



Our Own Land

by Huang Zhihan

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Dedicated to all of the community members of Sweet Springs, Missouri

Cover: As engines rev in the background, people stand for the national anthem at the Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex. (From left, Blake Self, Dakota Self and Madalyne Self)

My grandma came from a small village surrounded by mountains. Residents could only enter the village through a single road. With the rise of urbanization in China, many dilapidated houses in the village sit abandoned by their former residents. Only a few elderly people still live in town today.

Grandma's family moved away from the village years ago, leaving only a granduncle there. When I went with her to visit to the village in 2012, my interest in rural areas was piqued. I saw a community lost amongst the wilderness, lands lost to the shifting sands of time, yet there lived people unable or unwilling to move, tied to the earth they grew up on.

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Sweet Springs, located in mid-Missouri with a population of 1,484, was platted as Brownsville in 1838 and renamed Sweet Springs in 1887. In the early 1900s, the International Shoe Company employed nearly 400 people in the town.

However, many people had to find new jobs out of town when the shoe company shut down in the early 1980's. Downtown Sweet Springs is almost vacant now, but community members are trying to revive it.

The heart of this community is the people. They support each other and they are trying to save their town.

These photographs show the daily lives of the people of Sweet Springs.

“Our strong bond can ne’er be broken, formed in Sweet Springs High.

Far surpassing wealth unspoken sealed by friendship’s tie.

*Alma Mater, Alma Mater, Deep graven on each heart
Shall be found unwavering true, When we from life shall part.*

*High School days at best are passing, gliding swiftly by
So let us pledge in word and deed, Our love for Sweet Springs High.”*



August 26, 2019 It is the first week of Fall semester in Sweet Springs High School, all of the players and cheer leaders are introduced to the audience in the gym. Students stand together to sing their alma mater after the event. They do this after every game. City clerk Michelle Fuehring is an alumnus of Sweet Springs High School. Fuehring recalled that they didn't do the alma mater after games when she was in high school.

"I think it's a good tradition that we're doing now that brings unity to the school. And even if you don't play sports so you can be included in something and show support for it."

September 16, 2019 A cow wanders on Mary Jo Berry's farm in the early morning.





Historic photo of downtown from Sweet Springs Historical Society Museum.

The tallest building was the Colonnade Hotel built in roughly 1910 by Mr. C. K. Smith. Together with Mr. T. C. Andrew, the two men worked from identical plans in constructing the colonnade block of store buildings.





Downtown Sweet Springs in 2019.

The Colonnade Hotel burned down on December 9, 1937, while the “colonnades” buildings still exist. “The colonnades” used to be occupied with various businesses but is now vacant. Local couple Bill and Phyllis Koch are currently renovating “the colonnades” with the Sweet Springs Restoration Foundation in an attempt to bring business back to town.

September 1, 2019 From left, Willa Mae Vaught, David Hertley, Robin Thomas, Kim Nelson and Karen Giffen sing during the Sunday Service at Christian Church. There are around 20 to 30 people attending the Christian Church.

The Christian Church has a history of 176 years, and the building was built in 1883. In 1980, Sweet Springs Christian Church was added as one of the National Register of Historic Places.





June 16, 2019 Sam Blain, Jr. in the basement of the Historical Society Museum, where wagons used to dump coal.

The Historical Society was founded in 1995. The museum preserves a lot of historic objects donated by local residents. Members of the Historical Society have meetings every month except the summer.

Sam Blain is a member of the Historical Society, also a local historian. With a goal of preserving the local history, Sam wrote many articles and contributed to local paper, Sweet Springs Herald.

