OUR OWN LAND

Sweet Springs, a rural community in Missouri

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A Project Presented

to the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

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Jackie Bell, Project Supervisor

December 2019

DEDICATION

This photographic project is dedicated to all of the community members of Sweet

Springs, Missouri. Thanks for taking me as part of the community and letting me tell the story.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our Own Land

Sweet Springs, a rural community in Missouri

Zhihan Huang

Jackie Bell, Committee Chair

ABSTRACT

Rural communities are usually labeled negatively, with words such as high poverty rate, lack of infrastructure, limited sources for education and high rates of health problems. This research explored the stereotype of rural communities through community members' eyes in Sweet Springs, a rural town, population 1,484, located in mid-Missouri. Two rounds of photo elicitation interviews were used in this research. Subjects' reactions and perceptions to photographs helped to analyze the "role of photography in society"[1], how they felt about the labels of their town and how visuals change the stereotypes. Framing theory was used to guide the research.

SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONAL SKILLS COMPONENT

Our Own Land is a photographic project about the community of Sweet Springs, a rural town located in mid-Missouri. Downtown Sweet Springs is almost vacant now, but the community members are trying to thrive. These photographs show how people live their lives in Sweet Springs and how they are trying to save their town.

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[1] Smith, Z.C. & Woodward, A.M. (1999). Photo-elicitation method gives voice and reactions of subjects. Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, pp. 31-41.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a person who was born and raised in a city, I used to have a vague concept of rural towns. That is, until six years ago, when my grandmother took me to visit her village, where she was born and raised. It is a small, agricultural village located in southern China. The first time I went there I had a strong feeling of death. The village is surrounded by mountains, and there is only one muddy road leading to it. Many houses in the village are abandoned by their former residents and appear dilapidated. Only a few older people live in town with their grandchildren, whose parents usually work in bigger towns or cities. There is no clinic, no grocery and no school - only one small convenience store with very few goods. My grandmother told me that electricity is sometimes cut off in summer. Locals there live a simple life, waking up and working from sunrise to sunset.

In the summer of 2018, I returned to my grandmother's town to take photos. Compared to what I saw six years ago, I noticed more abandoned houses and fewer people. The convenience store in the village now keeps the door closed now, until someone knocks on the owner's door to ask for something.

This situation is not only happening in my grandmother's village. Beginning with the reform and opening up of China in December 1978, China entered a process of rapid urbanization that is still going on today. The National Scheme of Village Relocation and Urbanization is one of the significant changes during this process. When urban areas expanded and economic structure switched from primary sector into secondary sector, factories were in need of employment. People migrated from rural to urban areas to do factory labor. Thus, a large

number of villages are shrinking or have merged, which caused the number of villages to decline[1].

In recent years, China started to reconstruct rural towns. Meanwhile, Chinese media focused attention on the reconstruction of towns, called "building our new towns". Similar to my grandmother's village, new towns were usually built near the old towns, and new roads were constructed to connect to each with thousands and thousands of identical houses. Younger people moved and found job opportunities in new towns. However, there are still many older people staying in old and disappearing towns and farms.

Before visiting my grandmother's town, the rapid urbanization in China only existed in my high school textbook and as news on television. I had no idea how it affected people's daily lives. Once I visited this and other towns and I did research about the situation on rural towns in China, I started to rethink this problem.

This village piqued my interest about rural areas. When I came to the U.S., I explored rural areas in Missouri. I saw some broken houses and empty streets, and I wondered where the people had gone. Besides the similar broken houses and empty streets, I also noticed some obvious differences among small towns in China and America. For instance, there are still many young people in small towns in Missouri, but it is rare to see young people or middle-aged people in small towns in China.

However, I still had a feeling that rural towns in U.S. were also poor, broken and dying, until I met some residents of Sweet Springs, Missouri.

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[1] Huang, Q., Xu, J., Qin, H. & Gao, X. (2018). Understanding Land Use and Rural Development in the National Scheme of Village Relocation and Urbanization in China: A Case Study of Two Villages in Jiangsu Province. *Sustainability*, 10

Sweet Springs, located in mid-Missouri, has a population of 1,484. I chose Sweet Springs as the starting point for my project because I felt this town was also dying. It reminded me of my grandmother's village.

In the early 1900s, the International Shoe Company employed nearly 400 people in the town. One citizen of Sweet Springs told a reporter friend that the company was "largely responsible for bringing Sweet Springs out of the decline which it suffered in the early 1900s." However, the shoe company shut down in the early 1980's. People had to move out of town for new jobs, leaving the downtown business area mostly vacant.

I began to contact people in Sweet Springs and made connections with them, trying to portray the dying situation of the town, until I met Bill Koch and Phyllis Koch. The Kochs moved out of Sweet Springs 23 years ago because of the declining business opportunities in the town. The couple said that even after they moved away, they still considered Sweet Springs their hometown. In 2018, they decided to move back and bought one of three locally famous, historical buildings to renovate.

The more time I spent in the town meeting residents, the more I realized that I was wrong: Sweet Springs is not dying. Even though the population and economy have been decreasing since the 1980s, people didn't abandon their town. On the contrary, they are trying to save their hometown. Like the Kochs, many believe they should come back to the place they called home. They are making efforts to revitalize their once prosperous town.

Meanwhile, Sweet Springs is attracting people from the outside as well: Lindsay Fogarty, who is originally from Arlington, Texas, moved to Sweet Springs, bought and renovated the old schoolhouse with her husband Brad Fogarty, and turned it into a coffee and frozen yogurt shop in

2012. The Fogartys consider Sweet Springs their home now, and they are trying to make some contributions to the town.

Based on my personal experiences, I wondered if I had my own stereotype of rural towns like Sweet Springs. Rural areas are depicted by media as broken and dying places, which affected my understanding of rural towns. Except for the stereotypes, real living situations in rural towns are usually ignored by the outside world.

Based on my contact with community members of Sweet Springs, the stereotype of rural towns cannot represent the whole story of the town. To understand how the rural community members see their community compared to the stereotypes depicted by outsiders, I chose to focus on Sweet Springs for my project. I conducted two rounds of photo elicitation interviews with photos of the town. Community members discussed their feelings about their town through photos.

Even though it is still hard to tell the future of Sweet Springs and other rural towns, I wished to document Sweet Springs from a different perspective: not only the scenes showing the dying part of the town, but also the daily life of communnity members and their connnection with their town.
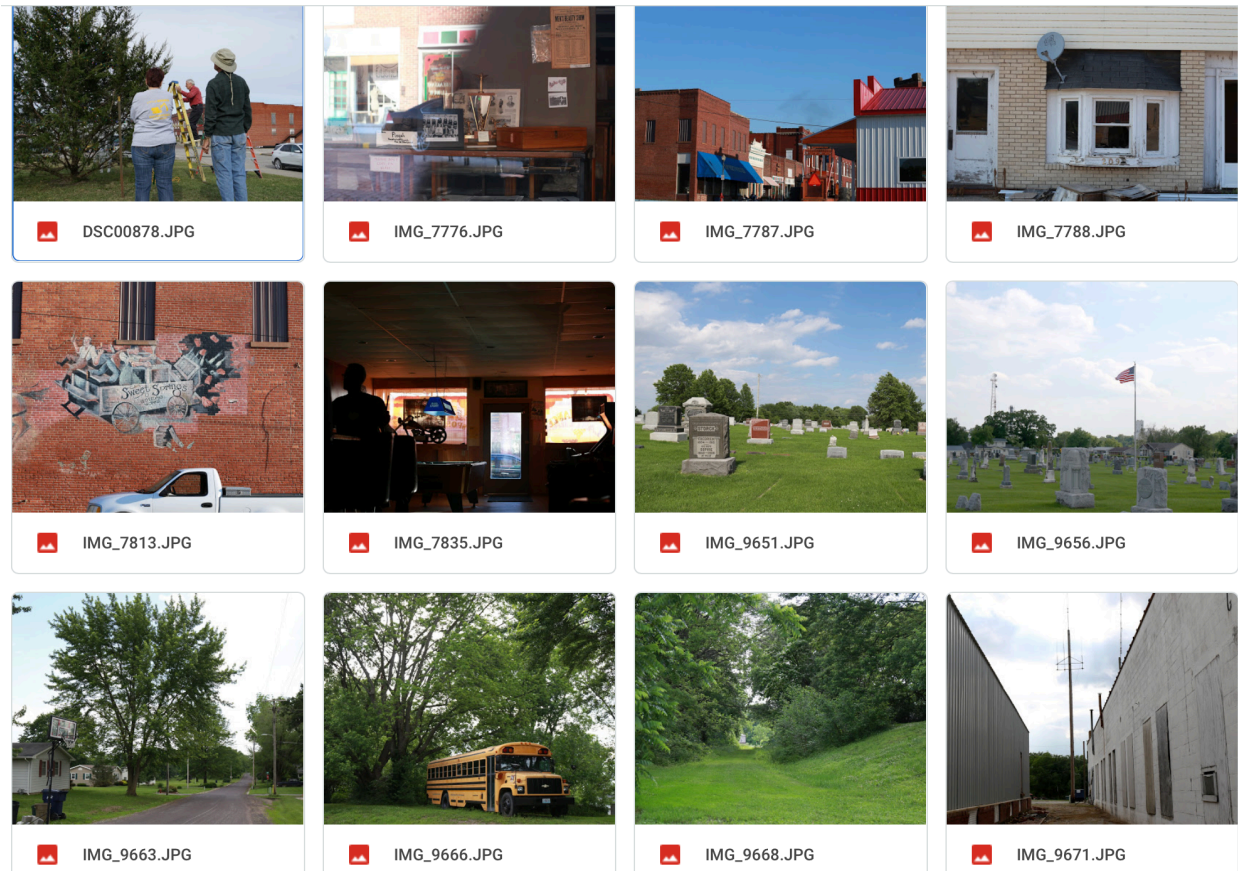
Chapter 2: Field Notes

Monday, June 3, 2019

Hi Jackie, Brian and David,

Happy summer! Hope everything is going well!

