

**ASSESSING IMPACTS OF RURAL GENTRIFICATION ON AN APPALACHIAN
COMMUNITY IN WATAUGA COUNTY, NC**

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

ASSESSING IMPACTS OF RURAL GENTRIFICATION ON AN APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY IN WATAUGA COUNTY, NC (August 2010)

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Appalachia is a region of contradictions. While Appalachia resides in the wealthiest country in the world, it is characterized by a poor population that appears unable to keep up with the demands of modern American life. Explanations for this observation have traditionally been either a Culture of Poverty model or a view of Appalachia as a domestic colony of the United States. This research uses the domestic colony model to understand modern Appalachian experience in Watauga County, North Carolina. In particular, it examines the impact that newcomers have on old-timers' ability to reproduce their native Appalachian culture.

Previous work has identified two distinct drivers of rural gentrification, one being amenity or recreation based and the other being primarily an extension of suburban sprawl. Most research on rural gentrification has focused on housing areas in the mountain west where patterns have been characterized by very low density developments or hobby farms. On the surface, patterns emerging in rural western North Carolina's Appalachian region

appear to be similarly driven by natural amenities. However, rural landscape change in this region indicates more dense development patterns and stark land value contrasts. This research therefore uses mixed methods analysis to determine the nature of socioeconomic change to the primarily rural Watauga County.

This research integrates Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis, quantitative assessment of housing density changes, and qualitative data gathered from interviews with six old-timers in the Triplett community, a relatively underdeveloped section of the county, and six newcomers to Watauga County. Comparison of interviews with old-timers and newcomers indicates differing perspectives on land ownership, land use, and the overall direction of development in Watauga County. Responses generally varied by the length of time the family has been established in Triplett. Triplett residents also voiced concern over land ownership as they describe newcomers as persons who value land ownership solely as an economic asset rather than a lifetime commitment. In addition, many residents report development in Triplett has occurred at a much slower pace, leaving residents of the area far behind others in the county in terms of income and access to more urban amenities. However, resentment and appreciation intertwine in this community as several residents have also reported benefiting financially directly from the region's exurban growth.

These interviews are placed within the context of countywide housing property value change and demographic transition. Results from this triangulation approach indicate the Triplett community residents' perceptions of remaining underdeveloped and being left further behind economically to be strongly associated with quantitative evidence and GIS analysis of housing density changes and growth rates. This study provides a portrait of recent experiences in Watauga County that may be characterized as rural gentrification.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| List of Tables | vii |
| List of Figures | viii |
| Chapter 1: Why Study Gentrification? | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review..... | 9 |
| Chapter 3: Quantitative Analysis of Triplett and Watauga County, NC | 27 |
| Chapter 4: Qualitative Assessment of Triplett and Watauga County, NC | 50 |
| Chapter 5: Interpreting Perceptions of Rural Gentrification..... | 72 |
| Bibliography | 82 |
| Appendix A: Interview Questions: Old-timer Sample..... | 87 |
| Appendix B: Interview Questions: Newcomer Sample | 88 |
| Biographical Sketch | 89 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 3.1 Housing characteristics 2006-2008 (US Census 2006-2008). | 28 |
| Table 3.2 Rate of growth in Watauga County Townships 1950-2000. | 47 |
| Table 3.3 Comparison of rates of development in Triplett and Powder Horn..... | 48 |
| Table 4.1 Demographic characteristics of old-timer sample from Triplett. | 52 |
| Table 4.2 Demographic characteristics of newcomer sample. | 53 |
| Table 4.3 Comparison of old-timer and newcomer samples. | 54 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 3.1 Watauga County occupied housing units by township..... | 36 |
| Figure 3.2 Watauga County percent unemployed by township..... | 37 |
| Figure 3.3 Watauga County median household income by township. | 37 |
| Figure 3.4 Watauga County median house value by township..... | 38 |
| Figure 3.5 Location of Triplett in Watauga County. | 38 |
| Figure 3.6 Limited access to Triplett. | 39 |
| Figure 3.7 Photo taken from Blue Ridge Parkway. | 39 |
| Figure 3.8 Near the intersection of Highway 421 and Elk Creek Rd. | 41 |
| Figure 3.9 Intersection of Elk Creek Rd. and Darby Rd..... | 41 |
| Figure 3.10 Common residential arrangement in Appalachia. | 43 |
| Figure 3.11 Central Triplett | 46 |
| Figure 3.12 Comparison of development rates between Triplett and Powder Horn. | 49 |
| Figure 4.1 House overlooking Triplett..... | 56 |
| Figure 4.2 Housing arrangement along Jake’s Mountain Rd. | 57 |

Chapter 1

Why Study Gentrification?

1.0 Introduction

We live in a world that has been globalizing and urbanizing for several hundred years and will likely continue to do so in the near future. Some critics of the global economy argue that it benefits those that already have money while simultaneously increasing the difficulty for the poor to break out of poverty. Late capitalism is placing more money in the hands of the wealthy few while the working and poor classes are growing in numbers (Stiglitz 2003).

The consequences of this trend are frequently manifested when the wealthy come into contact with the residents of poor communities. In many instances, the increased mobility experienced by the upper-middle and upper classes allows these citizens to choose—in a sense create—the communities in which they live. In some instances, they choose to purchase land in or near much poorer, working class, preexisting communities. The creation of wealthy communities adjacent to or within poorer communities often results in gentrification; traditionally interpreted as the process by which poor residents are displaced due to the rise in cost of living and land values (Smith 1982, Smith and Williams 1986). Gentrification has been discussed at length in prior research on urban communities but relatively little attention has been paid to similar processes in rural areas. Research that has been done in rural settings suggest that the process of rural gentrification is less linear and that a multitude of indicators must be analyzed in any investigation of the subject. This

research will incorporate a discussion of what these indicators are and how to research their impact in rural contexts.