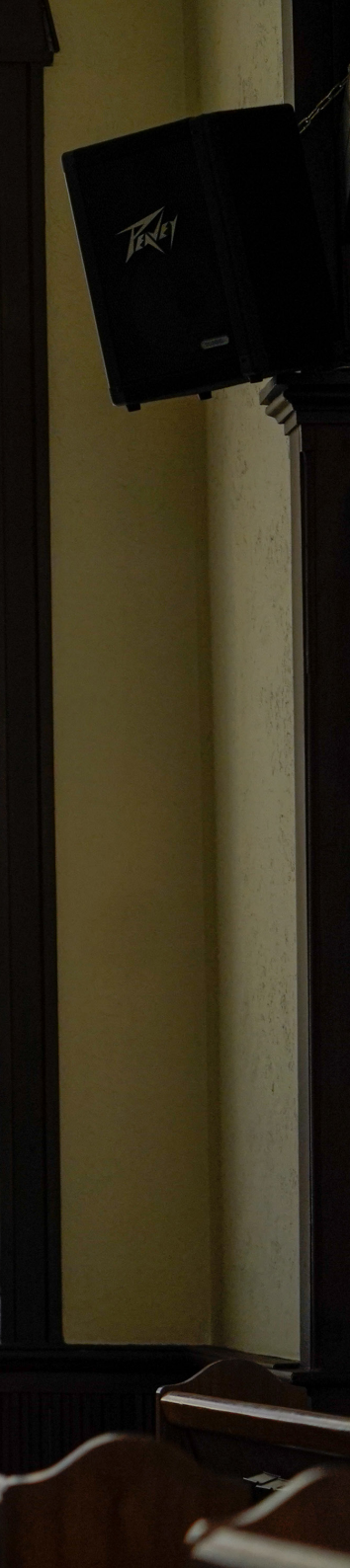


August 18, 2019 From left, Thad Johnson, Abram Goode and Travis Wike pray for Noah Fogarty during the Sunday Service at First Baptist Church of Sweet Springs. They only started praying for people during Sunday service in recent years. “It’s actually happening a lot now. And people are mostly comfortable with the idea, because when we first started that, it was almost like, people were uncomfortable,” said Jane Perkins, “people opening their mind for change, people deciding that it’s okay to do something other than what we’re used to, you know, opening your mind for possibility.” said Jane Perkins.



“Go Help Paul”. This picture is on the door of a children’s Sunday school room on the second floor of First Baptist Church of Sweet Springs.





Stained glass windows in Christian Church of Sweet Springs.

The First Christian Church of Sweet Springs had its 175th anniversary celebration in 2018. In August 1843, the church was first organized by Elder Louis Elgin with 19 members and was built in 1854. In 1882, the church was struck and destroyed by a cyclone, and the new one was established in 1883.

Lindsey Good, a local resident and the owner of Good Cuts Hair Salon, got married in this church and had a photo of her and her husband in front of this window.



"Let Freedom Ring" sign sits next to the window in a flea market at 234 Main Street.



October 31, 2019 Sam Hall stands in front of his house on Marshall Street while his daughter Chloe Hall walks inside the house. The Halls family has been living in this house for four years.



Left: October 23, 2019 Phyllis Koch weaves a rug in one of “the colonnades” buildings. Phyllis was born and raised in Sweet Springs, while her husband Bill Koch moved to Sweet Springs when he was in fourth grade. The Kochs moved out of Sweet Springs, and had been living in Chillicothe, Missouri for 23 years. In October 2018, Bill and Phyllis sold their house and farm in Chillicothe and decided to move back to their hometown Sweet Springs. Bill and Phyllis bought the north building of “the colonnades” in 2018, while the Sweet Springs Restoration Foundation bought the other sections of “the colonnades”. “We’ll all be working with a common goal to restore them to the way they’re used to be,” said Bill Koch. Bill and his family moved to Sweet Springs in 1956, the ally behind “the colonnades” was his backyard and playground. 62 years later, the ally will be his backyard and playground again.

Bottom: The remains of eight utility meters are attached to an alley wall in downtown Sweet Springs.







There are around seven empty buildings in downtown Sweet Springs.

One of them is located on the west side of South Miller Street. The property was bought by boat shop owner Andy, but soon after, the ceiling fell down. Only a wall is left now.

Behind the wall, sit the boats.



June 23, 2019 Two sinks sit next to each other inside the old hospital. When the old hospital closed in the 1990's, many things were left inside the building.



Dead leaves are stuck on a window inside the old hospital.

The old hospital in Sweet Springs is full of memories of local Sweet Springs residents. Michelle Fuehring, the city clerk, remembered that all of her brothers were born in that hospital, so were her husband and his siblings.

“My mother-in-law worked at the old hospital until it closed,” said Fuehring, “When it closed, the community was crushed. And then we got a new hospital, and everything was great. And then it closed, and the community is crushed. You almost see history happening again.”

“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.”

–Lindsay Fogarty, Sweet Springs resident





An old photo of Mary Jo Berry and her younger sister Betty Ann Sims in Sedalia.
“We had gone to Sedalia and the snow came. My aunt was a nurse, so she wrapped our feet in rags to go
downtown to buy new boots.”
In May 2019, Betty Ann Sims passed away.



August 24, 2019 Mary Jo Berry makes a sandwich in her kitchen. Jo has a porch behind her house. When weather is good, she likes sitting in her porch until sunset.

