

# Toward a theory of engagement: development anthropology in a rural river town in Iowa

*By Barbara J. Dilly*

**Biography:** Barbara Dilly is a cultural anthropologist who studies the economic anthropology of rural communities in Latin America and the American Midwest. She is also a development anthropologist in that she applies her examination of local social and cultural environments and natural resources to support eco-tourism and cultural tourism as alternatives to extractive industries.

## A B S T R A C T :

Development anthropologists identify the dynamic contested and changing local cultural and social dynamics that support or resist rural development agendas, whether defined at local levels by local elites or by external professional “experts” and policies. Resistance to externally and elitist driven agendas typically reflects on-going local social conflicts and fears of lost identities and eroded community solidarity. Therefore, engaging diverse interest groups and stakeholders in revitalization of local community cultural identities and interdependent processes through grass-roots activities is essential to on-going local development dynamics. Identifying and engaging local “experts” in the creation and application of knowledge of community cultural processes and the development of local agendas builds bridges between stakeholder centers of local knowledge and practice inside the community as well as between communities and academic centers of knowledge. This theory of engagement expands the role of anthropology as is evidenced in environmental tourism and river recreation development policy research and implementation in Shell Rock, Iowa, U.S.A.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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river recreation, engagement, cultural preservation, environmental tourism, local experts

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## ***Introduction***

The economic and social viability of rural communities in the American Midwest is threatened by external global economic processes that exploit natural resources and labor. In Northeast Iowa, which has been traditionally dependent upon the agricultural economy, these processes eroded the local economic self-sufficiency which historically characterized rural communities, leaving residents with few resources from which to respond to all too frequent upheavals in macro economic processes. This study begins with the 1980s when the agricultural economy was in one of the many recessions to affect American farming communities. Downtown businesses had been in decline since the 1960s, off-farm jobs were steadily diminishing, young people were continually leaving the area. Property values were at a standstill and by the 1980s, the local tax bases were so severely eroded that many local small town City Councils were hard pressed to provide basic services.

Particularly in Shell Rock, a farming community of 1,275 people on the Shell Rock River in Butler County, residents had too frequently been the victims of economic development schemes that benefited outsiders at the expense of their tax dollars. Professionals and elected officials typically seek to attract outside sources of capital to rural areas by leveraging local resources as collateral, guaranteeing interest free loans, waiving fees, and granting tax relief. These strategies place demands on state and local tax bases which are strained to meet growing operating costs for business developments that all too often fail.

By the 1990s, Shell Rock residents no longer held out much hope for external industrial investments that would revitalize their economies. Nor did they much trust the professional economic development agendas of commercial or government agencies in their own region. During this time, when this anthropologist began working in Shell Rock, residents of Shell Rock and other rural communities in the region have also faced the challenges of the regular and increasingly more damaging flooding that characterizes Eastern Iowa communities located on river banks. This poses serious challenges to the sustainability of existing business and social institutions that are necessary resources for further economic development.

Despite the economic and environmental challenges confronting small farming communities in Northeast Iowa, the Shell Rock community has gained a regional reputation for its social vitality and community solidarity. Despite the fact that most residents work outside of Shell Rock, residential property values remain stable. And while the downtown businesses are largely non-retail, most buildings are occupied. They house service oriented businesses such as a television sales/service center, attorneys, insurance agent, chiropractor, family practice clinic, hair dresser, day care center, two bar-grill establishments, and several light manufacturing operations and a welding shop. There is also City Hall, a community center, a store front church, a food pantry, a dance studio, a pet grooming establishment and a local phone company office. Located within a few blocks of the business district is a new library, a new bank, an antique shop, a grade school, a community museum, a fire department museum, and the post office. Situated on the edge of town near the highway is a gift shop and a Kwik Trip as well as a large Ford dealership. On the opposite end of town is a large regional farm coop. Downtown is always busy with pedestrians dodging semi- trucks passing through from a farm implement manufacturing operation a few miles away in the country to the south, an ethanol plant just outside of town to the east, a cement products plant to the north and a farm seed company also to the north.

Most farming communities that survived in the region have this level of economic activity. But this activity is seriously diminished compared to the just after WWII and the gradual decline of the downtown business sector and other local service businesses that supported the largely farming population. The decline of these businesses and the population declines significantly eroded the local tax base and also threatened property values. But small rural communities persisted as social and economic centers, each with their own processes of resistance. Shell Rock also lost its high school during the 1960s, one of the first in the region. This was due to the decline of the local community population, businesses, and jobs but also to its close proximity to a larger community where many residents worked. The loss of the high school and greater participation in the social and economic life of the larger community meant fewer people interacting on a regular basis downtown and the preservation of social relationships through clubs, churches, and community activities. It also meant that more youth were being socialized outside of the community. These processes were common in rural American communities, especially in the Midwest.

There were many pockets of resistance, however. Persevering against all odds that they could retain a vital quality of small town life, Shell Rock leaders assumed pro-active roles in defining and implementing their own agendas to preserve their cultural identity and social traditions. Through revitalization of community organizations and volunteer activities, they stubbornly resisted becoming a social and economic satellite of nearby larger communities despite the fact that they were no longer socially and economically self-sufficient. They kept local ownership of their bank, telephone company, a physician's clinic, and several restaurants and bars which served local needs and served as meeting places. The decline of local self-sufficiency beginning in the 1960s did not result in a serious loss of population and eroded local tax base in Shell Rock until well into the 1980s. The erosion of the downtown business sector was relatively slow considering the loss of the local high school and the re-routing of State Highway 3 to by-pass the business district. A hardware store, a variety store, a third bar/grill establishment, and two second-hand stores held out until the mid-1990s. However, the steady loss of economic autonomy was felt and it served to further galvanize the residents in protecting the local identity and social viability of the community.