1.1 Research Significance

Rural gentrification is a subject that has received relatively little attention; as a consequence, more research is needed in order to develop an understanding of how the process unfolds. Research that has been carried out on rural gentrification has tended to be macroscale and calls have been made for specific place-based research (Ghose 2004). Also, there appears to be a lack of research concerned specifically with the communities impacted by gentrification; the tendency has been to discuss the gentrifiers rather than the gentrified.

Additionally, the research that has been done on rural gentrification in the United States has been primarily concerned with the western United States. The Rocky Mountain West has experienced tremendous growth over the past few decades. This growth provides an environment rich in opportunities for gentrification research. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the southern Appalachian region despite the fact that it has been experiencing similar growth rates. Significant scholarship has examined Appalachia in light of industry, culture and development (Bingham 1978, Eller 1978, 1982, Hatch 2008, Keefe 1998, 2000, 2008, Lewis 1978, Lewis and Knipe 1978, Parlow 1978) but none has approached these processes through the lens of rural gentrification.

This research attempts to contribute to the discussion of rural gentrification through a mixed-methods, place-based study of Watauga County, North Carolina. In the process, special attention will be paid to the differences in perspective between ‘old-timers’ or native residents and newcomers. In doing so, the present research attempts to contribute to a discussion on the nature of gentrification.

1.2 Justification

Watauga County has been identified as an area where the process of gentrification may be underway (Badurek and Chamberlain 2010). Rapid development in the county has been persistent and ongoing for approximately 40 years and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has listed Watauga County as being ‘difficult to live in’ for eight years in a row (Watauga County Habitat for Humanity 2010). Previous researchers have noted that what “was once a summer and fall tourism industry has evolved...into a large-scale land development industry with resorts, second homes, and outdoor sports facilities...” (Putzel 1983, p. 56). Associated with this development, land values and the cost of housing have seen dramatic increases in the past 30-40 years and wages have not kept up with the rising cost of living. If one listens to people in the area, it becomes apparent that working class and native Appalachian residents in the county believe that long term residents are bearing the brunt of these economic and social trends.

The rate of development within Watauga County has been highly variable. Some parts of the county have seen rapid growth while other areas have remained virtually the same over the past 30 years. Triplett is a small community located in the southeastern corner of the county which has experienced a much slower rate of development than the rest of Watauga County. Additionally, a Geographic Information System (GIS) model has indicated that the community is likely an area that has been experiencing gentrification (Badurek and Chamberlain 2010). At the same time, Triplett is close to two gated communities. Powder Horn was founded in the early 1970’s and this moment is frequently referred to as the point in time which started the modern experience in Triplett. Additionally, Reynolds Blue Ridge (formerly Laurelmor) is a large-scale private development that is currently under

construction. The nature of this development's future impact on Triplett is unknown but this research takes advantage of an opportunity to take a snap shot of the community in order to provide a comparison for any future research conducted in it.

This research will contribute to our understanding of Triplett's experience with development and help determine the nature of rural gentrification. A concentration on the difference in experience between long-term residents and newcomers grants insight into how old-timers experience development differently than newcomers.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

If one listens to the sentiments of many Watauga County residents, it is apparent that they feel the housing situation in the area is unjust. There is no doubt that people are finding it more and more difficult to live in the area due to increased housing costs and it is likely that native Appalachian residents are experiencing this squeeze to a greater degree than newcomers. Therefore, this research attempts to determine the extent to which gentrification is occurring in Watauga County.

Using Philips' (1993) outline of rural gentrification, this research will view the process as a consequence of the conspicuous consumption of rural lifestyle. When affluent members of a society purchase second—vacation—homes in a rural community, they bring with them their own interpretations of what it means to live in a rural community. These perspectives do not always coincide with natives' interpretation of their own lifestyle. Consequently, arguments over community identity, meaning, allocation of resources, and shifting land use patterns frequently ensue. For the purposes of this research, this is the definition of rural gentrification that is used.

Recent geographic studies concerned with rural gentrification are best represented in Ghose's 2004 examination of Missoula, Montana. Ghose frames gentrification in Missoula in light of its "renowned...wilderness, its spectacular scenery, relaxed lifestyle and a myriad of recreational opportunities" (2004, p. 528) that draw middle class residents in spite of the state's dying economy. Watauga County resembles Missoula County in some startling ways: both counties are home to state universities, both have seen population explosions during the past 30 years and both have abundant outdoor recreation opportunities that draw middle class residents. These similarities enable Ghose's research to provide a framework in which gentrification in Watauga County can also be studied.

Some scholars, notably Spain (1993), have characterized gentrification as essentially a disagreement over the definition of community. If gentrification is viewed in this light, then Watauga County was already gentrified when it was forced to largely give up its agricultural heritage in favor of a working class economy based on tourism, development and the university. So the question becomes is the area continuing to gentrify? Based on preliminary data, conversations and the attitude of local residents, it is hard to claim that Watauga County is not still gentrifying. However, this research will attempt to systematically answer this question instead of merely relying on hearsay and other anecdotal reports. Since the area under investigation is representative of Appalachia, additional literature on Appalachian culture and community is utilized to gain an understanding of how traditional Appalachian communities approach and experience development and gentrification.