I shot some photos in Sweet Springs last week for photo-elicitation interviews. Combined with some photos I shot before, I roughly selected 30 images. Since my plan is using 10 photos for interviews, do you have any suggestions on selecting photos? I uploaded these photos to Google drive, here's the link: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1Udia9-rX-_qE1tmTzJhEF96Y4IUy60am

DSC00878.JPG	IMG_7776.JPG	IMG_7787.JPG	IMG_7788.JPG
IMG_7813.JPG	IMG_7835.JPG	IMG_9651.JPG	IMG_9656.JPG
IMG_9663.JPG	IMG_9666.JPG	IMG_9668.JPG	IMG_9671.JPG

IMG_9672.JPG

IMG_9674.JPG

IMG_9678.JPG

IMG_9680.JPG

IMG_9684.JPG
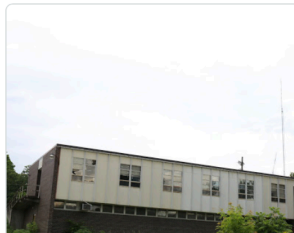

IMG_9685.JPG

IMG_9690.JPG

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IMG_9697.JPG

IMG_9699.JPG
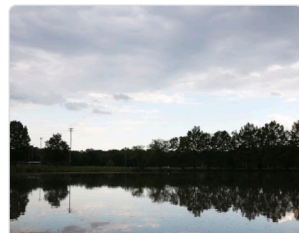

IMG_9703.JPG

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IMG_9718.JPG

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IMG_9729.JPG

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IMG_9739.JPG

IMG_9751.JPG

Also, last week was my first time to see so many young people in Sweet Springs. Since it's summer break now, their public swimming pool is open. There are many kids and teenagers

hanging out in the park and the pool. They also have kid's baseball and softball game almost every day in the afternoon. It looks like an interesting community thing, and it also creates a huge contrast: so empty in downtown business area while so packed in the park. I will find time to take photos about it next week.

Thanks all! Keep in touch!

Best,

Zhihan

Hi Zhihan, thank you for the update.

I put stars on about 10 or 11 images that I thought would start conversations for elicitations. Please let me know if you can't see my "stars." I primarily picked street and building scenes, thinking they would start conversations and jog memories. I like the idea of including something from the historical society, but the image you picked was wide and a tough read. I did like baseball and swimming too.

Zhihan, it's best at this point to begin weekly field notes and create a blog. Password protected is fine. A blog allows us to go back and review images and conversations without going to google drive or emails.

Here is a suggested format or outline, which can easily be changed to best work for you. The goal of the notes is to update your committee, to be accountable, and to get advice and feedback:

1   Weekly highlights: what important events occurred? How did you progress?

2   Work issues: Was there anything that stood out? Anything tough you'd like to discuss?

3   Research progress:

4   Goals for the upcoming week

This is a good start, Zhihan. Now create a blog and tell us the password (if you use one) when you send weekly Blog Post 2. Also, feel free to draw attention to particular questions you'd like answered each week.

Good start!

Jackie

Hi, Zhihan.

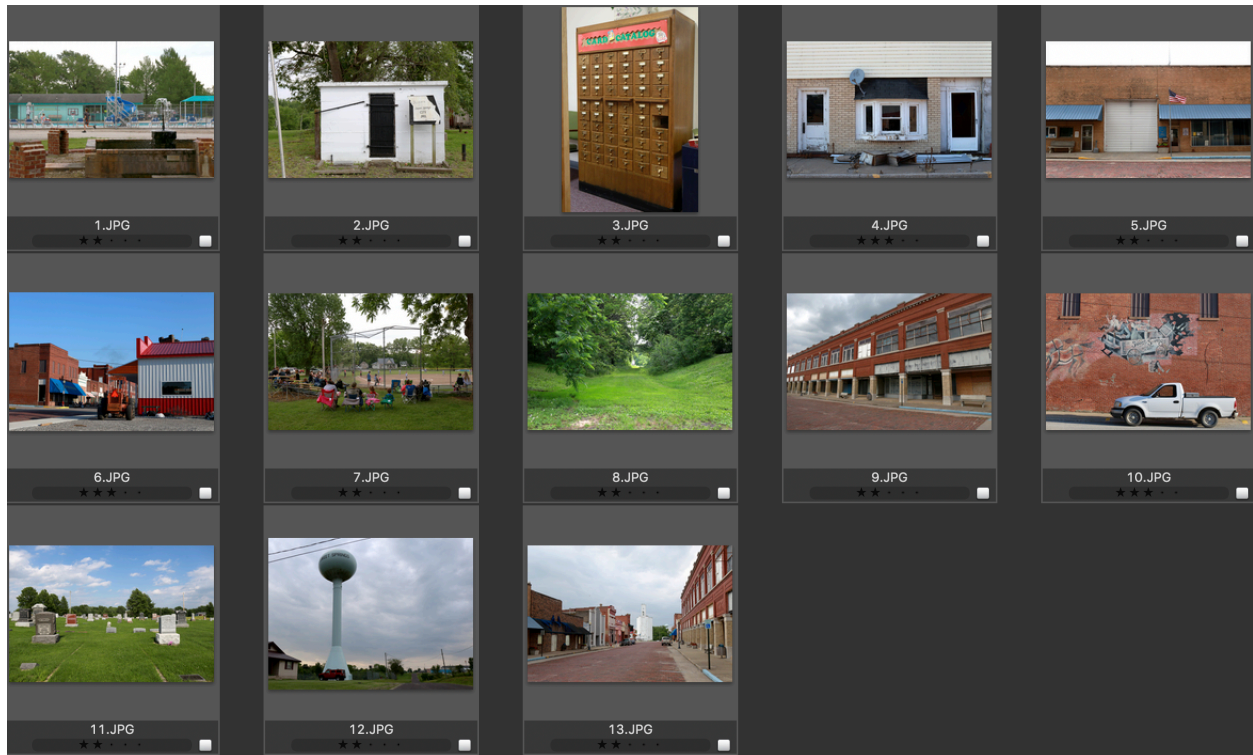You might be able to see Jackie's stars. I do not.

Photos I thought that might be good: 9651, 9668, 9680, 9690, 9729

Jackie has great suggestions as to how to format your field notes.

Brian

Sunday, June 9, 2019

After discussed with my committee, we finally chose 13 photos for the first round elicitation interviews:

Sunday, June 16, 2019

Hi Jackie, Brian and David,

This week I found a pastor, a police and a city employee for my photo elicitation interviews. I met a lady whose name is Jane Perkins, she bought the old movie house inn town. Jane gave me a tour inside the old movie house today, and she told me that she planned to renovate it as a multipurpose building. I took some photos of her and the inside of the building.

Sam Blain found me a lot of old photos of town this week, he also took me to the basement of historical society building. I took pictures of old photos. I will find a week focusing on photographing the current situations of these historical places.

I also did the first elicitation interview with Lindsey Good this week. Lindsey is the owner of Good Cuts Hair Salon in town. She is mostly interested about photos I took in downtown. I interviewed her before without photos, but she didn't talk too much last time. When

she saw these photos, she talked a lot about the changes in downtown. She even recalled that city repainted some buildings in downtown.

Next week I will photograph a church event, have interviews with pastor Kris Raven, police Johnson and city employee. I hope I can also do interviews with Bill and Phyllis, but they're busy with moving out now so not sure yet.

Hope everyone has a good summer time! And thanks for looking at my project! Keep in touch!

Best,

Zhihan

Hi, Zhihan.

Meeting more residents is good for you. Have you narrowed down who you will interview and what photographs you plan to show residents? I know from your last post that we looked at some photos you were considering. Are you adding more people and photos for the elicitation through what you have most recently learned? By meeting more people are you able to determine if any person is better as a photo story? Or as the photo essay of the place?

Brian

Hello Zhihan,

Congratulations on starting the elicitations! I will echo Brian's comments about this and ask if you have narrowed your questions and images for the elicitations. If so, please show us.

It can help to put all your weekly updates on the website with your images. However, I understand that your blog is set for public right now, and adding the committee notes might necessitate a private blog. Your choice.

Comments on the photos: You're working with light extremely well –lovely light! I also enjoy the portraits. However, I would recommend moving more. Think about bending and getting lower, particularly on the detail shots and shots without people. Also, think about shooting tighter sometimes. You may have done that and not included them for this edit, but that is something I notice. And as you continue to shoot, don't forget about moving beyond the observer status, trying to show some intimacy and more personal moments.

Zhihan, I know you want to shoot an essay, but "mini stories" within the essay can make it more personal. I think this is what Brian was getting at also – considering who you want to focus on a bit more.

Jane sounds like a great find. Nice job!

Keep up the good work

-Jackie

Tuesday, June 25, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

I went to the First Baptist Church of Sweet Springs couple times last week and got some photos there. The more I went there, the more I feel how important the religion is for their community. But it becomes a difficult part for me. Since I'm not a Christian, I'm trying to

understand the importance of religion to them, but I still can't fully understand. So far, I'm still trying to find a proper way to present this part.

Jane Perkins introduced me to another man whose name is Joe Campbell. Joe Campbell is working on renovating the old hospital building right now. Joe plans to turn the building in to a Christian Center in the end. Now I'm thinking to combine Bill Koch, Jane Perkins and Joe Campbell together in my project to show how do people in Sweet Springs try to revitalize their town.

Wish all the best!

Zhihan

Tuesday, June 25, 2019

Last week I went to the First Baptist Church of Sweet Springs couple times and got some photos there. Religion is an important part for their community, I'm not a Christian, it is a hard part for me, so I'm still trying to find a proper way to present this part.

I also met another man whose name is Joe Campbell, who is working on renovating the old hospital building right now. After the closure of hospital in 1990s, the building was kind of abandoned and filled with old hospital stuff. Since Joe took over the building, he finally cleaned up the most of stuff inside the building and will start renovating soon. His plan is turning it into a Christian center also involves a day care center inside.

I've interviewed two people so far:

Lindsey Good, the owner of Good Cuts Hair Salon. She moved to Sweet Springs in 2010 and opened her shop in 2012. She was intrigued by photos of downtown Sweet Springs. Because Lindsey likes historical stuff, while downtown Sweet Springs has many historical buildings.

Kris Raven, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Sweet Springs, is original from Austin, Texas. Kris and his wife moved to Sweet Springs around 8 years ago and raising their family here. Kris is mostly interested about the community photo. He said that he believes the community here, which makes him decided to settle down and raise his kids in Sweet Springs.

According to the interviews, I realized their answers are mostly related to their own interests and experiences, like Lindsey likes historical photos and Kris likes community photos. Both of them told me that even the downtown Sweet Springs looks empty and dying, but they saw more and more locals trying to do something to help their town better.

Sunday, July 7, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

Good news first, I got the Zoe Smith Scholarship for my project!