The success of Shell Rock residents in preserving their community solidarity contributed to the development of their status as the regional folk center for the preservation of rural life. They increasingly drew larger numbers of residents from around the region to their authentic annual folk life celebrations, the most successful of which included a musical variety show called "The Spring Swing" and a four day weekend 4th of July bash. In addition, The Sportsman's Club, the Lutheran and Methodist churches, Women's Club, Historical Society, and the volunteer Fire Department and Ambulance Crew, were among the successful local volunteer organizations in drawing regional residents to their fund-raisers. While other communities have held regular successful annual events, the Shell Rock community was the only one in the area that could consistently host enough successful church suppers and dinners, raffles, golf meets, and entertainment events to not only sustain their community organizations, but to draw in huge numbers of participants and spectators.

These volunteer activities and many other rural community traditions served to strengthen community solidarity and local identities in Shell Rock and the surrounding rural area. But they did not address the economic problems of the community. Social solidarity kept families together and neighbors helping neighbors but it couldn't pay the light bills on Main Street and it couldn't create jobs. The local City Council and Mayor were hard-pressed to meet the pay roll and provide basic services. They were caught between the rock of conservative local fiscal responsibility and the hard place of the times. Any mention of raising taxes or floating bonds was met by powerful opposition from two of the the largest sectors of rural communities, namely retired people on fixed incomes and wage laborers with uncertain futures.

Forward thinking leaders were frustrated with the fact that there was little collective local government support for investment in the future of the community despite the fact people held on tenaciously to the past and preserved local self-help traditions of volunteering. As businesses continued to close, factories went bankrupt, and the community infrastructure fell into disrepair, resentment toward leaders who talked tax increases rose to a clamor. Frustration on the part of some and fears on the part of others produced fractures in the social solidarity of the community. By the 1990s desperate local leaders were pursuing economic development strategies of a wide sort to help shore up the local tax base. In response, a former mayor and a group of progressive local leaders formed a community development corporation to work outside of the constraints of the city budget and local opposition to political processes to revitalize the community infrastructure and attract capital investment.

In 1994, a cultural anthropologist with deep roots in the area and a rural community research agenda moved in, bought a lot, and built a home at a time when few people thought investing in Shell Rock was a good idea. This study examines the role of the development anthropologist who has since engaged in on-going ethnographic field research as a full-time and then part-time resident of the community for over fourteen years. Over the last fourteen years, my engagement helped me to recognize the importance of on-going participation in community processes toward understanding sustainable development dynamics. There is no single quick fix strategy. Just as rural community building did not happen in one generation and the process of decline has also been gradual, neither does sustainable economic re-development occur in the course of one life cycle. Anthropologists are quick to argue for examination of long-term holistic processes in understanding the past, but less likely to recognize these realities in contemporary applied projects. It is important that rural development anthropology points out that the transformation of rural economies from agriculture and farm related manufacturing to anything else that will provide a long term future for families and neighbors will probably span several generations. It is a process that must be understood in terms of local systemic dynamics not in terms of business models that define short term projects or political models dependent on external power dynamics. Development professionals and politicians typically talk about development agendas in terms of short-term quick-fix policies and programs that serve their interests, not the on-going dynamics of local communities.

This study shows that the development and maintenance of stable and inclusive local community processes that are diverse and flexible enough to respond to changing macro economics is not the work of any one leader or group, any one consultant, any one anthropologist, or even any one generation. Further, it reveals that the long-term commitments of local leaders and volunteer organizations, combined with intergenerational cooperation, and the application of anthropological perspectives and skills by a diverse group of individuals are of great value to the success of sustainable rural community development processes. The application of anthropological insights is critical in this process of identifying community resources, negotiating the diverse interests of competing interest groups, integrating newcomers and youth, and encouraging the development of new leaders. Development anthropologists can share their knowledge with local citizens who can engage in their own ethnographic data gathering and knowledge production to further community solidarity and expand participation in decision-making. This study demonstrates that what anthropologists know can be transported outside of the formal classroom of the university into the practical informal classroom of community engagement.

### ***Theoretical Perspectives***

My engagement in Shell Rock community development processes is greatly informed by the insights of Susan Guyette (1996) who recognizes that rural community development must first focus on community building processes. She argues that it is important to integrate local cultural dynamics and integrate as many stakeholders as possible before successfully engaging in external political and economic processes. Secure local identities reinforce community processes, which reinforce community identities and local values (Guyette 1996:xi). Communities need to reinforce the values of the local culture and its traditions in order to create a stable future.

My participant-observation work in Shell Rock demonstrates Guyette's claim that while social and economic change is an ever-present reality in traditional rural communities, it is resisted because it strains face-to-face relations among family and neighbors by challenging power hierarchies and redistributing resources. Change, like the type experienced in declining rural communities such as Shell Rock and those studied by Susan Guyette, threatens to erode individual and group identities which further contributes to social and psychological stress. Whenever possible, individuals draw on traditions to protect themselves from and to reduce social and psychological stress as a result of change (Guyette 1996:xiii). The Shell Rock community also demonstrates Guyette's claims that in times of intense social and economic change in rural communities, stress can be alleviated and community solidarity can be strengthened through revitalization of cultural traditions. It is important, therefore, to recognize local culture, traditions, and identities and to strengthen them in order to mediate the threats of changes in the larger society when engaging in rural development processes (xii). Rural development, argues Guyette, should not focus on a specific end product, but rather on gaining community participation in the visioning and implementation of a culturally appropriate future (xiv). I agree strongly with Guyette that cultural preservation is necessary in traditional communities before economic development can proceed effectively.