1.4 Methods

An attempt to research gentrification in Watauga County inherently requires a mixed method approach. The process of gentrification has social, economic, geographic (place-based), demographic and capitalist components and requires a segment of the greater society that is highly mobile. These characteristics of gentrification create a subject that must be approached simultaneously from a variety of angles in order to understand how it is experienced in a given community or neighborhood.

In Watauga County, there is a plethora of statistical data concerned with housing, income and other demographic variables recorded by the census as well as tax-parcel data obtained from the county by the Geography Department at Appalachian State University. The difficulty in working with most of this statistical data is that it is nearly impossible to determine the individuals impacted by the trends that are evident within the numbers. For this reason, this research will compose multiple approaches including GIS analysis of land use histories, analysis of available housing and income statistics, and a case study of Watauga County residents.

The majority of statistics concerned with gentrification variables are gathered through the U.S. Census. For the purposes of studying gentrification, data from the 1980 census is compared to data gathered in the 2000 census in order to ascertain the rate of change in Watauga County as a whole. Additionally, more recent, estimated data will be included in an attempt to determine if these trends persist today. Other sources for statistical data include Habitat for Humanity, the Northwest Regional Housing Authority (the local distributor for HUD funds), and newspaper articles. Land parcel tax data acquired by the Geography Department at Appalachian State University from the Watauga County Planning Department

has been used to create a GIS that predicts locations within Watauga County where gentrification may be occurring.

Qualitative assessment of different segments of Watauga County's population will also be utilized in the research. Two main samples were chosen, an old-timer sample and a newcomer sample. The two main samples may also be broken down into subgroups based on age, gender, and place of birth. In the discussion, special attention will be paid to the impact these differences may have on responses. Older natives may very well have different responses than younger natives; Appalachian born in-migrants may feel differently than non-Appalachian born in-migrants. These variations in experience speak to Nelson's (2001) layers of meaning that will be discussed in the next chapter.

1.5 Research Framework

In order to determine the impacts of gentrification, this research will concentrate on three themes; the meaning of land ownership and land's use, the outside control of resources and associated impacts of this trend, and differences in attitudes between old-timers and newcomers. Triplett was chosen for a case study because of its unique characteristics that differentiate the community from the rest of Watauga County. To some extent, development in Triplett has occurred more slowly than of the rest of the county; Triplett is a geographically isolated community that has a lower population density than most other areas in Watauga County. These characteristics suggest that Triplett may have been slower to adapt to the modern capitalist economy than other parts of Watauga County. As a consequence, Triplett seems to have retained some characteristics of traditional Appalachian culture that are absent from many other areas.

A combination of quantitative data and qualitative assessment is used to understand the nature of gentrification in Watauga County. Quantitative data will be used to establish the nature of economic and housing trends in the area. This data is useful for gaining a broad understanding of Watauga residents' experience with the tourist and development economy. The quantitative data is coupled with a qualitative investigation of two samples. An old-timer sample was selected from Triplett and a newcomer sample was chosen from eastern Watauga County. These interviews were conducted in order to ascertain any differences in experience with the development economy between old-timers and newcomers. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods facilitates a comparison between the numbers and actual experience. This comparison develops an understanding of any holes in the quantitative data.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Appalachian Experience and Rural Gentrification

2.1 Introduction

Southern Appalachia is a region of contradictions. It resides within the richest country in the world and has an immense wealth of natural resources. In many respects, Appalachia provided much of the fuel for the industrial revolution of the United States (Eller 1975, 1982, Lewis 1978). Yet, despite this wealth, the region consistently houses some of the poorest and most destitute citizens in all of the country (Keefe, 2000, 2008, Weller 1965, 1975). Explanations for this predicament have tended to be representative of two models: the Culture of Poverty model and the Colonization model. The Culture of Poverty model tended to blame Appalachian residents for their own predicament; many writers using this approach have criticized Appalachians as being fatalistic and lazy. More recent interpretations of Appalachian life have begun to describe Appalachia as a domestic colony of the United States (Eller 1978, Lewis 1978, Lewis and Knipe 1978, Royalty 1975). This model has begun to show that Appalachian people have been exploited by outsiders for over a century and this exploitation is responsible for much of Appalachia's predicament.

The view of Appalachia as a domestic colony provides a view into the mechanisms which allow gentrification to occur. This section will establish gentrification as an experience inherent in certain parts of the Appalachian region. In doing so, it will be

necessary to briefly situate gentrification within the broader process of modern capitalism. This discussion will be followed by a brief outline of Appalachian community life in order to provide a backdrop against which the modern Appalachian experience can be contrasted. This will be followed by a discussion of Appalachia's experience with capitalism. After the sections on Appalachia, we will examine these changes in the light of gentrification.

2.2 Capitalism, Modernity and Gentrification

Any analysis of gentrification inherently requires a discussion of capitalism. Smith (1982) outlines gentrification as a representation of uneven development inherent in capitalist societies. While uneven development exists in all societies, capitalist societies display the most pronounced division between developed and underdeveloped. The only way for capitalists to survive is to make a profit and in the competitive economic atmosphere today, this requires expansion which translates as the need for constant growth. Due to the continuous process of reinvestment and the search for profit, capital restructuring is constant in the landscape (Smith 1982). In this light, gentrification is viewed as a symptom of wider social relations in the political economy (Cloke and Davies 1992, p. 351).