I was about to shoot something on 4th of July, then found that they were having the annual motor championship. It lasted for three days and racers are from all over the country. Besides, they also have a motor club. The host family and some of board members are local Sweet Springs. I feel it is part of important community things and I am also interested about such a big event happened in a small town.

Since next week, I plan to focus on old building renovating things in town, because these are important for the town. I will follow more on Bill, Phyllis, Jane and Joe. I also plan to contact people who work in city hall about it.

All the best!

Zhihan

Thank you, Zhihan.

The motor sports event seems like a nice change of pace. How did it change the look of the town on that day? Literal motor sports is nice, like the panning photo of the gator, just curious about how things looked different during this short time.

Many nice images. The two I responded to the most: man on phone & the pledge of allegiance. Note, though, that being on a phone isn't much of an action. Many of the images showed people from the back or far away. Sense of place is important, but so is intimacy. I do like the tight photo of the race car driver for that reason.

Brian

Thanks for the reply, Brian!

The motor sports was on the other side of the town, but during the time, the downtown area was still quiet and empty. I kind of want to show the contrast but I have no idea of how to do it… Also, the man was actually not on the phone. He was a local Sweet Springs racer and he was maintaining his vehicle at that time. I got some other photos of him with actions, but I like the light of the photo I chose. I might need help with editing photos though.

I plan to reshoot some church service photos, because I'm not satisfied with the church photos I took last time. Since church is an important thing in the community, I want to present it. But I'm totally not familiar with any church things. Do you have any suggestions on photographing in church?

Many thanks!

Zhihan

Monday, July 15, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

Last week I took the FAA drone pilot test and got my license with a high score, finally an official FAA drone pilot now! I am excited about it and planning on borrowing a drone to make some drone shots in Sweet Springs.

I printed out some photos and tried to place them, made me feel that I might need to change my project a little bit. Since my original plan is dividing my project into three parts: history, environmental portraits and community. However, when I was placing photos on the floor and playing with them, I feel that maybe the part of environmental portraits does not work well. I feel those portraits look better when they go with some detail shots. Instead of environmental portrait part, now I'm thinking to add another part for revitalization. There're three main projects going on in Sweet Springs now, Bill's historical building, old movie house and old hospital. They could be put together to show how local folks try to revitalize their town. Also, I'm still thinking if I should make an individual part for church, separate from community part. Because compared to other community things, church plays an important role in town. I roughly arranged the photos which I got so far, and put them on the wall. I will definitely shoot more. This is just for me to see how these photos work with each other. I attached them with this email. I don't know if the individual part for church will work, I'd like to know your suggestions. Thanks so much! And have a good week!

Best,

Zhihan

Sunday, July 28, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

I interviewed the librarian Janet Scott, Jane Perkins and Joe Campbell. Jane mentioned the importance of church in their community. Jane and Joe talked a lot about their vision of renovating old buildings. However, both of them do not have detailed plan, detailed schedule, and they don't even have funding for their project. From my perspective, I don't know what the town will be in the future. I do admire what they are trying to do, but I don't believe that only passion can save everything. I feel the contraction between their passion and the reality. I don't know if I should present my feeling through the project. This is just my personal feeling and I felt that the community members do not think the same way as I do.

I almost finished my internship in Missouri Business Alert. Since next month, I will spend more time on shooting my project. The good news is: the owner of a coffee shop in Sweet Springs said she could provide a room for me.

Wish all the best,

Zhihan

Hello Zhihan,

I'm sorry for my slow response. I have a lot to catch up on, so please pardon the long email.

I'm glad to hear you've decided to do a section on "renovation" rather than "environmental portraits." Renovation is more story driven and is an area of interest for you. It

makes more sense. You can easily put your environmental portraits into any section of the project.

I think you need to keep shooting. You have history, renovation and community (I'd put church into community I think). I'll echo what Brian said about needing more intimacy. Many of your images of people are sides/backs, portraits, landscapes and details. The landscapes are particularly nice (the hands on the cards, the gas station and the Food sign). But I'd now like to see you capture natural, intimate images that show who these subjects are and how they feel. Images that come to mind are the woman announcer in the red jacket sitting down. I learn about how she feels, and the image has a mood or feeling. I also like the man with beautiful light who appears to be on the phone – and the kids/pledge of allegiance. Get closer to people and work on intimacy and moments, shots when subjects don't notice you. You did so well with the racing, and I think you could find more situations where people gather (Labor Day, start of school, etc).

You asked for suggestions on how to shoot in church. You have nice still life images from church, and now I urge you to photograph the people at the service. Get permission from the pastor/minister, and photograph parishioners and the minister. Try not to move around too much, don't use a flash, and bring a long lens (I used to take a 300 and monopod, but this church may be small enough for a 200). Find a spot near the front (against the wall, on your knees or in a chair at the edge). Shoot peoples' faces, and then make sure to get names. I do think you should return for another service.

Can you follow someone revitalizing? I'd like to see more images of them doing or supervising the work. Perhaps you could also find old photos of those particular buildings as a contrast.

You said that you think passion alone can't save the town and that some residents aren't realistic (hope I'm reading this correctly). My suggestion is to shoot what you see. You need to respect your subjects and photograph what they are doing, but I suggest also photographing things that present a contrast to you.

Zhihan, huge congratulations on getting your drone license. Great news. And congratulations on the scholarship. I'm so pleased for you. Way to go!

Last question: How are the elicitations coming? You talked about two interviews earlier, but I haven't heard much since then.

Good luck on finding a place to stay from the coffee shop owner. I hope it works!

BEST

- Jackie

Monday, August 12, 2019

Hi Jackie, Brian and David,

Sorry for my late field note. I was busy with my last week of intern, traveling to three different towns in Missouri. Now I finally finished my intern. I contacted the coffee shop owner, hopefully I'll be able to move to Sweet Springs in the coming week.

I uploaded some drone shots I took last week:
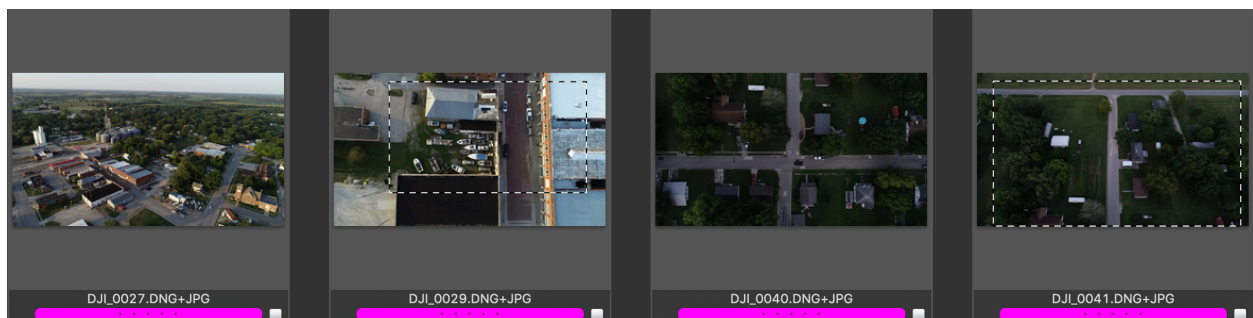
I will try to get more intimate photos. I'm thinking to follow some specific people, spending more time with them so that I could get close images of people. For the renovation part, since Jane and Joe both have full time works, they only work on the buildings when they have free time. I will find the time to shoot when they're working on their buildings. Also, they're fine with me to follow them to their houses and farm, and maybe sometimes follow them to their work. Especially Joe works for Sweet Springs Ambulance District. Since Sweet Springs doesn't have hospital and clinic anymore, I think it is important for me if I could follow Joe when he is working.

I'm going back to take photos in church next week and got permission from the pastor. Also, I'm working on analyzing elicitation interviews. Hopefully I could send the report of it in two weeks.

I feel that I am stuck at a point since I've been busy with shooting many projects for Business Alert in the past month. I'm trying to refresh my mind, so I went down to other places, met new people and did a little practice. I uploaded some photos about my practice, it is not related to my project, but if you're interested, please take a look at it! Here's the link:

https://existingordisappearing.wordpress.com/2019/08/12/a-little-practice/

Wish all the best!

Zhihan

You have some nice drone photos. Without the drone it may have been difficult to discover the boats. Interesting. Something you mentioned helps point out a unique problem in smaller communities. Joe works for the ambulance district. There is no hospital. Not even a clinic. Access to health care in rural areas is a large problem and this topic could be explored

more against the backdrop of Sweet Springs. With this focus you might find some interesting stories.

Brian

Hi Zhihan,

I love Brian's idea about exploring health care access, particularly with the link to Joe and his job. Luckily, both Joe and Jane will allow greater access.

The drone shots set the scene well and show just how small Sweet Springs is. There is still surprisingly a lot of concrete.

Zhihan, I can feel that you're stuck. I think it would help for us to meet next week, when classes start. Can we set up a time? Maybe 2:15 or 2:30 on Wednesday August 21? However, I'm open to other times. I'd like to looks through all your shoots with you and think about what you have and what you need.

Thank you for showing us the practice shots. I like that you're closer to people, getting to know them a bit.

Glad you got a place in Sweet Springs! Wonderful.

Jackie

Thanks Jackie and Brian! And I'm willing to meet 2:30 next Wednesday. I'll bring my photos.

Thanks again!

-Zhihan

Sunday, August 18, 2019

Hi Jackie, Brian and David,

After I talked to several friends about my worries, they told me that my worries about taking photos for a different religion should not be barrier for me but it could be an advantage for me. So I kind of changed my opinions to their religion, tried to get close to them and understand more. I spent couple hours with Jane today to talk about religion. I feel a little better now.

Jane introduced me to a Sweet Springs high school teacher, she is fine with me to talk photos in her class. I'll contact school to get the permission so that I could photograph in school. Also, a bunch of high school students went to visit the old hospital today. Since they're planning to put a youth center in old hospital building, some high school kids will help to do some works inside the building. Jane said they will probably start working inside the building after school this week or next week and I will go and take photos.

The coffee shop owner Lindsay got an available room for me finally, so I will move to Sweet Springs on Thursday, August 22.

Wish all the best!

Zhihan

Hello,

Zhihan and I just spent a while looking through her work and talking about ideas for her project. We plan to meet again next week when she can bring a larger batch of digital images (we looked though about 20 small prints).

