarty found



(Figure. 1-7)

her family on this photograph and said, “What I want to pick is this one, because it's community. And I think what is great about Sweet Springs is that, it is community. It’s just small and intimate and I've just enjoyed being a part of this place.” So does Kris Raven. Raven moved to

Sweet Springs around eight years ago and said the town has a really good community, which is also why he decided to settle down and raise his children here.

In the second round of interviews, I asked my interview subjects to pick their favorite photographs in the beginning and to pick the photographs which they think are the most accurate description of their community in the end.

Interestingly, although every respondent had his or her own favorite photographs, all of them chose the school photo (figure. 2-10) as the most accurate description of their community.



(Figure. 2-10)

Lindsey Good chose the school photo (figure. 2-10), the Pledge of Allegiance photo (figure. 2-2) and the farm photo (figure. 2-14). The drone photo of downtown was one of Good's favorites (figure. 2-5), but she

didn't choose it as the most accurate description. "Because what our community is, it's about our people," said Good. "Those (landscape photos) are what our



(Figure. 2-5)

community is, like what does it look like. But if you really get into the heart of our community, it's our people."



(Figure. 2-2)



(Figure. 2-14)

Lindsay Fogarty compared the farm photo (figure. 2-14) and the school photo (figure. 2-10): "This (farm photo) is an outside view, but more accurately, I feel like people when they think about rural, they think farm, there's nothing. 'Oh look, there's one cow in the pasture'. Well, you didn't see the other 42. They're just hiding under the trees. This is what people would see from the outside. But things like this (school photo), you're on the inside of a gym, so you're actually inside of building. This is what you see togetherness, rallying one another, encouraging one another, excitement, fun. I feel like inside represents us more."

Jane Perkins also mentioned that this photo showed a very typical scene in rural communities. "This is very typical for small community... Kids in a small community where they all stand together and sing the alma mater, which is not something they do in big cities anymore," Perkins said.

The existence of stereotyping is reasonable. It expresses a general impression of a specific group. Issues like high poverty rate, lack of infrastructure or health problems, are more



obvious in rural communities than urban communities. Rural communities have very small sizes and few things going on, so these social issues are easily noticed by outsiders.

However, when you look deeply into a group, you would discover that the stereotype is just the surface level. As photojournalists, I don't think we should just tell the stories on the surface. We should go beyond the labels, and we should dig out the story behind the labels.

I would like to end with a quote I got from a Sweet Springs resident, Lindsay Fogarty:

“Do you hate that? It's run down and falling apart, and really not being used right now. But it doesn't represent death to most people. It's a memory that's still alive.

Sure, it's sad, but it's like, you're going to come here and you're going to tell me that my whole place is just crumbs and rubbish. I'm going to tell you that life happened here. And sure, it doesn't look the way I want it to look, but it's okay, because life went with me.”