In my field work in Shell Rock, I employed Guyette's methods of cultural preservation and revitalization along with economic development methods. I further expanded the role of participant-observer to that of a citizen anthropologist. I have never held a paid position as an outside development expert. I work as a volunteer community organizer with professional skills in the same way as do other community leaders in Shell Rock where I am also considered a community leader.

My professional skills are available to my community because I am a member of the community and because my volunteer work is part of my research. There are few traditional rural communities who could otherwise afford to hire a full-time anthropologist to engage in on-going community and economic development processes. Even grant processes that would support the expertise of a development anthropologist are often likely to be unsuccessful on the long term because require completion of a specific project in a specified time frame and do not typically allow for long-term engagement or monitoring.

After spending over a decade working in the Shell Rock community, I have come to think that a professional economic development position would likely be contrary to the long-term best interests of this and other small communities and possibly unethical as it would make leaders dependent on and probably subordinate to outside experts for short-term objects rather than developing the local expertise and furthering sustainable community dynamics. After working for nearly two decades to understand grass roots processes and to find unobtrusive ways to apply Guyette's principles, I favor a theory of engagement that applies anthropological knowledge and participant-observation methods to volunteer practices over the long-term.

To further this model of on-going community engagement, I am developing a workbook for community leaders and residents to teach apply basic anthropological concepts in local processes. It requires local residents to develop their own baseline ethnographies that identify local culture processes and systems of value that sustain their identities. My role as a teacher-scholar and a community worker convinces me that development anthropologists can work as effectively in rural communities as teacher role models to mentor and encourage local leaders to gain anthropological skills through their roles as community workers as they can as paid professionals who assume outsider roles. Anthropologists can train local leaders to apply inclusive communication skills to further community solidarity and expand options for development agendas. In this role, as in professional roles, it is important that we not identify too strongly with any sector of the community less our work be seen as divisive. From my perspective, if rural communities can't be invigorated at the grass roots, outside professionals can't save them.

### ***The Model***

This theory of engagement defines the relationship between academic anthropology, the ethics of independent knowledge building and application in local communities, and effective long-term outcomes as multiple processes of development. It includes the development of natural and cultural resources, the development of leadership, the development of goals, and the development of strategic objectives in specific local contexts. If the goal of sustainable development is to reinforce local cultures, preserve egalitarian social relations, secure identities, reduce psychological stress, and provide a future for subsequent generations, development processes need to be locally visioned and locally owned. Benefits must be retained in local communities.

I recognize that it is not realistic, however, to think that all rural communities will have residents with anthropological training in their midst or that residents will have access to anthropologists who will work with them through the community workshops to gain anthropological skills. We must still assume that development anthropologists will serve short term roles as consultants who can understand and identify local processes, act as advocates for rural development resources, and serve as brokers between local citizens and outside power structures that anthropologists can understand and sometimes influence. In my work in Shell Rock, I have served in all of these roles over the years. In these roles I have found the following general principles outlined by Susan Guyette (1996:2) to be most helpful in focusing local community agendas:

1. Identify and support actions which positively affect the subsystems of kinship, religion, education, the arts, social organizations, local business, and local politics to reinforce cultural meaning and create synergy that gives development actions more momentum.

2. Create linkages and balance between cultural preservation and economic development to reduce threats to local resources and identities.

3. Develop internal mechanisms of development that proceed without outside assistance. This includes intergenerational involvement, strengthening the local economy, meeting basic needs, and preventing capital leakage.

In addition, I added two more principles to my role as I came to realize them through the application of the above principles in my work:

1. Identify a cultural inventory of leadership styles and skills in the community. This enables me to encourage individuals with diverse skills and styles to develop new roles and new relationships to create synergy among diverse stakeholders and generate new forms of cultural meaning and solidarity.

2. Get out of the way and enjoy the benefits. It is extremely gratifying to see more people involved in a wider range of spontaneous activities. Being asked to assist local community leaders apply for grants for local projects and defining long term goals and objectives enables me to participate as a community elder.

### ***Methods and Data Collection:***

My work in Shell Rock began with a baseline ethnography in 1994 in economic development and the preservation of local identities. Relationships among concrete variables identified the following sub-systems of shared local cultural values and behaviors that sustain local community solidarity and protect individual identities.

**Geography:** Social, economic, and political proximity to urban centers and surrounding small rural communities.

**Natural resources:** Land fertility, rivers, fishing, hunting, hiking and biking trails, recreational opportunities.

**Population:** Size, age distribution, gender relations, and kinship networks.

**Economics:** Role of agriculture, manufacturing, service industries in the local economy and social interaction. Degree of self-sufficiency.

**Social Services:** Schools, health care, and legal services.

**Social Organizations:** Churches, volunteer mutual aid societies and breadth of activities.

**Social diversity:** Ethnicity, religion, class, age-sets, newcomers and the nature of conflicts.

**Social solidarity:** Participation in historical traditions, preservation, and revitalization of community events and processes. Rituals of cohesion and continuity.

**Ideological dispositions:** Political perspectives and local cultural attitudes and beliefs regarding development goals and change.

#### *Leadership:*

*Roles, styles, status, networks and development.*

I examine the five most critical dimensions of these cultural realities and their role in development processes are examined in this paper: 1) class consciousness and conflicts; 2) integration of new young families into community development decision-making processes; 3) river recreation options; 4) revitalizing local culture through historical preservation; and 5) re-visioning our relationship to the river. It took approximately two years to define the rural development ethnographic present of the early 1990s that I used for the baseline data in this study of Shell Rock. Over the next seventeen years, I engaged in participant observation in the community to characterize the cultural processes of on-going development strategies and tactics in Shell Rock. Through its self-conscious commitment to development that is both social and economic, this community represents a dynamic model of rural development that illustrates my assertion that community revitalization must accompany economic development. This model is analytically and practically distinct from a static model of discrete temporal development programs. It identifies economic and social realities in terms of local processes within the context of larger economic and political processes. As have most rural communities, Shell Rock experienced the gradual centralization of rural economic, social, and political power in urban areas through the changing nature of agriculture. The community also experienced the effects of rural development activities, agendas and community discussion of agendas and their effects on social group cohesion and identities. Regional development activities influenced the nature of cooperation, resource sharing, leadership changes and local political developments. And, as is the case for many rural communities in northeast Iowa, Shell Rock experiences changes to the natural environment due to frequent flooding in the area.