Establishing a precise date for the birth of the modern economic system is nearly impossible but its emergence as a major force can be traced back to 16th century Europe. The decline in a feudal economy along with the emergence of Enlightenment ideas and the Renaissance were pivotal to the restructuring of economics and knowledge that are key components of the modern paradigm. In addition, the Age of Discovery provided Westerners with a backdrop against which to compare themselves; thus, "It is impossible to separate modernity from the processes of industrialization, capitalism, the spread of democracy, the rise of the nation-state, and globalization" (Keefe 2008, p. 5). Essentially, industrialization,

capitalism, and globalization are some of the recent techniques, methods and ideas that makeup the modern experience. This interpretation of modernity stipulates that gentrification is inherently a modern experience because the infrastructure necessary for the process to occur is wrapped up with the emergence of capitalism. As a result, in the following discussion, the term modernity will be used to refer to the intertwined nature of these processes.

While the roots of the modern world economy can be found in the 16th century, the process to get where we are today has taken many appearances and practices have differed in various places and times. The nature of globalization has been extensively discussed and is beyond the scope of this research. However, it should be noted that many scholars criticize the global economy for providing benefits for the wealthy while increasing the difficulty for the poor to break out of poverty (Stiglitz 2003). This notion is important for the present research because gentrification is frequently interpreted as a manifestation of the polarization of wealth that is so symbolic of late capitalism and the global economy (Smith 1982). While this research project interprets gentrification as an attempt by affluent members of the United States to buy into a lifestyle—and the associated conflicts over community identity—this process has a component of wealth polarization as well. In order for people to be affluent enough to ‘buy into’ particular lifestyles, they must have a substantial amount of disposable income, significantly more than those that live the lifestyle they are buying into.

The next section will examine Appalachia’s experience with uneven development. Through this lens, it becomes apparent that Appalachian history provides a unique milieu in which gentrification takes place. The exploitation of Appalachia had kept residents poor and land

values low. Over the past 40 years, southern Appalachia's rural lifestyle and cheap real estate began to entice affluent Americans in search of recreation and second homes.

2.3 Appalachia as a Colony of the United States

In the past, Appalachia has been cast as a cultural backwater full of uncivilized “mountaineers who were...unclean, lawless, and degenerate backwoods hicks” (Keefe 2008, p. 6). Residents were seen as remnants of a historic lifestyle that had never modernized due to the secluded nature of the terrain (Weller 1965). Appalachia was viewed as possessing a regional culture different than the mainstream society because it has a unique historical experience that, in some respects, remains poorly understood. This view stems from culture and geography as well as the way the two interact. The mountainous terrain left the region sparsely settled until after the Revolutionary War. The promise of larger tracts of land with more fertile soils pulled the majority of settlers further west, into the Blue Grass areas, the Cumberland Plateau and Tennessee River Valley (Lewis and Knipe 1978, p. 10). The early southern Appalachian community is frequently described as isolated from economic, industrial and communication centers. As a result, the region developed a unique social system that remained independent of mainstream America (Photiadis 1983, p. 2).

While there are some aspects of this view that have some merit, it has come under attack in more recent studies of Appalachian culture. The reason for this shift is partly due to the realization that the processes of industrialization and capitalism have been occurring in Appalachia for over a hundred years. The Appalachia that is emerging from this new perspective is of the region as a domestic American colony (Lewis and Knipe 1978). Most industrial and development projects that occur within Appalachia are owned and controlled by people and companies located outside the region (Weller 1978). This model sheds light

on the fact that Appalachian resources are controlled by outsiders who strip the region of its wealth, not by the people that live in the region. Appalachia has experienced modern capitalism; it is just that its experience has been one of exploitation rather than accumulation.

Due to the region's rich array of natural resources, traditional industrial activities have centered on resource extraction. However, depending on the region in question, the resources vary. Central Appalachia is home to large quantities of coal, a fact that has asserted tremendous influence in the area's modern experience. Since a community in southern Appalachia is the focus of this research, timber and recreation development are more likely forms of modern capitalist experience to be explored because the region is virtually absent of minable coal. Before moving to an analysis of how these aspects of modern capitalism have impacted Appalachian communities, it may be useful to present a discussion of Appalachian communities themselves.

2.4 Appalachian Community and Social Organization

The basic social and economic unit in Appalachian life was the small family farm. Traditionally, these small, disperse units were tied into community through the "shared experiences of the ancestors of the present population" (Beaver 1976, p. 10). Through shared experiences, Appalachian people found common ground. As a result, these shared experiences level the playing field and most people in these communities enjoy the same quality of life as other members of the community. While there are differences in wealth and income, these differences are not as powerful as the cohesive power of shared experience.

Appalachian farms remained diversified and refrained from the tendency to move toward a single cash crop to a greater extent and for a longer period of time than any other agrarian region in the United States. The lack of commercial agriculture inhibited the

creation of a hierarchical society. Beaver (1986) suggests that differences in status were more important than differences in class. A family's status had more to do with their adherence to the community's value system than to any economic criteria. Thus, "the rural social order was divided not into upper, middle, and lower classes, but into respectable and nonrespectable groups, and each local community determined its own criteria for respectability" (Eller 1982, p. 10).