She's moving to Sweet Springs tomorrow! Wow.

She's still struggling a bit with the structure of the project and how she feels about the town. I think she's beginning to feel a bit more uncertain about the future of the town.

So I've advised to her to shoot, shoot, shoot this week – and then meet me again in a week. Go out early, with the sunrise. Reshoot some of those cool buildings and settings that you shot for elicitation. Go to the high school and meet teenagers. How do they feel about their future in this town? What do they do for fun, etc? Find events for Labor Day weekend. Shoot more renovation. Go find a family and spend time with them at dinner, outside, with kids, etc.

Structure:

-She had talked about 3 parts: history, renovation, community (including religion).

-or is it two parts: The town and its renovation, and the community

-or is it a few stories

Go find out this week Zhihan. You've shot a lot already. Now figure out how you're forming this and telling the story.

Good luck!

Jackie

Sunday, August 25, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

Since I moved to Sweet Springs this week, I got more time to just walk around the town and talked to people. It kind of changed my view to see the town. It is so quiet at night, most of time the only sound I heard is dogs barking. I can even see the Dipper in the sky. I tried to shoot it, but I'm not satisfied with my shoot, so I'm still looking for a better spot to shoot stars.

I found some historic photos of Sweet Springs, and combined one of them with my drone shot.
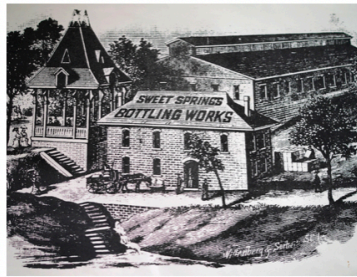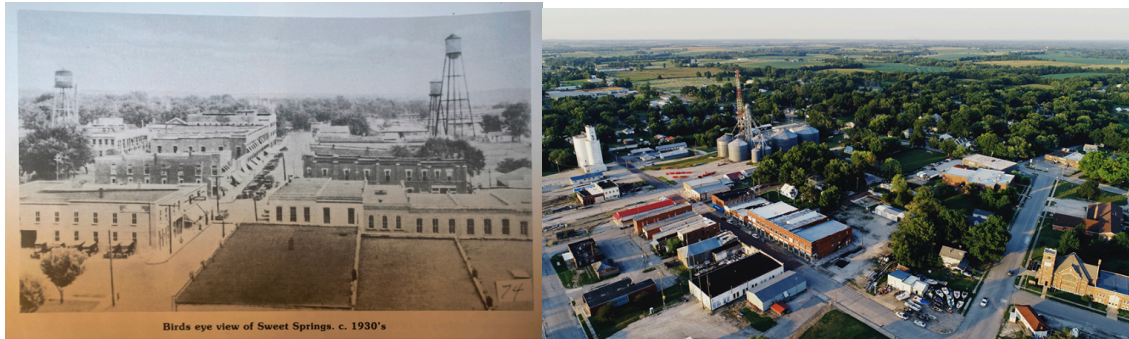
I met Debbi Gaddy, she is the owner of Butterflies & Lilacs, it is a boutique shop. Her shop is across the street of Sweet Springs Library, pretty close to downtown. It was actually my first time to see her shop opened. She told me that she only opens her shop when she has an appointment.

I also went to Andy's Boat Shop. Andy is originally from Illinois. I forgot the name of town where he came from, so I'll check with him again next week. He has been owning this boat shop in Sweet Springs for 14 years. Andy said there are around 15 to 20 local customers, there're actually more customers from other places, like Marshall, Sedalia, Independence, some of them even from Illinois.

People were working on old hospital Saturday. Joe brought his wife and his kids to help. They fixed part of the ceilings in lobby, and cleaned up the front yard. Kevin Browder came to

help as well. He said he thought it is important for their community since it will provide a space for kids to learn and hangout. Then I talked to Summer, she is Joe's daughter. Summer is 12 years old, in 6th grade in elementary school. She said she basically had nothing to do after school and even during weekends.

Spent some time with my friend Mary Jo.

Wish all the best!

Zhihan

Monday, September 2, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

I shot too many photos last week. It is hard for me to select and edit them, so I did a rough selection and uploaded the screenshots.

I went to high school and took some photos of their sports teams. I also went to a 4-year-old girl's birthday party, I used my Polaroid to take three photos in the party. I kind of like these polaroid photos so I was thinking to include them into my project as well. I took photos of a girl who works in the cheese store. She graduated from Sweet Springs High School last year. I got a quote from her which I like it a lot, because her feeling about the town is different than most of other people I talked to. Here's the quote:

"Basically, I like living here, but it's very small so very little experience you have here. But I'm kind of stuck here, because the person I'm like in a long time committed relationship has farm grown, so I have to be here."

I took too many photos on Jane's farm, which makes me hard to edit them.

I went to Sunday service in Christian Church of Sweet Springs. It was also my first time to see the communion. I really like the photos I took in church this time, I think they're better than what I took in Baptist Church.

I am contacting the principal of high school to see if I could get the permission to shoot in high school. The head coach of Sweet Springs football team is fine with me shooting their Friday night games, so I'm going to do that!

Since I'm going to my friend's wedding at Baltimore this Thursday, what I planned for this week is finish the analysis of interviews and trying to narrow down the photos for project. Thanks!

Zhihan

Screenshot:
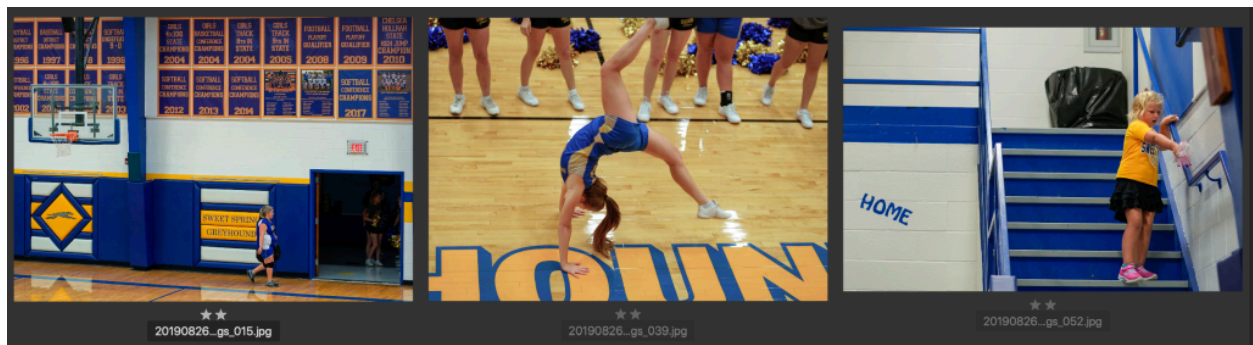
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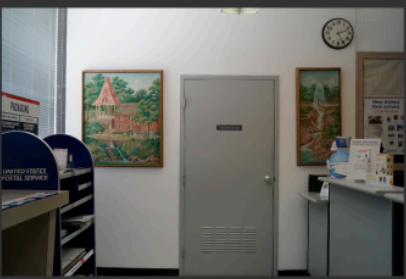
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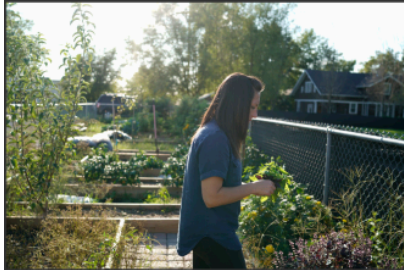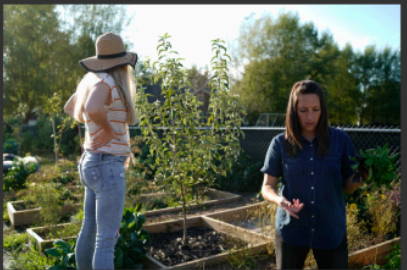
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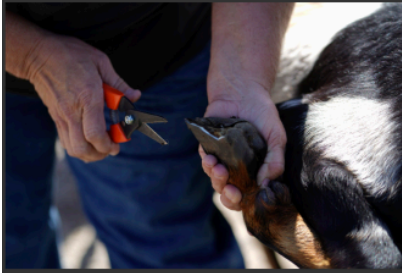
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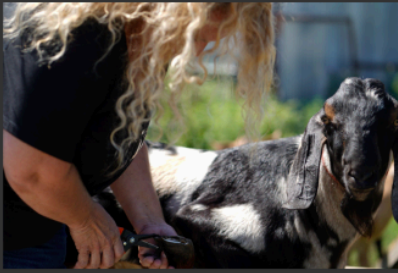
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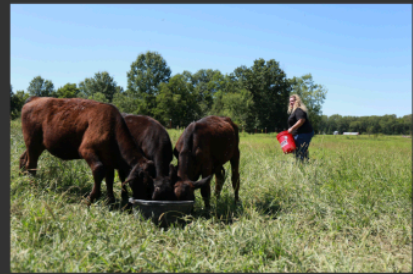
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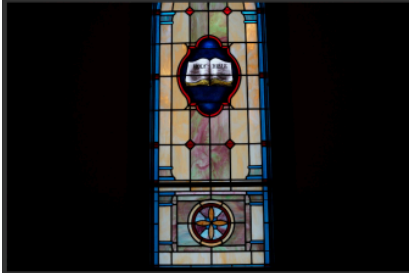
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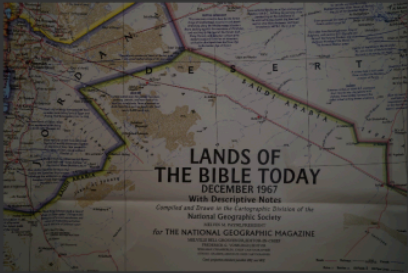
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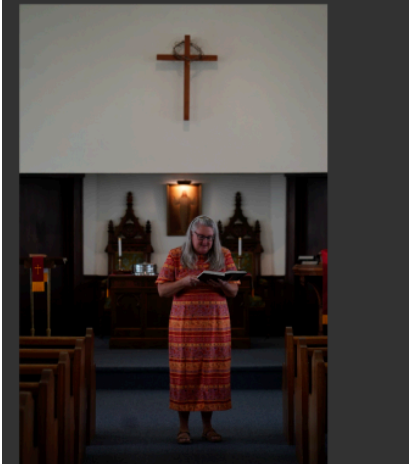
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Hi Zhihan,

When will you next come to Columbia? I would like to set aside a good chunk of time so that you and I can meet to look through your work. We should start to do a tight preliminary edit.