### ***Data Analysis***

While the on-going processes of social and economic change in Shell Rock reflects general trends in rural community dynamics, my model of engagement reveals community specific dynamics and processes which must also be identified. These processes help explain why some communities adapt more successfully to macro level changes. It also enables us to identify factors that explain why some residents either resist or impede development projects with intense passion. We can also identify when most residents would more likely be fully supportive of development agendas.

In the process of participating in and contributing to economic development agendas defined by elites, I quickly learned that not all residents supported the leadership and their development agendas. I then sought to identify and contribute to those projects that drew on central community values, thereby promoting group solidarity and individual identities. I also worked to more actively to listen carefully to all stakeholders to identify the threats to personal identities and social status experienced by individuals who resisted development strategies defined by leaders. This enabled me to assist local leaders in better understanding the resistance to their efforts.

Understanding the perspectives of diverse stakeholders and perceptions of inequality within the community was the first step in producing local knowledge. As a result, local leaders were able to better identify and address psychological feelings of fear of change. In response, they worked more effectively to enhance community communication and solidarity through greater transparency. As I began to better understand the long-term development dynamics and processes of the community, I slowly developed my role as a local knowledge collaborator and to encourage individuals reflecting more diverse interests to develop new relationships that built bridges across interest groups. This affirmed individual identities and generated new leaders who developed new programs and projects. I briefly discuss the five critical processes of engagement that characterize contemporary community and economic development in Shell Rock and my roles as a participant in them.

### ***Class Consciousness and Conflicts***

The Shell Rock community development programs of the 1990s were led by a visionary former mayor of the community who recognized that volunteer efforts were far more successful than local government initiatives in furthering development agendas in Shell Rock. Local politics tended to be dominated by what many perceived of as local elites. While many individuals did have formal educations and professional leadership skills, this was certainly not true for all. But the perception of elite interests in city hall was promulgated by a group of people who feared elite domination of the largely working class community. While the median income for Shell Rock households in 1995 was 30,000 (clearly working class) and great disparities in wealth were not evident in the community, most people were sensitive to class differences.

They identified class inequality in terms of blue collar/white collar job status, job security, education levels, leadership styles, and economic advantages due to inheritances. While the perceived “middle-class elites” were largely in favor of progressive public agendas, a large number of working class and fixed-income retired residents were resistant to programs funded by tax dollars and voiced fierce opposition to bonding initiatives. While the progressive and perceived economically secure group sought developments that would improve property values and enhance residential life, the conservative and perceived more economically vulnerable group resented improvements that would raise property values because it would also raise their property taxes.

During the 1980s recession, property values dropped, unemployment rose, and business activity plummeted. The local tax base was so eroded that the city could only afford to light only every other street light. City Hall was powerless to do much to enhance or even maintain the local infrastructure. After her term in office, “Mrs. Progressive Mayor” organized a community development corporation comprised of progressive middle-class business and professional leaders to move the community forward. As the wife of the local physician, she actually was an elite but she and her husband had worked selflessly and tirelessly for the community for over 40 years, earning them the affection of most people in town. The newly formed development group consisted of about a dozen highly motivated and talented middle-aged civic-minded volunteers with strong social and economic commitments to the community. This well organized group met once a week at 6:30 in the morning at a local restaurant. Anyone who wanted to participate could attend. They were behind nearly all of the projects that made a difference in the community including promotion of the building of a new library and engagement in beautification and recreation projects. They effectively lobbied City Hall to increase taxes through bonds for some projects and organized fund-raisers for others. They were also very successful in networking with outside development professionals and obtaining grant funding for their projects.

I was recruited by this group in 1994 when I moved into town and participated fully in their fundraising projects. My main contribution was to restore two old advertising signs on downtown brick buildings. They had been priorities of the development group but professional artist fees were prohibitive. When I said I would do it for free, they were elated. The Coca Cola and Gold Medal Flour signs I restored perked up the downtown and contributed to community solidarity. The group also worked with Trees Forever to coordinate plantings and professional landscaping into the public spaces.

They paid for their projects with proceeds from regular fund-raising activities they conducted at a dizzying pace. Members engaged in well organized and regular Town Hall meetings which enlisted the entire community in the process of defining project priorities and soliciting new members. They were remarkably successful. But despite the highly visible successes of the Development Corporation and their transparent activities, many working class residents grumbled about the publicity they received and mistrusted their motives. Group members expressed disappointment in the lack of community appreciation and voiced that they frequently felt personally resented for their activities. They wondered why this should be the case. I knew why.

Anthropologists are good listeners. And, I had friends and relatives among the grumblers who were quick to voice their concerns that I had identified with the "rich" people. By listening to them carefully, I soon realized that class perspectives mattered a great deal in Shell Rock even though there was little objective evidence that class distinctions were significant in this community. But to local residents, class was clearly perceived in terms of leadership types and effectiveness. The elite leaders were perceived to be people who were educated and whose work schedules enabled them to attend meetings where they felt confident to express themselves and define agendas. Many residents perceived that they tended to influence the City Council even if they were not elected to serve. Local expressed the concern that elites could control and influence the flow of capital. While there were many leaders in Shell Rock who could organize work parties of friends, family, and neighbors to get things done that did not require capital, they spoke of themselves as "the little people." They expressed concerns that their work schedules prohibited them from attending the meetings organized by the elites and that their lack of confidence kept them from speaking out at public meetings.