The resulting social system simultaneously stressed egalitarianism and individualism (Beaver 1986, Eller 1982). While these ideologies may seem to be in opposition they are both rooted in recognition of the rights of the individual. Upon first glance, many Appalachian communities would not appear to be communities at all, except for the fact that the people live in close proximity to each other. There was a relative lack of structure and formal social institutions which "contributed to the evolution of a comparatively open and democratic social order in the mountains" (Eller 1982, p. 9). This element of mountain society establishes individual independence; unless someone's behavior threatens the health of other people, for the most part, they are allowed to do as they wish.

Community is not created by an elaborate system of social responsibilities but frequently it is created in response to crisis; people come together to aid individuals or the entire community (Beaver 1986). This mechanism establishes egalitarianism and reinforces the worth of the individual by ensuring that all individuals have equal access to the necessities. The fact that most people in these traditional mountain communities were related to each other provides the cohesive power of shared experiences. Kinship ties are frequently the most important social mechanism in mountain communities (Beaver 1986).

An important aspect of community organization for the purposes of identifying potential impacts of gentrification is the “public lands” that were so typical of Appalachian communities. While most of this land was actually privately owned by small farmers, in practice, the hillsides were considered public lands and could be used by any member of the community. The fact that, until the arrival of an industrial economy, most small farms cultivated only 25% of land at any given time and the rest remained virgin forest ensured that there were ample areas left for public use (Eller 1982).

All the aspects of traditional Appalachian culture discussed above have come under pressure to change as the region has been overrun by newcomers. The leveling effect of shared experience is obviously compromised as the composition of a community becomes less based on kinship. Additionally, the public lands that were once so characteristic of southern Appalachian communities are largely privatized as newcomers move into a community. Bingham (1978) even claims that a culture’s ability to reproduce itself is diminished through in-migration. In a culture based on kinship, cultural transfer from parent to child is necessary to propagate the culture. As kinship in a community breaks down, so does that community’s ability to reproduce its culture. The following discussion takes a look at how the modernizing forces of capitalism have had an impact on Appalachian communities.

2.5 Modernity, Industrialism and Capitalism in Appalachia

Appalachia is frequently seen as inhabiting a paradoxical position; being a region unto itself, “in but not of America” (Shapiro 1983, p. 73). While Appalachia is “part of the West...its experience is similar in many ways to the non-Western experience” (Keefe 2008, p. 3). Since Appalachian culture came to the consciousness of greater America, scholars

have interpreted mountain people as sometimes “hopelessly traditional, sometimes as modernizing [and], sometimes as resisting the modern” (Keefe 2008, p. 3). Recently, Keefe (2008) and Hatch (2008) explained these conflicting impressions of the Appalachian experience with discussions of the existence multiple modernities. For a variety of reasons, some communities adapt to the modern to a greater extent than others, creating multiple experiences with capitalism. Even within a community, individuals vary in their ability and desire to adopt a modern capitalist perspective of the world.

Appalachia has been dealing with the modern, capitalist economy for most of its existence; the nature of that experience has been intensified since World War II. In addition to industrial activities centered on the extraction of coal and timber, parts of the region have experienced the emergence of an economy based on development, recreation and tourism. Advancements in transportation are responsible for much of the growth in development. The increasing affordability of the automobile and the associated construction of roads broke down some of the traditional barriers that kept many people out of Appalachia (Keefe 1998, 2000, 2008).

The Appalachian region has been studied for quite some time and ongoing research has shown that mountain people “are alarmed at the changes...introduced by global capitalism” (Keefe 2000, p. 6). However, there is no consensus in the form of Appalachian reaction to these changes. Appalachia is a region “that is at once modern and non-modern, capitalist and non-capitalist, global and decidedly local” (Keefe 2008, p. 3). What follows is a summary of the work that has been done on the implications the late capitalist, global economy has had on Appalachia. Special attention will be paid to the impact of economies based on development, recreation and tourism since this is the type of late capitalism

experienced in the study site. Additionally, this is the atmosphere in which gentrification is most likely to occur.

2.6 The Creation of an Economy Based on Development, Recreation and Tourism

Since the 18th century, the natural wealth of Appalachia had been recognized but the capitalist speculative eye intensified over Appalachia shortly after the Civil War. During this time, Appalachia's ability to fuel the industrialization of the United States was entering popular consciousness. The widespread intellectual interest in the region is what initiated the demise of traditional Appalachian community based on small family farms. The process was highly variable, some places did not feel the impact for several decades but it was "The penetration...by outside speculators, land developers, and industrialists that launched a revolution in land use and ownership that drastically altered the mountaineer's relationship to the land" (Eller 1982, p. 44).

As stated earlier, the southern Appalachians are absent of coal. In this area, timber provided capitalists with the incentive to industrialize. In the 1890's, northern lumbermen turned their interest south as the northern forests were stripped of profitable hardwoods. The construction of railroads in the region increased capitalist's ability to profit from logging and consequently, the number of mills exploded. Shortly after the turn of the century, a railroad was constructed from Abingdon, Virginia to West Jefferson, North Carolina, followed by the Virginia Creeper along the Virginia/North Carolina border. These two railroads, coupled with the arrival of the Western North Carolina railroad in Asheville in 1880, allowed for timber operations to reach their peak in the Great Smokies, where they would have their "greatest effect upon the lives of mountain people" (Eller 1982, p. 99). The population of Asheville increased 500% in the ten years after the arrival of the Western North Carolina

railroad (Eller 1982). This sparked the development of a tourist economy based on the purported benefits of mountain air and water that drew in thousands of visitors each year.