This week or next are good for me. I'd also like to see some of the research you've done and talk about the article you'll write.

I have some comments on specific images from your last post. I do think we need to very soon start putting them into a final project so that you can start filling in any gaps and finalizing the shooting.

-I like 89, the circle of people on the volleyball court with the flag in the background. It sets a scene and feels like small town Missouri.

-I prefer 43 or 48 of the birthday party. They show moments, spontaneity and several people. There is more complexity to these images as well.

-I kind of like 50, the older mailbox slots.

-8, EV parking is a nice frame. It shows the town in a modern light, a different angle.

-277 or 293 (with the baby) have an intimacy that you need. I'd like to see more emotion like this in some other shots. I'm not sure which I prefer. I think it will depend on what else you have and what you need in the end.

-garden: I think 307 is lovely, with the light. However, I like seeing someone else in the frame as well, so I'd consider 308.

-367 and 397 (scene setters) may end up working in the final project.

-GOATS! I particularly like 507, the feeding shot, but you have many shots that could work. Are you going to do a small story on her and not just include one or two? You might be able to do that. This is one of your stronger shoots. You shot moments and interaction and not as many portraits, which I like to see.

-There are several you can pick from the church scene as well (the group singing at the front, the boy, a detail, etc).

-I understand that you like the quote from the cheese shop worker, but the photo doesn't work as well for me. She looks like a customer. However, it may be the small size of the screenshot. I'd like to see the shoot in person.

-What's the story with the emergency room and the empty parking lot? I like the feeling of bleakness, like it is an abandoned hospital. Is this the hospital that people were fixing up in your last blog post?

Finally, I think it might look strange to just mix in a few polaroids from one event. If you had a theme to them, or a reason, it would fit better.

Zhihan, let's set up a time to meet in person!

 BEST

- Jackie

Thanks Jackie! I'm sorry I haven't sent the field note for last week. I'll be back to town tonight or tomorrow, but we're going to Boonville for MPW setup Friday. I'd like to meet with you, I think anytime on Wednesday works for me! Thanks again!

Best,

Zhihan

Wednesday, October 2, 2019

Dear Jackie, Brian and David,

I'm planning on starting the second round elicitation interviews soon. I selected 14 photos and made a question list.

Since my research questions are about the stereotype of rural communities:

RQ2: What do community members in Sweet Springs think about the stereotypes of rural communities?

RQ3: How do visuals enhance or change the stereotype of rural communities in people from Sweet Springs.

I'd like to throw out the labels of rural communities to my subjects, and ask how they think about these labels:

· High poverty rate

· Lack of infrastructure, such as public transportation, water supply, etc.

· Limited sources for education

· High rates of health problems

Then I'll ask how do they think about these labels, comparing with the current situation in Sweet Springs. Then I'll ask them questions based on the following question list:

1. Do you think these labels reflect your community fairly? If not, what other things should be included.

2. There are also some other photographs about your community. Is there any other photo attracting you this time? Why?

3. Could you use couple words or sentences to describe how do you feel about these photos (photo they select)

4. Do you think these photographs represent your community accurately and fairly? If not, what part of your community is missing?

5. Among all of these photographs, which one is the most accurate description of your community?

Here are the 14 photos I selected:
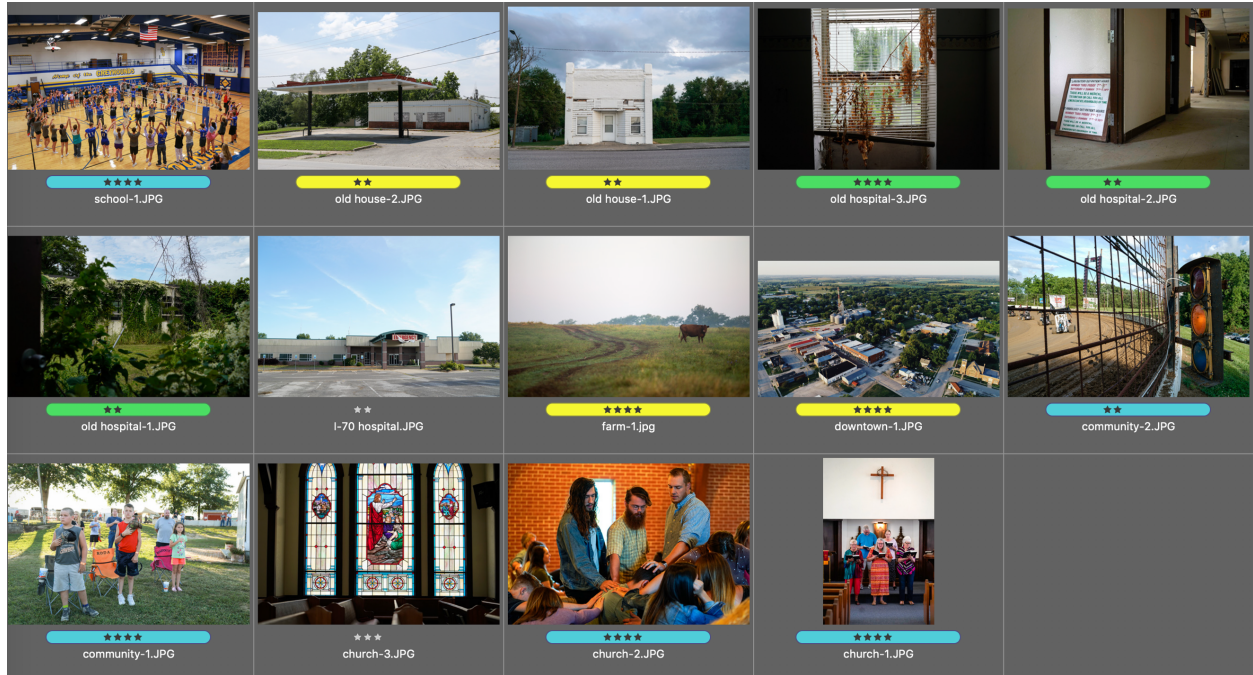
But I'd love to discuss it in detail with any of you before I start doing the interviews.

Please let me know if you would be available this week! Thanks so much!

Best,

Zhihan

Zhihan,

I just saw the last sentence, below the images – asking for time with us. Did you already

do these interviews?

These are different images and different questions than the first time you did elicitations.

I assume you're asking the same people, so that you have some basis of comparison.

Here's what I like:

-you're using images that you plan to use in your final edit (images we edited together

two weeks ago). I like that you're getting opinions on your chosen images

-I like that you're getting specific with the labels used for stereotyping of rural communities. This is direct and honest. It will be interesting to hear reactions, but I hope it doesn't hurt relationships with your subjects.

Question:

-how will you use both sets of elicitations and compare them? All the questions and images are different.

Good choice of images!

BEST

– Jackie

Chapter 3: Evaluation

It has been almost a year and half since I first visited Sweet Springs. In the beginning, I was attracted to this town because it seemed to be a dying town. All of the data I found and the research I did also supported my first impression. However, the longer I stayed in Sweet Springs, the more people I met and the more information I gathered, my impressions of this town have changed a few times.

Bill Koch was the first person I focused on at the early stage of this project. He and his wife Phyllis Koch moved out of Sweet Springs over twenty years ago because of limited business opportunities. However, when they reached retirement age, they decided to move back and spent a majority of their money on renovating one of the famous historic buildings in downtown Sweet Springs. They changed my impression of Sweet Springs. That was the first time when Sweet Springs was not a dying town in my mind anymore, but a home for people trying to change the current situation, to save their town. Thus, I produced a video about their story last year.

Besides Bill and Phyllis Koch, I made strong connections with people in the Sweet Springs Historic Society. Most of their members are elderly people and have been living in Sweet Springs all their lives. They collected historic documents and items from local people, the International Shoe Company, old newspapers and so on. They also wrote many articles about the history of the town. After talking to some of historic society members and local residents, I got the impression that this town has a long history and people in town really respect their history.

This impression affected me a lot when I was proposing this project. I was curious about the history, the present and the future of Sweet Springs. I was hoping that I could document their

beloved town for them. Whether or not the town exists or disappears in the end, I hope I can document their lives in their homeland and how their lives changed from the past to the present.

Sweet Springs is only an hour drive from Columbia, easy for me to make a round trip in a day. However, I still decided to live part-time in Sweet Springs beginning in August. That was probably the best decision I made for my project. It is not only because I could spend more time photographing my project, but I also felt more connected to the community. I had chances to see sunrise and sunset in Sweet Springs, to sit next to the lake watching a full moon rise, and to walk around the town waving to people. I also went to people's house, went to their farm and went to churches with them.

When I was living on the second floor of Old School Coffee Shop, I hung out often with people in the coffee shop. Many local customers walked into the coffee shop, said hello to me and commented something like, "I've seen you walking around the town many times with a camera. What are you working on?" Or sometimes, "I've watched your video about Bill before, nice to see you here." I am really happy with the connections I made by living in town, and I realized that more and more locals noticed me during these months.

However, not just happy and good things happened during this process; a new problem also came up at the same time. Since many people are working on different renovation projects in town, and renovation is also a part of my project, I spent time talking to them. Gradually, I realized that many of them only have visions, but no plans. They do not have a schedule or even a budget for renovation, and they often pray to God, believing that God will provide them with everything they need.

This left me with complicated feelings about the town. The motivations of those wishing to restore the town are noble, but their plans seem only partially conceived. I feel that I have more things I need to present, but all of the things are out of my control.

My feeling about this town also affects the direction of my project. Once my feelings became complicated, I felt like I could not handle all of these feelings. I was frustrated.

As a photographer, I knew that once I determined the direction of my project, the things I emphasized and the way I edited would work together to present the story. However, during this process, I tried to become part of the community, which caused all of the complicated feelings. These feelings affected my direction and made me drift away from my original plan.

Now, when I look back, I realize that all of the feelings and emotions I had during this process are normal and real. The fact that Sweet Springs is dying at this moment is real, that locals are trying to save their town is also real, and that the effort they made may not have any results is also real. When all of this happened in front of me, I did not stay on the path I set out for myself but tried to present all of the situations. I think this is why I feel my project is out of my control and makes me frustrated.