These distinctions were obscured by the fact that both types of leaders were recognized by Shell Rock residents as valuable and both worked together on most important community events. The sense of community identity and solidarity had been historically strong enough to bind residents together for the good of the community most of the time. But the challenges of community decline produced cracks in the solidarity and threats to individual identities. Working class leaders felt that their status and roles were always subordinated by middle-class leaders who seemed to be revisioning the community in ways that marginalized the working class. There was a clear understanding on the part of most people which leaders had the instrumental power to be economic decision-makers and which were the affective leaders of social solidarity rituals. The difference mattered. As long as community processes sustained the status quo, traditional structures and perceptions of inequality did not threaten group cohesion. But when resources were scarce and directions of change threatened to erode secure identities and social status, class issues moved clearly in the center of the emerging conflicts.

To better understand how these very personal issues played out in community processes, and with the campaign promise to build bridges of respect and communication among differing stakeholder groups, I ran for and was elected to a position on the City Council in 1999. At that time, I was the only woman (but not the first female ever to be elected) on the Council and at the time the youngest member (although not historically). I did not notice any overt sexism or ageism during my time on the council nor did I recognize any class issues or coherent conspiracies. Despite perceptions of some community members to the contrary, I found council members to be representative of several diverse economic interest groups. Rather than an organized group of elites who sought to serve their own interests in local politics, I encountered a rather impotent body of well meaning local citizens who were mostly powerless to enact any meaningful change or engage in visioning for the future. While some council members supported the visions of the Community Development Corporation, the collective body did not articulate a strategic plan grounded in a coherent community development agenda, nor did they attempt to. When conflicts occurred, which were quite regular, they reflected personality differences more than disagreements among diverse interest groups. Diverse interest groups reflecting class divisions did at times, however, exploit these personality issues in local elections to further their agendas.

For nearly three years prior to my service as a council member, the Council had faced severe opposition to a Main Street repair project that required replacing cracked sidewalks, sagging curbs, and the fifty year old water and sewer lines. A grant was obtained that covered half the costs but the city and downtown merchants would have to meet the difference. The contention was that the “big people” wanted to spend the money of the “little people” without their voice in the matter. The Council was accused of using its power to make decisions undemocratically without “taking a vote on it.” While the Council did indeed have the legal power to make decisions on projects under a \$600,00 limit, which was beyond the expense of the street repair, they were reluctant to do so. They just talked about the project but did nothing. Some council members feared angry phone calls from constituents, a practice that was quite common in the community.

Council meetings and agendas were published in a regional newspaper but the many residents who didn't subscribe complained that they had not been informed of information regarding the project. They also complained that they could not attend evening meetings to become informed because of competing work schedules.

It seemed to me that if we promoted more transparent processes we could gain more trust. After several well publicized public information meetings on the street project with project engineers and the Public Works Director, we moved ahead. But tensions were high things got worse before they got better. One disgruntled resident called a larger city newspaper editor voicing injustices to “the little people.” This drew a reporter who elaborated on the conflict without listening to both sides to “write a story that would sell” as she said. But after several public meetings and face-to-face conversations with stakeholders to carefully explain and clarify the renovation process and the economic issues it represented, resistance gradually became resignation, and eventually, with the completion of the project, resolution. The critical concern was not the project itself, but the process. It was not about “calling for a vote,” which would certainly have ended the project, as much as it was about presenting the facts and valuing the concerns of all the stakeholders in a public process that convinced residents that they were participating in a democratic process. It was about defining the process in terms of individual stakeholders with equal power and influence.

The experienced produced local knowledge. We knew that City Hall needed more transparency. After the street project got underway, the Mayor began to send out a newsletter with the water bill mailings that announced meeting agendas and Council decisions. This was a more personal way of contacting individual residents than the public notices in the newspaper published in another town that most didn't read. Shell Rock had lost its own newspaper back in the 1960s and until the Mayor's newsletter began, nothing had taken the place of a reliable local information clearing house. Information was shared over coffee at the café or beer at the bar and that translated frequently into mis-information. Within a few years and with the election of a new mayor, the newsletter has become a reasonably effective communicator of local government processes in Shell Rock. Conflicts over decision-making processes continue, however, and some people continue to feel excluded or alienated from agendas that do not reflect their interests. The City Council still has a lot of power over the purses of local residents and that will continue to be a matter of contention.

While I was on the City Council, I also unintentionally contributed to some of the conflicts by promoting one of my progressive development agendas. Hopefully due to the trust I earned, I was fortunate enough to hear from stakeholders about their concerns immediately so I could address them with greater transparency. That does not mean that conflicts were resolved. Serving a term on the City Council provided an important opportunity for me to learn through this form of engagement in community processes. I learned more about the diverse nature of stakeholder involvement in development visioning, which is further discussed in "Examining River Recreation Options." My experience as a City Council member does illustrate how a theory of engagement informed by anthropological insights and methods can be learned and applied by local community leaders.

### ***Integration of New Young Families into Community Decision-Making Processes***

In 2001, after moving to Omaha to accept a position at Creighton University and resigning my position on the City Council, I redefined my role for engagement in the community. I began to encourage new stakeholder participation by coordinating summer book discussion focus groups through the local public library. Each year for four years I selected a book that addressed issues of relevance to the Shell Rock community and invited residents to participate through public announcements.