Increased tourism created a new niche in the economy filled by developers of tourist and recreational facilities. "...Of the more modern invaders, he [the developer] appears to have the most disturbing influence on the traditional way of life" (Bingham 1978, p. 59). The nature of the developers is very similar to that of timber barons in that most of these corporate agencies are not owned by locals but by people with outside interests. The manner in which outsiders obtain land is evidence of conflicting worldviews. It was common for a capitalist land speculator to offer much more for a property than it was worth as a semi-subsistence farm. Landholders in southern Appalachia at this time were mostly small farmers and their conception of property values was associated with this land use. The consequences of this practice are two-fold. First, it produces an offer that most unsuspecting small farmers are unable to refuse. As a result, vast tracts of land were transferred from local control to the hands of outsiders. Second, once this transfer was well underway, it ensured that an area's land values were significantly higher than they had been in the recent past (Bingham 1978).

In order to gain local support the developers often tout their economic activities as beneficial and modernizing (Bingham 1978). However, the long term effect is typically that the economic benefits go to the outside developer and do not stay within the community. The best jobs associated with recreation and tourism development are the temporary construction jobs. Most permanent—and frequently seasonal—employment is low wage, service based, clerks, cooks, servers and maintenance positions. Additionally, the local

population is frequently unable to afford the amenities included in the new developments such as golf courses and ski resorts.

Arguably, over the past 50 years, Watauga and Avery Counties have experienced these changes as much as any others in Appalachia. Widespread development has been persistent and ongoing in the area since Hugh Morton and the Robbins brothers initiated it in the early 1960's (Parlow 1978). Hugh Morton carved up the 7,000 acres his family owned to create resort subdivisions such as Grandfather Mountain Golf and Country Club while the Robbins brothers founded the Hound Ears development. Since that time, the two counties have seen the establishment of four ski resorts and well over a dozen private, gated communities. The area has lost large expanses of farmland as a result of development. During the early 1970's Watauga County lost 50% of its farmland, compared to the national rate of 10%. At the same time, the amount of land owned by outside speculators increased 164% in Watauga County between 1970 and 1975 (Parlow 1978).

Land values were dramatically increased as a result of these occurrences and the increases are not always associated with any sort of alteration to or construction on the property. Sometimes land was bought and sold three or four times in as many months; "one realtor bought 300 acres at the base of Grandfather Mountain for \$30,000 and sold less than a third of the land the following month for \$156,000" (Parlow 1978, p. 179). Average land values in Avery County increased 401% in a five year period; the national average was 60% for farmland during the same period. Quarter acre lots in Beech Mountain were sold for 820 times the original purchase price (Parlow 1978).

2.7 The Introduction of Capitalism and Development as Gentrification

Some locals feel a disproportionate amount of money and attention is paid to the recreation economy, frequently at their expense. Maintenance workers report that one-third of North Carolina's entire snow removal equipment is used in Avery and Watauga Counties. At the same time, roads leading to ski slopes were kept clear while schools have to close because busses are unable to pick up students (Parlow 1978). These characteristics of the development economy cause many locals to resent the newcomers.

The most devastating aspect of the establishment of a development economy is to

“introduce a job orientation no longer directly associated with the land and to shift the local economy farther away from the self-sustaining pattern of the past...[that] serves to undermine the spirit of independence so long characteristic of the mountain people and places them in a position of almost perpetual subordination to the outside dominated financial manipulators...” (Bingham 1978, p. 60).

This shift is caused not only by the introduction of new economic enterprises but also by altering the social makeup of the region. Many people, including some Appalachian residents themselves, point out that this process spells the end of traditional Appalachian culture. Through the incorporation of second home developments, an influx of outsiders disrupts a community's cultural transfer from generation to generation. Over time, as the number of outsiders increases, this process alters the culture as it is unable to reproduce itself (Bingham 1978). Within the present research project, this process is seen as the agent through which gentrification takes place. Unlike the interpretation of gentrification that has been used in many urban contexts, the process of rural gentrification incorporates not just increasing land values and the possibility of associated displacement but also a disagreement over what community is and how it should function. Through this disagreement, community members feel the very essence of their community is changing; resources become privatized,

locals are outnumbered and excluded from decision making and a disproportionate amount of money is spent on the maintenance of the development economy at the expense of local issues.

2.8 What is Rural Gentrification?

Traditional definitions of gentrification—in both rural and urban contexts—frequently include the replacement of working class residents with members of the upper-middle class. Philips (1993) suggests that in many rural settings, the interpretation that one middle class fraction is replacing another is probably more valid. Some scholars may suggest that if this is in fact the case, then the process does not signify gentrification *per se* and that another term should be used. However, Philips is quick to point out that while many definitions of gentrification include the standard working and middle class distinctions, it is hardly the only way the term has been used. In fact, within urban scholarship, there has been much debate and disagreement over the nature of gentrification. In one of the more fluid understandings of gentrification, Beauregard (1986, p. 36) suggests that there is no single definition of gentrification; instead there exists several alternative understandings of gentrification that are stratifications of meaning.

Working within this framework, Philips (1993) sets out to explore the ways in which this debate in urban studies may provide insight into rural places. In doing so, he outlines three distinct interpretations of gentrification: 1) a manifestation of uneven development and circulation of capital; 2) a strategy to reduce reproductive labor; or, 3) as an attempt to buy into a desired lifestyle. In the context of the present research, the last definition is the one that will be used most extensively.