Photographs:

I did two videos about Sweet Springs last year for my Picture Story and Photo Essay class. In the beginning, I thought about continuing with video. But I finally ended up doing a photo project because the subject of my project is not a single person or a family, but a whole community. Also, this project is more like a photo essay, but not a picture story. My plan was to document the situation of Sweet Springs community in different aspects. It would be hard to find

a focus point in video, but it would be easier for me to photograph and edit works to present the different aspects of the community as a photo essay.

I had good connections with a couple people in Sweet Springs before I officially started doing my project, which was an advantage for me. Since it is a project about the whole community, I am happy I was able to talk to a lot of local residents of different ages and occupations. I want to know how they feel about their community and why they choose to live their lives there. I believe that talking to more people could help me understand this community better. Thanks to the connections I made last year, these local residents referred me to other local people, and then the new people I knew referred me to more locals. I created my own network in town and I have many information sources. Once something interesting or important happened, there were always people who came and told me.

Interview:

I chose to do photo-elicitation interviews for my research because people would have more reactions to photographs. When doing photo-elicitation interviews, it is helpful to record interview subjects' reaction and their perspectives to photographs.

Some research about photo-elicitation I found mentioned that people reacted more to buildings than people in the photographs. When I was doing the photo-elicitation interviews, I realized that is true. Photographs of places actually reminded interview subjects of their old memories and old stories that happened in those locations. Some of my interview subjects told me that they felt more connections to photos of places.

The photo-elicitation interviews actually helped me improve my project. I found my blind spot after first round photo-elicitation interviews. It made me realize how important

religion is for the community, so I started to take more photographs inside churches or of people going to church.

I also felt that my interviewing skills improved a lot after I did so many interviews with people. During the first round of elicitations, I gave subjects so much freedom to talk about what they think and to tell their stories. Some of my interview subjects are talkative, like Jane Perkins and Mary Jo, so they drifted far away from our original topic and it was hard for me to drag them back.

However, after reviewing my first round of interviews, I changed my interviewing style. For those people who do not talk much, I learned how to ask questions in different ways to make them talk more. For those people who usually talk too much, I learned how to politely stop them from rambling and moved them back to the topic. I have more confidence in controlling the pace of interviews now.

I am also getting better at finding new questions which were related to my research topic during the interviews. I made a sequence for the questions I must ask before interviews. Every time I noticed a new question I needed to ask during the interview, I took a quick note next to the original question which related to the new question. In this way, I did not need to immediately ask them as soon as the question came to mind. The advantages are, firstly, it did not negatively impact my pace; secondly, I would have more time to polish the new questions; thirdly, sometimes subjects answered the new questions naturally without me having to ask.

In general, I still feel that there are more things I could have done better.

There were some photographic opportunities I missed during the process. I was still somewhat afraid of approach to new people or ask for permission. There was a time I saw some

people wearing black, standing in the cemetery. I wanted to ask for permission to take photos of the funeral, but I was also nervous. However, after I finally decided to walk to them and ask permission, the family members had already left. I have improved somewhat in talking to strangers, but I think I still have a long way to go. Especially as a photographer, this is a thing I need to overcome.

Also, for those local people who I am close with, I appreciated that they treated me as a friend or even as a family member, but I had other problems when I tried to take photographs of them. They wanted to talk to me all the time and share what happened in their lives recently. It was hard for me to balance my positions as a friend and a photographer. When they tried to have a conversation with me, I felt bad taking photographs, which made me miss some photo opportunities.

Overall, I am pleased with the development of my project. This is not a perfect project. I have improved, but I also made some mistakes. All the things I learned from doing this project will help me to do other projects in the future.

Chapter 4: Physical Evidence

Please refer to PDF file *Our Own Land* to view the final edit of photographs.

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

50

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."

Existing or Disappearing

Sweet Springs, a rural community in Missouri

Project Proposal

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University of Missouri

Spring 2019

COMMITTEE:

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David Rees

Existing or Disappearing:

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Project Proposal

Introduction

Since the reform and opening up was conducted in December 1978, new market principles were introduced to China. The market was opened for foreign investment while entrepreneurs were allowed to start businesses. China's gross domestic product and economy were increased remarkably.

Besides the remarkable economic growth, many significant social changes have taken place in China as well, especially in urban areas. Because of this, China entered a process of rapid urbanization that is still going on now.

National Scheme of Village Relocation and Urbanization is one of the significant changes caused by the reform and opening-up, which "imposed a large-scale and continuous rural land expropriation and exercised unified rural planning to achieve rapid urbanization" (Huang, Xu, Qin, & Gao, 2018, p. 1). When urban areas expanded, especially cities and metropolitan areas along the east coast, and economic structure switched from primary sector into secondary sector, factories were in need of employment. People migrated from rural to urban areas to do factory labor. Thus, a large number of villages are shrinking or have merged, which caused the number of villages to decline (Huang, et.al, 2018).

In recent years, China started to reconstruct rural towns. Meanwhile, Chinese media focused attention on the reconstruction of towns, called "building our new towns". New towns were usually built near the old towns, and new roads were constructed to connect to each with thousands and thousands of identical houses. Younger people moved and found job opportunities

in new towns. However, there are still many older people staying in old and disappearing towns and farms.

The following infographic shows how the urbanization rate changed in China since 1949, when the new China was founded:

Urbanization in China
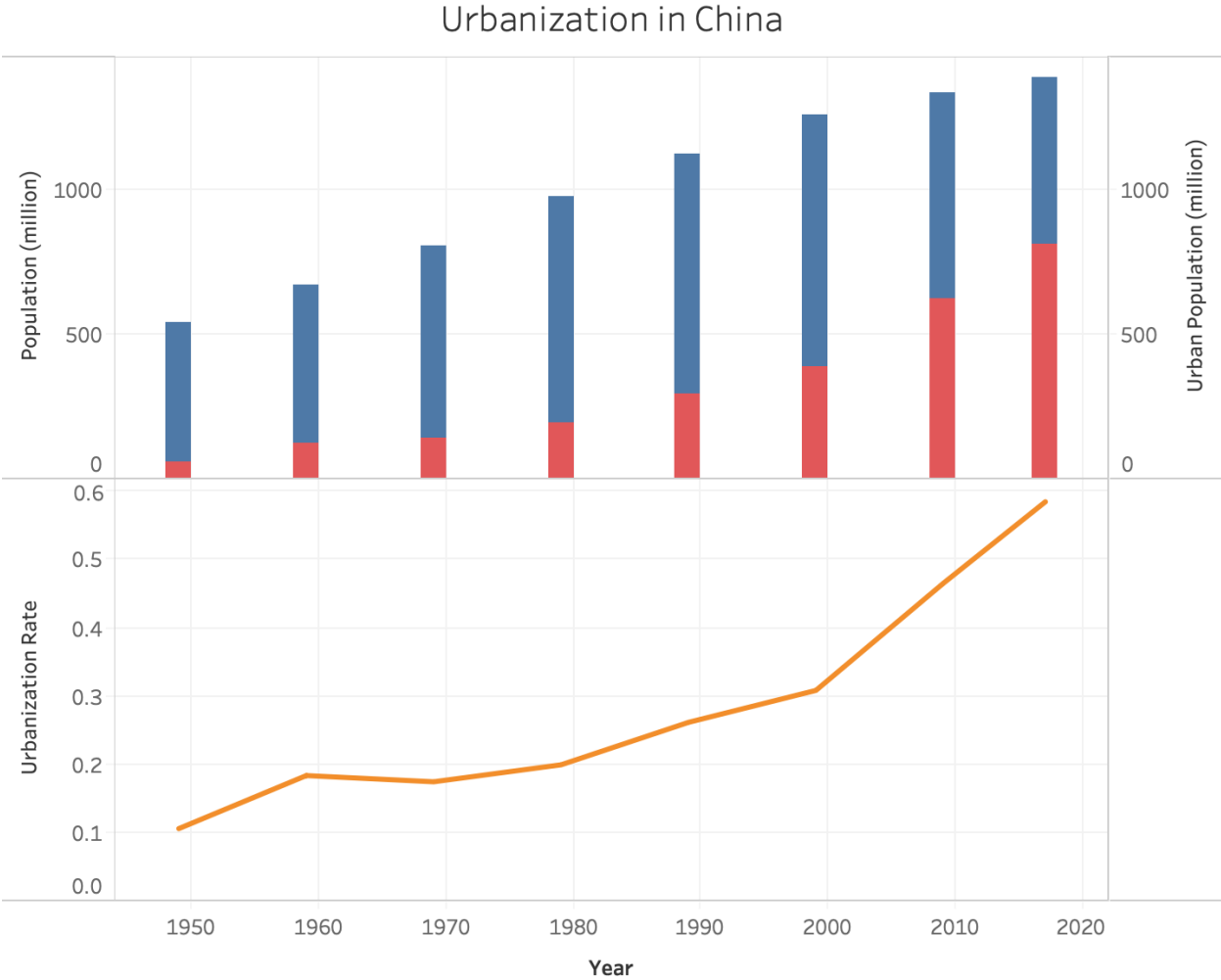
(Red column: urban population. Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China)

However, as a person who was born and raised in a city, I never realized the situation of dying towns in China until six years ago, when my grandma took me to visit a small village where she was born and raised. The first time I went to that village, I had a strong feeling of

death. The village is surrounded by mountains, and there is only one muddy road leading to the village. Many broken houses in the village are abandoned by their former residents. Only a few older people live in town with their grandchildren, whose parents usually work in bigger towns or cities. There is no clinic, no grocery and no school - only one small convenience store with very few goods. My grandmother told me that electricity is sometimes cut off in summer. Locals there live a simple life, waking up and working at sunrise while resting at sunset.

In the summer of 2018, I returned to my grandmother's town again to take photos. Compared to what I saw six years ago, I noticed more abandoned houses and fewer people. The convenience store in the village always keeps the door closed now, until someone knocks on the owner's door to ask for something.

Before visiting my grandmother's town, the rapid urbanization in China only existed in my high school textbook and as news on television. I had no idea of how it affected people's daily life. Once I visited this and other towns and I did research about the situation of rural towns in China, I started to rethink this problem.

This village piques my interest about rural areas. When I came to the U.S., I explored rural areas in Missouri. I saw some broken houses and empty streets, and I wondered where the people have gone. I went to several small towns and noticed that there were obvious similarities and differences among small towns in China and America. For instance, I can still see many young people in small towns in Missouri, but it is rare to see young people or middle-aged people in small towns in China.

However, I still had a feeling that rural towns in U.S. are also poor, broken and dying, until I met some people in Sweet Springs, Missouri.