I also solicited participation through personal phone calls to individuals I thought would be good focus group members. In the early 1990s, I had done a study of population change in Shell Rock which I presented at one of the Development Corporation's town hall meetings. I was able to gain access to the account data of the local telephone company that showed new services and closed accounts over a ten year period of time to identify that the community had experienced a 25% change in the composition of the small town and surrounding rural community population during that period of time. This was before cell phones became popular so the data were fairly reliable. The study showed that there were many new people in the community who had not been integrated into the local culture.

In 2003, I identified and specifically invited some new young parents in the community to discuss a book by Sonja Salamon titled *Newcomers to Old Towns* (2003). Salamon addressed the need to incorporate newcomers into existing social structures and to form new groups to invigorate rural community leadership.

She noted that newcomers to old towns are often more likely to contribute to the development of family and child centered services. I further recognized the need to reduce barriers between insiders and outsiders when incorporating new leaders. As a result of our discussions that produced new local knowledge, and my encouragement, the young women in this group reinvigorated the aging and nearly dismantled Women's Club to focus on the needs of young families. They have since become one of the most dynamic volunteer groups in Shell Rock in shaping an agenda for the future. In addition, one young father not yet forty years of age ran for and was elected to the City Council in the next election.

The strategy of organizing focus groups for the purpose of identifying shared stakeholder issues and discussing problem-solving options is a highly effective anthropological tool. In this case, the young parents also adopted a concern expressed by Salamon that rural communities with declining down town centers needed more public spaces and places for interaction. I specifically raised the concern that the city's Parks and Recreation program needed revitalization, particularly in the form of parental volunteers, new programs and paid positions. I had earlier expressed this concern to the Council at budget time but was unsuccessful in creating a budget line. When the young parents expressed their concerns to the City Council and to the Community Development Corporation, a partnership was formed between the two entities. The Development group provided funding for a part-time director, a talented young woman who was a newcomer to the community.

### ***River Recreation Options***

In 2004 I coordinated another focus group through the library. I followed the same procedure, this time inviting local residents with entrepreneurial experience and interests in starting new businesses. We read and discussed Thomas Power's *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies* (1996). Power argues that local residents need to reassess the long-term value of sustainable natural resources in revitalizing local economies. The extractive enterprises of the past have failed local economies but natural resources like rivers can be conserved and developed for local profits if citizens learn to develop entrepreneurial skills and service niches. Power shows how careful management of natural landscapes can provide valuable resources for sustainable local economic development in rural communities. He further argues that local economic development of the natural landscape is dependent upon a commitment to a sense of place which also enhances the social environment (Power 1996:238). This fit well with my model of long-term engagement with the processes of local communities. I also selected this book in response to a growing interest in and conflicts associated with river recreation, particularly kayaking, in Iowa. I gained interest in this topic while on the City Council and subsequently sparked a local conflict over the matter as I was perceived as promoting the interests of elite outsiders. One day I noticed several kayakers going over the boulder dam's white water spillway near the bridge that spans the river that passes through the center of Shell Rock. I was curious about this activity and waited to speak to the kayakers. When they found out that I was on the City Council, they solicited my support to lobby local communities along the Shell Rock River to develop its white water spillway potential. Most of the dams along the Shell Rock are old boulder dams. The kayakers had done their homework. They had researched the hydraulic, conservation, and aesthetic issues associated with modification of the existing dam to create an even more challenging and safer "play hole" for their sport. After providing me with web-sites from which to view this information and the economic potential of river recreation, I invited one of the enthusiasts who lived in a nearby community to speak to the Shell Rock City Council. I also made all of the information available to the public and published an editorial regarding the potential of river recreation in the regional newspaper.

After the impressive presentation of the kayak enthusiasts, the City Council was interested in finding out more about this development potential and so were some citizens, predictably the middle-class professionals. The advocates of kayaking, both local citizens and outsiders, argued that development of white water spillways could be part of a larger agenda to restore stream integrity and enhance habitat for fishing. Therefore, the local Sportsman Club showed interest in supporting the development of this project. After consulting with their insurance provider regarding liability issues, however, the City Council learned that the community would be vulnerable to law suits if they promoted river recreation activities. In addition, many locals feared that river recreation agendas would cause bank erosion and bring tourists to town who would compete with them for favorite fishing holes. The working class residents feared an influx of new young largely urban middle-class tourists and potential residents who would transform the social identities and rural traditions of the community.

In coordinating the focus group discussions around the Power book, I was interested in bringing together a variety of local stakeholders who could examine the potential risks and benefits of river recreation to the community. Participants agreed that recreational tourism could revitalize local rural economies through collection of fees and permits, rentals and sale of sporting equipment, and patronage of local restaurants, bars, lodging, and craft and antique shops. But they also expressed concerns that development of the river, which is owned by the state, and liability issues associated with potentially dangerous activities, should not be the responsibility and expense of the local City Council. Further, participants noted the potentially divisive effects of local government efforts to coordinate regional recreational strategies in Shell Rock. They noted that even though the river was public property, local residents felt that it belonged first to them and they were reluctant to develop its potential for outsiders. The mayor appointed several people, including myself, to gain more information and pursue external development resources but the Council did not take action, largely due to the production of local knowledge by the members of the focus group.

Over the next several years, through the lobbying efforts of myself and other community advocates of river recreation, two local state representatives were able to sponsor a successful bill in the state legislature that exempted local communities who promoted river recreation from liability suits. That solved one problem. In addition, regional development professionals and state agencies began to discuss river recreation in Iowa in earnest. But no funding for large-scale projects was allocated or obtained from federal funds and no action was taken. Activists continued to lobby local, regional, and state government decision-makers but nothing happened. It was not trivial to note that communities along the rivers in Northeast Iowa considered prime candidates for river recreation, including Shell Rock, had been victims of four major floods of the 100 year and 500 year variety within a fifteen year period of time. Recovery projects drained state and federal funds and distracted all residents from the recreation development agenda. But I continued to research the possibility that efforts to tame the river, conserve its natural resources, restore its significance to rural community identities, and develop recreational activities as an economic strategy were integrated and viable options for Shell Rock. But I backed off on any public agenda to this pursue these options and not surprisingly, no one else took up the cause.