In outlining gentrification as a manifestation of uneven development, Philips refers to Smith's (1982) and Smith and William's (1986) discussion of gentrifiers as capitalists with a profit motive. Even though gentrifiers may not acknowledge this aspect of their action, "...few would consider rehabilitation if a financial loss were expected" (Philips 1993, p. 129). In urban contexts, the ability to extract a profit is made possible due to the restructuring of urban areas associated with suburbanization. Urban districts decayed as people moved to the suburbs. Eventually, the low housing cost in the decayed neighborhoods drew the attention of middle class residents interested in relocating back to urban areas. In rural contexts, the ability to extract profit appears to come from two angles; one being the comparatively low cost of land in general and the other being associated with the emptying out of rural areas as residents move to cities in search of work. This seems especially true in Appalachia as the region had been experiencing outmigration for decades prior to recent shifts as a result of the establishment of tourism and development economies.

Gentrification as a strategy to reduce reproductive labor is seen as a result of women participating more fully in the money economy. As more women enter the workforce, it creates "more symmetrical households in terms of their class make-up" (Philips 1993, p. 135). This is particularly important for gentrification for two reasons: the first being that dual incomes increase family's ability to purchase and rehabilitate housing and the second being that having two adults in the workforce may influence where families locate.

There is much evidence in popular media and advertisements that a significant draw for outsiders into rural Appalachia is due to the conspicuous consumption of rural living. Certainly there is an aspect of the uneven flow of capital in this process as well. In order for individuals to conspicuously consume a lifestyle, it is required that they have enough

disposable income to 'buy' their way into a lifestyle that others merely experience as daily life. While this fact will present itself to various degrees throughout the following discussions, the analysis will concentrate on gentrification as an attempt to buy into a desired lifestyle. If enough people in a given area attempt to buy into a certain lifestyle, conflicts over the nature of that lifestyle are sure to ensue. Spain (1993) discusses the impact of rapid in-migration and states that when new residents become numerous enough, resources are reallocated and privatized and it is in the conflict over these processes that the identity, values and definitions of community are negotiated. Long-term residents have created the traditions that are the foundation of community life while newcomers are drawn by their impression of these traditions; the two perspectives do not always coincide. One example of differing perspectives is the purchase of second homes in rural communities. To many newcomers, the purchase of a second home in the mountains functions simultaneously as a status symbol and place to relax. To the established resident, a second home looks very different. Vacation units are frequently left empty for the majority of the year and many local residents see this as a symptom of an unraveling community.

There is a substantial and growing literature about the impact of changing lifestyles in the British countryside as well as the Rocky Mountain West of the United States. Much of this work highlights changes similar to those that have been occurring in Watauga County. Missoula County, Montana, in particular appears to be experiencing rural gentrification in very similar ways to Watauga County. Ghose (2004, p. 534) describes changes on the landscape such as the emergence of prestigious neighborhoods, the creation of local lifestyle as a positional good which is then conspicuously consumed, the privatization of open land and the hillsides, and escalating land values as "...powerful consequences of rural

gentrification...” Each of these consequences highlighted by Ghose is evident in Watauga County. One of the major similarities is the conspicuous consumption of rural life and the associated privatization of resources. Advertisements for resort communities portray a packaged rural lifestyle that consumers can become a part of; all they have to do is buy into it. Rural lifestyle becomes a commodity that indicates a certain affluence among those who can afford its consumption.

One of the major themes to emerge from the British literature in the past twenty years is to incorporate ideas from culture studies; primarily issues of meaning and identity. This incorporation is partly due to increased discussion of variability of perspective within regions and even within communities themselves. Here, perception is stressed because “restructuring may lead to altered sets of meanings and transformations in both individual and collective identities” (Nelson 2001, p. 399). These altered meanings challenge existing community identity by causing shifts in the way economy, family, landscape and class are experienced. This seems particularly relevant in Appalachia as the traditional meanings of family based on an egalitarian, small farm economy have been challenged by the creation of wage labor economies based on tourism and development.

2.9 Conclusion

When affluent Americans buy into lifestyles through the conspicuous consumption of the rural, they bring with them their own impressions of what that lifestyle is. At the same time, rural inhabitants have already created the lifestyle being bought into. When these two impressions of rural life contradict each other, conflict ensues. In the present research, this conflict is seen as the agent through which gentrification takes place.

One of the most obvious conflicts that arise in Appalachia is the privatization of resources that frequently accompanies an influx of newcomers. As was discussed earlier, a significant amount of land was considered public in practice even though much of it was privately owned. Any member of the community had access to this public land. Privatization of land occurs through the construction of resorts, ski slopes, gated communities, golf courses and parks. Most of the traditional residents can't afford to use the newly constructed recreation facilities. As a consequence, the traditional inhabitants are effectively priced out of using land that their ancestors had access to for generations.

A second major impact on rural Appalachian life has been the steep increase in land values. The major result is a shifting relationship with the land. Before an economy based on development and recreation emerged, Appalachian land values were tied up with agricultural land uses. As land values increased, it became harder for residents to pay for their land as a farmer. Within this process lies the conflict that manifests itself as gentrification. The increased value of land has contributed to the annihilation of traditional southern Appalachian social organization that was dependent on an economy based on small farmers. The disagreement over the purpose of land and the nature of one's relationship with that land has been instrumental in conflicts between traditional Appalachian residents and affluent newcomers. This disagreement will be explored more fully in Chapter 4.