Mary Jo Berry has lived in Sweet Spring all her life. She went to Sweet Springs high school, played basketball, worked in the International Shoe Factory, and then worked as a city clerk, and a tax collector.

23 years ago, Jo tore down her barn, moved it down to the country, and rebuilt it into a house which she is living in now. "It's a big joke that I live in a barn."



June 11, 2019 After the historical society monthly meeting, Marvin Wilhite stands inside the Historical Society Museum for a portrait, with historic collections donated by local residents of Sweet Springs.



October 31, 2019 Five-year-old Pikachu, Cashton Rucker, runs door to door in the neighborhood to “trick or treat” and collect candies.



July 6, 2019 A boy plays on the grass under the audience's seats at the Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex before the Annual John Hinck Championship starts.

John Hinck was a local resident who volunteered at the Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex for several years. In July 2014, nine months after John Hinck passed away, the Hincks family started hosting the John Hinck Championship and turned it into an annual event. According to Tara Brewer, Tara, John's granddaughter, over 100 racers participate the championship this year.



August 24, 2019 Kevin Browder volunteers to help in the old hospital.
Joe Campbell leads the old hospital renovation project in town. A youth center will be put inside the building
for kids in the community.



EV parking spot on the I-70 Community Hospital's parking lot.

The I-70 Community Hospital closed in February 2019 and filed for bankruptcy one month later. At this point, there is no hospital or clinic in town. Local people feel sad about this situation. Many of the community members supported the I-70 hospital, and Janet Scott was one of them: “We worked a lot of fundraising to get things for that hospital. And my husband worked there as a volunteer for many years, so it’s just sad to see it,” said Scott, “We were all very hopeful when they bought it... People there, they were very nice, they were dedicated. When they were getting ready to close, there were people that worked without getting paid, because they love the hospital so much, and not much hope of being paid.”



July 19, 2019 Janet Scott, the librarian of Sweet Springs Public Library, arranges library borrower's cards. The Sweet Springs Public Library is still using card catalogs to organize books.

Right: October 22, 2019 Linda Krause puts the texts on a billboard outside of the Cheese Store.

The Cheese Store was located at Emma, which is 6 miles west of Sweet Springs. It closed in 1998 and reopened at Sweet Springs in 1999. Manager Linda Krause started working for the Cheese Store when it was at Emma, and even though Linda still lives in Emma, she spends much time in Sweet Springs and sent her children to school in Sweet Springs. "Even I didn't grow up in Sweet Springs, I kind of treat it like it's my hometown, because I've been here for so long."

Far right: November 24, 2018 Lindsey Good sits in her hair salon "Good Cuts" in downtown Sweet Springs. Lindsey moved to Sweet Springs in 2010 and opened her shop in 2012. There are very few businesses running in downtown Sweet Springs.









August 28, 2019 Jane Perkins feeds her cows on her farm in the country. Jane Perkins has been living in Sweet Springs all her life, 52 years.

Twenty years ago, when Jane's kids went to high school, the Perkins family moved from the country to town. Back then, because there was not much things for children to do after school. Thus, in 2000, Jane and her husband Greg opened a club inside "the colonnades", offering pizzas, drinks, movies, Ping-Pong table and pool tables so that teenagers could hang out at their club after school. Jane made her club alien and space themed and named it "Club 2000" and ran it for around two years. "But the building is still there, still has our mirrors on the wall."

In May 2018, Jane bought the old movie house in downtown Sweet Springs and a tiny building next to it and is renovating the two buildings now.

The old movie theater closed in 1950s'. Jane has no memory of the movie theater in operation, but her husband remembered going to see movies in that theatre when he was a kid.

Since Jane is working on renovating the old movie house, she plans to move back to town from the country.



August 27, 2019 Kate Fogarty, left, and Emma Lock play at Romi Lock's four-year-old birthday party at the Old School Coffee & Frozen Yogurt.



August 28, 2019 Alisa Goode, left, David Goode and their grandson Theophilus Goode.



October 22, 2019 Sherry Bertschy, manager of Old School Coffee & Frozen Yogurt, starts the espresso machine in the early morning before she opens the shop.



July 6, 2019 Dana Self takes a smoke break during Sweet Springs annual John Hinck Championship. Dana is an announcer for the championship.

06:48 a.m., October 5, 2019.

Downtown Sweet Springs.

Sun will rise, a new day will start.



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Our Own Land is dedicated to all of the community members of Sweet Springs. Thank you for allowing me into your community and letting me tell the story.