### ***Revitalizing Local Culture through Historical Preservation***

In 2005, in response to the community's 150th anniversary celebration agenda, I organized another library focus group comprised of individuals interested in writing the history of the community. We read and discussed a chapter from A. E. Luloff and R.S. Krannich's edited volume on *Persistence and Change in Rural Communities* (2002). Eric Hoiberg's study of Irwin, Iowa revealed similar historical and cultural dynamics to ours and became a model for building Shell Rock's story. To strengthen our community identity and solidarity, we identified the themes that revealed persistence of community traditions, its rural identity, its small town values, and its ability to respond to change. We next solicited contributions and a local committee began the creation of a digital archive of materials at the local library. Talented volunteers went to work writing articles and chapters.

The book project was largely managed by members of the newly organized Shell Rock Historical Society which was founded around the acquisition of a small historically significant home purchased by the city through a FEMA flood buyout program. The relocation and preservation of the Sears catalog craftsman style home drew large numbers of volunteers and generated strong financial support for the Historical Society Museum which was housed in the restored home. The Historical Society attracted an entirely new group of community leaders with talents as writers and creative fund-raising. They also articulated an inclusive vision to represent all stakeholders in their projects. I immediately offered my support and was asked to be the general editor of the book project. Within a year, we had compiled and published a 471 page illustrated hard-bound volume that sold like hot cakes for \$50.00. It was also a success with state and local libraries who purchased it for their collections.

Within the next three years, the Historical Society would publish three additional smaller books on the history of a key home, the town's historically "upper-class" neighborhood, and towns in the rural area that didn't survive. The books were the work of talented local writers and sold well at \$10.00 each. The Society then began work on the histories of country schools in the area. Plans are underway to include histories of rural churches and rural women's clubs as well as town churches and social and/or service clubs. The Society held highly successful fund-raisers that celebrated the social history of the community. Among a few of them were a 1920s tea party in a recently restored older home and an antique tractor drive. A monthly newsletter promotes the activities of the Society which contribute greatly to the revitalization of the community identity and ongoing solidarity of its current and former residents.

The processes associated with developing the local history, a historical society, and a museum of local history demonstrate the strong commitment of local residents to preserving the local identity. The excitement associated with the processes of gathering information, accepting donated items, and collecting funds furthers the social solidarity of the community. And while there were still some who gathered at the local café for coffee to complain that their special interests were not represented in the local history that was controlled by local elites, the inclusive nature of the group's agenda soon negated their criticisms and thwarted their fears. The contribution of anthropological principles to the inclusion of all stakeholders in the production of local knowledge in inclusive histories cannot be understated here. An inclusive group history validates individual and group identities as well as serves group solidarity interests.

## ***Re-visioning Our Relationship to the River***

In summer of 2006 I coordinated another focus group to read the essay “Going Softly Down Along the Water” in Robert James Waller’s *Just Beyond the Firelight* (1988) essays and stories. Waller, the famous author of *The Bridges of Madison County*, grew up along the Shell Rock River and then became a professor of economics at the University of Northern Iowa before he settled into writing romance novels, essays, and short stories. Waller has a romance with the Shell Rock River, as do most people who grew up around it. But he is also a pragmatic economist. I selected the essay and solicited focus group participants with a passion for the river because I hadn’t given up on the river recreation idea. I thought that they would find Waller’s development essay inspiring. I also knew that the Development Corporation had received some grant money from a local estate to develop local river recreation activities for children in the community and that they had hired a talented young woman in the community to coordinate a local river appreciation event. I invited to the focus group meetings people in the community who would help make that event happen.

To my surprise, Waller’s economic development ideas did not really resonate with the group who attended the focus group meetings. Waller’s ideas were too academic and did not offer concrete instruction for the immediate project at hand. Waller argues that enlightened visions are necessary in the development of environmental resources like a river and that most people in rural communities are not capable of addressing the complex and overwhelming problems of the natural environment. He argues that economic development in rural river communities should integrate the natural environment, the local culture, and the commitment people make to stay in a place. I observed whether or not participants made a connection with Waller’s economic development ideas and Shell Rock’s commitment to making river recreation a part of the cultural experience of young people growing up in the community. They didn’t. The local knowledge the group produced was not unlike the knowledge produced by the earlier focus group that examined river recreation potential. It revealed that not everyone who reads Waller’s essay and who cares about the Shell Rock River is interested in promoting economic development that would result in the sharing of “their river” with outsiders. I should have known.

Rather, the group discussions became focused on the planning of the highly successful first River Fest event that shared the memories and skills of earlier generations regarding river recreation with the children of Shell Rock. This “community identity and solidarity first” approach followed more the views held by Guyette (1996) regarding cultural revitalization processes rather than economic development processes. Guyette argues that making traditions a more vital part of community life focuses on the future of the children in the community (85). This involves coordinating traditions, arts, social relations, environmental landscape features, specialized knowledge, architecture, and local infrastructure that is worth preserving for them (86). The River Fest, which is held at the end of August before school starts, has become a successful institution that focuses on integrating the river’s past, the present, and the future for local residents.

It remains to be seen whether or not the community will develop a river recreation sector to the local economy. It may take another generation before the leadership and the will emerges to revision what the river can mean to Shell Rock in terms of conservation, beautification, and economic development. I still hope that my ongoing engagement in the community will contribute to that revisioning. And while local residents are divided on the role the river should play in economic development agendas, nature may assert an even larger role in the river's future.