Sweet Springs, located in mid-Missouri with a population of 1,484, is one of the small towns I explored. I chose Sweet Springs as the starting point for my project because I felt that this town was also dying.

In the early 1900s, International Shoe Company employed nearly 400 people in the town. One citizen of Sweet Springs told a reporter friend: the company was "largely responsible for bringing Sweet Springs out of the decline which it suffered in the early 1900s." However, the shoe company shut down in the early 1980's. People had to move out of town for new jobs, leaving the downtown business area mostly vacant.

I began to contact people in Sweet Springs and made connections with them, trying to portray the dying situation of the town. I met Bill Koch and Phyllis Koch. The Kochs moved out of Sweet Springs 23 years ago because of the decaying business opportunities in Sweet Springs. The couple said that even after they moved away, they still considered Sweet Springs their hometown. In 2018, they decided to move back and bought one of three locally famous historical buildings to renovate.

The more time I spent in the town and meeting residents, the more I realized that I was wrong: Sweet Springs is not dying. Even though the population and economy have been decreasing since 1980s, people didn't abandon their town. On the contrary, they are trying to save their hometown. Like the Kochs, many believe they should come back to the place they called home. They are making efforts to revitalize their once prosperous town.

Based on my personal experiences, I wondered if I have my own stereotype of rural towns like Sweet Springs. I was considering rural towns as a place which is poor, dying and people trying to leave. I thought my understanding of rural areas was affected by media. Rural areas were depicted by media as broken and dying places. What we think about their life might

be different than their real living situation. Thus, I would like to do my project about people in rural areas, trying to document and present the real situation of rural communities.

Professional Skills Component

My professional component will consist of an independent photo project about local residents in Sweet Springs. I plan to spend five months, from June 1 to October 30, 2019 documenting people who live in Sweet Springs. I am curious about different age groups, different occupations and social circles. Because of a previous video project I did in Sweet Springs, I already have good connections with local residents.

Since this will be an independent photo project and Sweet Springs is one hour away from Columbia, I will stay in Columbia so that I can review my work and my project with my committee members on a regular basis.

The project will be turned into a photo book, including around 40 photographs from Sweet Springs. The whole book will be divided into three parts: history, environmental portraits and community.

1) History: re-photograph historical sites in Sweet Springs and old photographs in the local Historical Society Museum. The history part will include old photographs and stuff from the International Shoe Company. The International Shoe Company opened its factory in Sweet Springs in the early 1900s, fulfilling orders for the military. There were nearly 400 people hired by the shoe company. The shoe company used to be the most important economy in town. So, when it shut down in the early 1980s many people left town to seek work elsewhere and the downtown business area became

mostly vacant. It is important to show how people's lives changed because of the closure of the shoe company.

2) Environmental portraits: eight to ten environmental portraits of community members with different ages and occupations. The following people will be included in this part: Bill Koch, owner of the Market, which is the only grocery store in town. The bartender in Lastchance Saloon which is the only bar in town. A pastor in Church, because church is an important thing in this community. There are around 7 churches in town with population of 1,484. The librarian in Sweet Springs Library. There is a small library in town with some old computers, and they are still use a card catalogue to manage books.

3) Community: scenes of the town, its community members' daily lives, church, some events in the community, boy scouts and girl scouts, children and school life. I will try to take some drone photographs to show how the town looks. Also, I will photograph local people's connection with their church. There is only one school in Sweet Springs which houses their elementary school, middle school and high school together, so the school life will also be the part of this project.

Besides the photo book, I also plan to put ten to twelve printed photographs in town. I will contact people in town to check where I can place my photographs. The proper places I consider for now is either Historical Society Museum or the Miller Street in downtown.

Timeline:

June 1 – June 7: Taking photographs for the first-round photo-elicitation interviews.

June 7 – June 15: Doing the first-round photo-elicitation interviews.

June 1 – June 15: Finding subjects for project.

June 7 – October 31: Photographing and editing.

- June 7 – August 15: First stage of photographing and editing, take photographs for all three parts of my project, make a rough edit, review with my committee.

- August 18 - September 23: Second stage of photographing and editing, keep photographing and editing photos based on the review from the first stage, review with my committee.

- October 1 – 28: Third stage of photographing and editing, based on the review from the second stage, make changes in photographing and editing, write captions and prologue.

- October 29 – 31: Design the photo book after editing work is done.

August 1 – August 7: Doing the second-round photo-elicitation interviews.

September 1 – September 7: Doing the third-round photo-elicitation interviews.

September 1 – September 30: Write research analysis.

September 1: Start contacting relevant publication to see the possibility of publishing my project.

November 4 – 6: Final review for chair.

November 11 – 15: Final review for committee members.

November 18 – 22: Project defense.

Equipment:

I have a Canon 6D with a 24-70 mm f/4 lens and a 50mm f/1.4 lens, and two flashes. I will also be able to check out equipment from photojournalism locker. Thus, I will have enough gear to use for my project. Also, I will check out a drone to get some drone shots of the town.

Budget:

The following is a rough estimate of budget for this project:

Editing software: $150 ($30*5mo).

Photo papers & printing: $300

Hard Drive: $100

Memory Cards: $60 ($20*3)

Transportation: $800

Drone Insurance: $270 ($90*3)

Total: $1,680

I will communicate with my committee members weekly, especially my chair Jackie Bell, including detailed field notes of my research and photography, to make sure everything is progressing.

Theoretical Framework

The framing theory was first put forward by Erving Goffman in his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on Organization of Experience* in 1974. Under the framing theory, people could be affected by what is happening around them through their primary framework (Goffman, 1974). There are two kinds of primary frameworks which have influence on people: natural frameworks and social frameworks. Natural framework is about things happening naturally without any influence by social forces, while social framework is usually driven with purposes by people (Goffman, 1974).

Framing theory is usually considered to be close to agenda setting theory, because they both focus on media's effect on audience. "Framing" is used to describe "the socially situated process of meaning construction" (Christiansen, 2018, p.668). Since people receive most of the information from media every day, media can set up specific topics to be covered and can also create a frame for the information. Which means, media is able to expand or lower the exposures of different issues while deciding how to interpret the information to the audience.

Therefore, social framework could create a collection of anecdotes and stereotypes. These stereotypes would have influence on individuals when they understand and respond to social events (Goffman, 1974). The way people look at the world and the decisions they make are influenced by the framework they receive.

However, previous studies on framing theory were mostly focused on verbal language (Christiansen, 2018). Even though the visuals might have the ability to enhance or even override the meaning of words (Messaris & Abraham, 2001), the function of visuals in the construction of the reality has not been fully developed. So far, visual framing is used in some practical realms. Activists use visuals to support their political agendas (Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford,

1986), public health researchers also use visual framing to convey certain perspectives in order to convince viewers to improve their health (Sontag, 2018).

Since visuals are more intuitive than words (Harper, 2002), images also have ability to create and convey visual producers' perspectives to audiences. The function of visual framing is worth studying deeply. It is important to know how visuals work in framing an issue.

Framing theory explains the process of constructing meaning and how people are affected by the information they receive, so it could explain the reason why people have a stereotype of certain things, like rural communities. Usually, people's understanding of rural communities, especially for people who have never been to rural areas before, is mostly from what they receive in the media.

This research will focus on how people are affected by visuals and the stereotype of rural communities that is constructed by visuals.

Research Questions:

The following research questions will be answered in this research:

RQ1: What kinds of stereotypes about small towns do outsiders have?

RQ2: What do community members in Sweet Springs think about the stereotypes of rural communities?

RQ3: How do visuals enhance or change the stereotype of rural communities in people from Sweet Springs.

The first question will be answered in the following parts of this proposal. Since rural communities have already been studied and exposed to the public for a long time, the stereotype of rural communities already exists.

The second and third questions will be analyzed through the photo-elicitation interviews. Because it is a rural town, people from Sweet Springs will be able to tell whether they agree with the existing stereotypes of rural communities or not. Also, they would be able to find out the power of visuals in framing rural communities.

Literature Review

Rural communities

The U.S. Census Bureau defined rural as " population, housing or territory not defined as urban" in 2010. Based on the definition of urban areas, the smallest population for urban areas is 2,500 (Roka, 2018). Thus, places with populations smaller than 2,500 could be considered a rural area. In the U.S., only 19.3% of the population live in rural areas, while 90% of land belongs to rural counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

As a sociology conception, stereotypes represent collective understanding and knowledge of a social group (Stangor & Schaller, 2000). Stereotype is a perception of how outside groups think about a particular group (Hamilton, Stroessner & Driscoll, 1994).

As opposed to suburban and urban areas, rural areas have fewer busy roads, less traffic, less business or infrastructure, and even lack basic education and health care (Roka, 2018). Because of small population and limited resources, rural areas do not have much human activity. Rural areas are considered places which have more simple, innocent, and peaceful residents who have the closer relationship to nature (Roka, 2018).

Previous studies and articles about rural areas are mainly focused on several points:

(1) High poverty rate: around 26 percent of rural residents live at the poverty line (Bryant, 2010); also, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 35 percent of rural students live below the poverty line (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring & Xie, 2007).

(2) Lack of infrastructure, such as public transportation, water supply, etc.: rural areas lack enough funds for "constructing and upgrading water supply and waste water treatment facilities (Jansen, 2009, p.217); lack of public transportation caused high transportation fee and limited access to other economic or cultural resources (Jansen, 2009; Roka, 2018).

(3) Limited sources for 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 (Jansen, 2009).

(4) High rates 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 (Jansen, 2009; Roka, 2018). Rural residents also have high rates of mental health problems but lack access to treatment (Smalley, Yancey, Warren, Naufel, Ryan & Pugh, 2010; Selby-Nelson, Bradley, Schiefer & Hoover-Thompson, 2018).