The frequent devastating floods are likely to draw major funding for a comprehensive environmental initiative sponsored by the federal government. Perhaps my ethnographic study of development processes in this rural rivertown can contribute to a more enlightened and inclusive agenda should major funding for conservation and economic development become available any time in the future.

In the meantime, I have developed a modest bed and breakfast establishment in my summer home during June and July that I hope will provide a model of business development for other residents who may want to pursue the hospitality industry as a viable economic niche. The home, which sits on a semi-wooded acre only about 300 feet from the high banks of the river, also functions as a women's weekend retreat center in spring, fall and winter when I am not there. It has also been the site of Historical Society fund-raisers and sought for other community events. I hope to attract visitors interested in hiking in the nearby wildlife preserve along the river, biking on regionally connected bike trails, touring local farms and craft shops, and experiencing authentic small town peace and beauty.

## ***Conclusions***

To further new visions, I continue to work with new groups, to encourage new leaders, to listen to diverse perspectives, and to advocate for the community. My ongoing engagement in Shell Rock development processes demonstrates that development agendas and policies must recognize a multiplicity of voices and employ flexibility in timing. Development anthropologists, professionals, and local volunteers also need to recognize that development work is not effective when processes are not transparent. In rural communities, process is more important than project. Top down, expert driven approaches must respect local knowledge and participatory processes. The methods of anthropology, which include participation, informal conversational interviews, listening through unobtrusive observations, demonstrate a great respect for the value of local knowledge and local experts. Even better, they should produce local knowledge through collaborative processes.

Increasingly locals are learning to develop their own projects from the bottom-up using their local expertise. I applied these principles to my development work in Shell Rock, Iowa as well as in the Guyanese Rainforest where I worked with the Makushi of Surama in the development of ecotourism in the mid 1990s. Recognizing local residents as local experts validates their identities and can contribute to group solidarity if all stakeholder groups are represented.

This was true for the Makushi who needed to balance the interests of family groups and gender in competing for positions of paid local tour directors. There was intense competition for these positions. The solution was to create enough positions so that all family groups benefited from at least one member's role as a local expert. The same is true in Shell Rock. It is imperative that the development of ecotourism or cultural or heritage tourism in the area benefit as many households as possible and not fall under the control of just a few if it is to be desired and successful. The development of multiple local expert roles in planning and implementing river recreation is critical to maintaining a sense of community solidarity.

These principles are not that difficult to grasp conceptually, although in practice, they are not so easy to apply. Local leaders and local experts can, however, learn how to do ethnographic work in their own backyards. Applied anthropologists can train local leadership outside of the university classroom to do their own research and evaluate their own successes. We can also help professionals and local leaders to recognize that there is no such thing as homogeneous community histories, processes, or visions. For economic development strategies in rural communities to work, local leaders must first develop a local culture of community development comprised of transparent processes. In their engagement, they must allow for ongoing revisioning in response to public assessment of what is working and what is not working.

Guyette points out that economic development is best accomplished with the merging of cultural preservation and economic development. My research in Shell Rock finds this to be wise counsel. Rural residents of small communities are particularly concerned to preserve the local culture before engaging in economic development strategies. Development that preserves cultural subsystems like kinship, religion, the arts, the environment, local government, and the local economy are more likely to be successful in buying support for larger projects and visions (Guyette 1996:10). This is particularly true for Shell Rock where community activities that promote the arts help create an identity for local residents. The activities of the Swing Show Association, for example, promote the musical arts at the same time that they promote leadership development and provide formal and informal structures for social integration within the larger area.

Environmental and cultural tourism associated with river recreation are dependent on the reinforcement of cultural subsystems and the strengthening of local culture values and traditions (Guyette 172).

It is possible, despite what many people fear, to select the kinds of visitors we want to attract and design the itineraries that will attract them (712), just as residents have done with their Spring Swing Show and 4th of July celebration. When local tourism policies can respect everyone's interests, validate roles of local experts, protect locals from exploitation, and strengthen their local culture and identities, they will be supportive. River recreation as economic development has not yet accomplished these goals. River recreation as community development has accomplished the valued goals of social solidarity. If the people of Shell Rock do engage in river recreation economic development, they need to develop their own local programs as independently from external leadership as possible.

Working with state and federal programs usually means urban top-down approaches. This model is capital-intensive and requires that local citizens or governments match funding, resulting in a burden on local tax bases or volunteer organizations. This model has negative effects on rural communities when it threatens local self-sufficiency, local decision-making, and drains local funds. It creates dependency and not sustainability (Guyette 1996:133). In contrast, the bottom-up model of development is based on local resources, meeting local needs, and reflects the integration and balance of human, natural, and institutional resources at local levels (132). This model requires intergenerational, family, gender, and class cooperation as well as integrating public and private processes to affirm local cultural solidarity.

The Shell Rock community is recognized in the region for working through its own processes fairly independently. It still needs, however, to develop more local leaders who represent diverse interests and who can work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders to develop long-term goals based on shared visions of the future. At this point, development agendas reflect the priorities of whichever organizations and individual leaders are active at the time. Small towns experience a rise and fall in participation due to the aging of residents, out-migration, and the constant hemorrhage of spare time as residents work longer hours farther away from home. Development processes also tend to mirror the personal processes of volunteers who shift priorities or just burn out. To keep development dynamics alive, it is necessary to continually incorporate and integrate diverse stakeholders, new people, young people, and new ideas reflecting changing realities in the visioning process. But most importantly, it is necessary to engage in on-going community processes that protect the values and identities central to community solidarity. (10,315 words)

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