According to the definition of stereotype, these points could be considered as rural stereotypes.
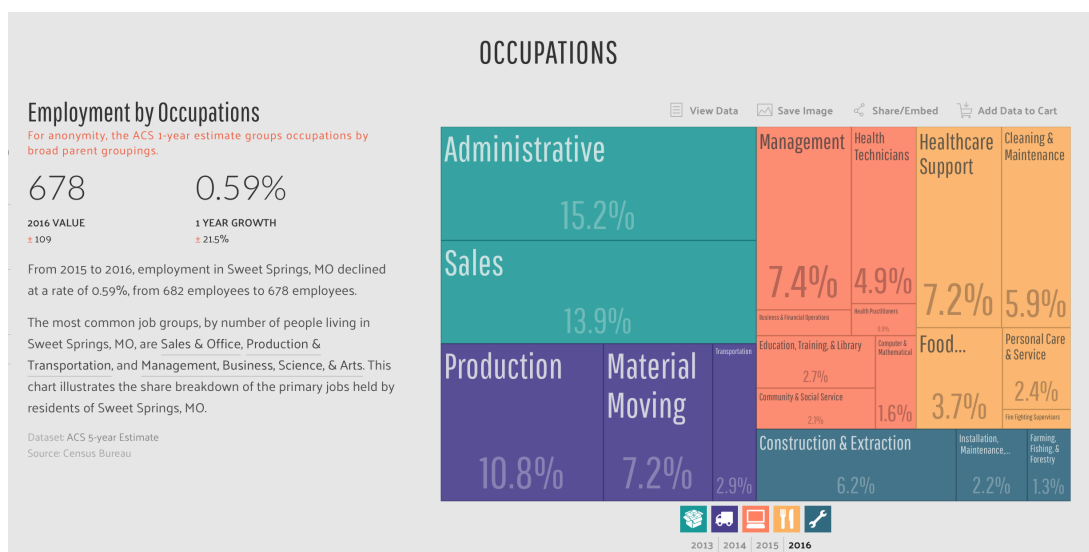
Sweet Springs

Sweet Springs is a town located in mid-Missouri with a population of 1,484. According to the definition of rural areas from the US Census Bureau, Sweet Springs can be considered as a "rural area", due to its small population.

In the early 1900s, the International Shoe Company opened its factory in Sweet Springs, fulfilling orders for the military. The shoe company employed nearly 400 people in town, and it brought Sweet Springs out of the economic decline which it suffered in the early 1900s.

However, the shoe company shut down in early 1980s. The downtown business area became mostly vacant from then on, and it caused people to leave town to seek work elsewhere. The population dropped from 1,716 in 1970 down to 1,484 in the 2010 census.

The median age in Sweet Springs is 45.2, which is 7 years older than the national average 38 according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018). Meanwhile, median household income in Sweet Springs is $40,000, lower than national average of $61,372 in 2017 (Konish, 2018), and the poverty rate in Sweet Springs is 16.2%, higher than national average of 12.3% in 2017 (Konish, 2018).

(Screenshot from DataUSA; Dataset: ACS 5-year estimate; Data Source: Census Bureau)

According to the data of Sweet Springs, it conveys a feeling of a declining town. Local people's lives were greatly affected by the closure of the international shoe company.

The data and previous studies show how outsiders think of rural communities. But it is important to know how these insiders think of their communities.

Why it is important

There are reasons why we need to promote an understanding and knowledge of rural communities:

1) Information about rural communities from outside media is based on media's framing. Knowing insiders' understandings of their community is different than just receiving and analyzing sources from outside media. Community members have the capacity to provide information about what they think of their community. Based on this, it could be helpful in increasing knowledge of rural community, understanding what the community members really need and improving the community.

2) Stereotypes of rural communities affect outsiders so that they mostly focus on the negative situations in rural areas, such as high poverty rate and low educational rate, but ignore some other situations in rural communities. For example, much coverage about Mathare, a slum of Nairobi, Kenya, from outsiders focused on its deficits. Dakin, Parker, Amell and Rogers (2015) conduced a participatory research in Mathare to focus on the strengths of the community and provided a "more completed, strengths-based picture of Mathare" (Dakin et al, 2015, p.173).

Methodology

For my method part, I will conduct semi-structured interviews using photo elicitation. I will interview around ten community members in Sweet Spring.

I plan to use one week to take some photographs of the town, and combine with some photographs I took before for the photo elicitation interviews. I plan to discuss with community members if they feel rural communities are portrayed fairly by media and research.

I plan to do these interviews during the summer. Each interview is expected to last around an hour. I prefer to interview them in person with printed photographs.

Photo-Elicitation

Definition

The research will be carried out by photo-elicitation interviews. As an interview method in visual sociology research, the photo-elicitation interview is able to record subjects' reactions and perspectives to photographs, which helps photographers and researchers better understand photographs better.

Photo-elicitation was first put forward by photographer and researcher John Collier in his research about mental health issues in Canada (Collier, 1957). In 1988, sociology researcher Douglas Harper mentioned that photography could be used as an important method in community studies and sociology researches (Harper, 1988):

> *"Many sociological categories are based on observable phenomena, and indeed, many of these can be understood better if frozen in a photographic image than they can if written about in a field memo … Photographs can be read to*

> *understand nuances of interaction, presentations of self, and relations among*
>
> *people to their material environments." (1988:61)*

Photo-elicitation provides a way to examines the "role of photography in society" (Smith & Woodward, 1999). The photograph plays a vital role in the photo-elicitation interview because interviewees need to report their reactions to photographs. Since the parts of brain which process visual information are older than the parts which process verbal information, visual information can be processed deeper than words so that photo-elicitation could be able to elicit a different information than simple interviews (Harper, 2002). Thus, photo-elicitation is more and more used in visual sociology research. Interviewees, or subjects, play an important role in photo-elicitation. Different people might have different reactions and see different things while viewing same photograph. Interviewees are not just answering questions but representing their personal experiences and perspectives (Smith & Woodward, 1999; Harper, 2002; Kronk, 2015). Furthermore, the role of researchers and subjects could be altered during photo-elicitation interviews. Because photo-elicitation can alter the way a researcher perspective subjects might be able to help improve photographing a more complete story (Harper, 1988):

> *"As the informant studies images of his or her world and then talks about what elements mean, the interview produces information that is more deeply grounded in the phenomenology of the subject. A photograph, a literal rendering of an element of the subject's world, calls forth associations, definitions, or ideas that would otherwise go unnoticed. The subject may tell the researcher how to photograph a topic more completely or even how to approach a topic from a completely different perspective." (1988:65)*

Another advantage of the photo-elicitation interview is using photographs to evoke information which might be hard to describe by words (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007). Photography is helpful in expressing some emotions or some visual concepts, which are difficult to be depicted verbally, like illness, death, etc. It could be hard for subjects to answer how they feel about illness, death or other emotional things, but they could be able to tell their feeling about photographs which show these scenes and could be able to tell if these photographs are representing their feelings and understandings of these emotional things.

Therefore, when it comes to rural communities, it will be easier for subjects to answer if they think the photograph can represent their community fairly rather than just answering what they think about their community verbally. Moreover, the feedback from subjects can help researchers to improve understanding of the social group, and find out something which might have been ignored or taken for granted (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

Photo Project

I was planning to do three rounds of photographing and interviewing. For each round, I will choose and print fifteen photographs. These photographs will be a mixture of historical buildings, park, some streetscapes, school, church, old hospital, etc.

For the first round, I will use the first two weeks to take some photographs, select and print photos to use for photo elicitation interviews. The first round will be asking interviewees to pick up one photo which attracts them the most and ask for the reason. Based on their responses, I will re-photograph the important scene mentioned by interviewees, combining with other photographs I take then do the second interview. The goal of second-round interview is getting more feedback from interviewees and their understanding of the community. After two rounds of

interviews, I will do a brief analysis to find out if there is anything of their community missing through these photographs and re-photograph the missing things and important things in town for them. After that, I will conduct the last round of interview. The goal of this round is trying to find the photographs which represent the community fairly in their eyes.

Potential Interviewees

1. Mary Jo Berry, who is 86 years old and she has been living in town her entire life.

2. Keisha Hall. Hall is the bartender in the Lastchance Saloon.

3. Bill Koch. Koch is the owner of the only grocery story in Sweet Springs, who also bought one of the historical buildings in town and tried to renovate it.

4. Phyllis Koch, Bill's wife. She was born and raised in Sweet Springs, moved out of town 24 years ago and just moved back last year to renovate the building with her husband.

5. Janet Scoot. Scoot is the librarian in Sweet Springs Library. She moved to town roughly 20 years ago from a larger city.

6. Lindsey Good. Good is the owner of Good Cuts Hair Salon.

7. Minister of church.

8. Police officer.

9. The banker.

10. K-12 school teacher.

11. High school student.

12. City employee.

Question list

First-round:

1. Among all of these photos, which one attracts you the most? Why?

2. What did you see in this photo? Can you try to tell a story behind the photo?

Second-round:

1. This is the scene we talked about last time, I re-photograph it. Do you see any difference? Do you feel more from the photo?

2. There are also some other photographs about your community. Is there any other photo attracting you this time? Why?

3. After looking through these photographs, what are your general impressions about these places? Could you use a couple words or sentences to describe them?

4. Do you think there is any important thing about your community missing from these photographs? If so, what are the missing things?

Third-round:

1. Do you think these photographs represent your community accurately and fairly?

2. Among all of these photographs, which one is the most accurate description of your community?

However, these interviews will not be restricted to the question list, I might change the questions and ask more related follow-up questions during the interviews.

<center>**Publication Possibilities**</center>

The possible publication for my professional analysis is *News Photographer Magazine* or *Photo District News*.

I plan to present my photographic project by creating a photo book or organizing an exhibition. I plan to find a couple relevant publications after I start my project to see if it can be published.

Here is a list of publications I plan to contact:

- Another Place Press: Another Place Press is a small independent publisher interested in contemporary photography that explores landscape in the widest sense, covering themes which include land, place, journey, city and environment – from the remotest corners of the globe to the center of the largest cities.

- Photobook Publishers Network (PPN): PPN is an independent publisher which supports documentary photographers and humanitarian photography.

- Here Press: Here Press is an independent publisher dedicated to exploring documentary photography in book form.

- PHREE: PHREE is a publishing house focused on documentary photography, travel books and family albums.

- Overlapse: Overlapse is an independent visual arts publisher interested in personal work with individualistic themes and narratives; experiential photographic diaries, social documentary or commentary, and street photography with a developed vision or concept.

If it cannot be published, I will try self-published.

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Figures Used for First Round Photo Elicitation

Figure. 1-1

Figure. 1-2

Figure. 1-3

Figure. 1-4

Figure. 1-5

Figure. 1-6

Figure. 1-7

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Figure. 1-9

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Figure. 1-11

Figure. 1-12

Figure. 1-13

Figures Used for Second Round Photo Elicitation

Figure. 2-1

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Figure. 2-3

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Figure. 2-13

Figure. 2-14