Appalachian experience with modern capitalism provides the milieu in which gentrification takes place. The reasons for this can be approached from at least two fronts. On the one hand, Appalachia as a domestic colony is a manifestation of the polarization of wealth and development that Smith (1982) outlines as necessary for gentrification to take place. On the other, the nature of southern Appalachia's experience as a colony—the

development and tourist economy—facilitates the ability of affluent Americans to ‘buy into’ a rural lifestyle that is seen as desirable. While these two views of gentrification have been outlined as different approaches (Philips 1993), it is more likely that they are manifestations of the same capitalist processes. There is an aspect of wealth polarization in any social group’s ability to ‘buy into’ alternative lifestyles. The nature of this connection will be evident in the following discussion of Watauga County’s experience with modern capitalism and gentrification.

Additionally, it appears likely that being a domestic colony of the United States is itself a manifestation of gentrification. The situation here is somewhat different than traditional explanations of gentrification but the result is very similar; the resources are controlled by people other than the established residents. The nature of these interconnections will be evident in the following discussion of Watauga County’s experience with modern capitalism and gentrification.

Chapter 3

Quantitative Analysis of Triplett and Watauga County, North Carolina

3.1 Methods

This chapter outlines the nature of Watauga County's recent experience with the development economy using U.S. Census figures and GIS methods. Housing statistics and economic data from the U.S. Census describe how residents experience the current housing market. This data displays that the housing market in Watauga County is different from that of North Carolina or the U.S. Additional housing and economic characteristics for Watauga County were downloaded from the census and displayed in a GIS. Elk Township and Triplett were chosen for further examination because the data indicates the area represents an extreme even for Watauga County.

3.2 Geographic Setting

Watauga County lies in the Appalachian Mountains in northwestern North Carolina. It was founded in 1849; broken off from 313 acres of Ashe, Caldwell, Wilkes and Yancey counties. At the time, the county was home to 3,348 persons and for much of its history it remained a sparsely populated, agricultural county. The arrival of the Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad at around the turn of the 20th century sparked the introduction of industry to the county. With the arrival of the

railroad, the county experienced a period of heavy deforestation associated with the logging boom (Akers and Lambeth, 2008).

Until the 1960's, agriculture and logging were the major economic activities. At that point, development, tourism and recreation started their ascent as major forces of the local economy. The impact of these activities on the local population is hard to overstate and this is the topic of the current chapter. Here, a brief history of housing as it relates to the local economy is outlined followed by a discussion of Triplett examining the impact of the recreation economy on development and housing.

3.3 The Nature of Housing in Watauga County

The cost of housing in the United States has been progressively increasing for decades. In particular, between 2000 and 2007 the number of cost burdened renters increased 38.5% while the number of cost burdened home owners increased 91.6% (U.S. Census 2000, 2008). Table 3.1 offers a comparison of housing and economic characteristics at the national, state and county level.

| Variable | United States | North Carolina | Watauga County |
|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Median Income | \$52,175 | \$46,107 | \$35,010 |
| % Poverty | 13.2% | 14.6% | 21.2% |
| Vacant Units % | 12% | 14.2% | 31.5% |
| Owner Occupied | 67.1% | 68.1% | 57.4% |
| Renter Occupied | 32.9% | 31.9% | 42.6% |
| Mortgage Payment | \$1,508 | \$1,222 | \$1,250 |
| Median Home Value | \$192,400 | \$145,600 | \$208,600 |

Table 3.1 Housing characteristics 2006-2008 (U.S. Census 2008).

Median income in Watauga County is significantly lower than in either North Carolina or the country as a whole. The poverty rate is 45.2% higher while the median value of a home is 43.3% higher. These statistics depict some of the difficulties working class residents encounter when living in Watauga County. Additionally, nearly 47% of properties are owned by absentee landlords (Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, 2010). These figures seem to point to the fact that the housing market in Watauga County is somewhat different than the rest of the country. The unique character of the county is probably due to a combination of the university, a large percentage of the population that is comprised of students (which accounts for the low percentage of owner occupied units), and the fact that the local economy is almost completely dependent on recreation, tourism and development. The impact of this economy of development on housing will be examined in this section.

3.2.1 Affordability

As Mallach (2009) discusses, housing problems are typically approached from either a supply or demand perspective. Since almost a third of housing units in Watauga County were vacant in 2006-2008—including 11% of the rental units—the problem would not appear to be associated with supply; there are plenty of housing units. According to the federal government, a household is cost burdened if the cost of housing amounts to 30% of its income (Mallach 2009, p. 33). Using this criterion, 36.8% of homeowners and 67.3% of renters in Watauga County are considered cost burdened (U.S. Census 2008). Consequently, the problem has traditionally been handled by trying to increase residents' ability to pay for houses that already exist. HUD and Habitat for Humanity are both actively trying to ease the cost burden of families in Watauga County.

When compared to the rest of North Carolina, several interesting trends emerge in Watauga County. Median household income is 16.8% lower than the state average and yet the median cost of a house or condo is 35% higher than the state average while rent is 8.6% higher. Additionally, the poverty rate is 45.5% higher than the state average while the percent of residents with income below 50% of poverty level is 82% higher than the state average (Onboard Informatics, 2010). Additionally, 47% of the housing structures across the county are owned by absentee landlords and approximately 30% of all new building permits are for seasonally inhabited units (Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, 2010).

Certainly the demographic nature of Watauga has changed significantly in recent years. The county's population has grown by 42.7% since 1980 while the number of housing units has increased by nearly 100% during the same time period. From a supply/demand perspective, this would lead one to believe that housing costs would be relatively low in Watauga County. However, HUD has listed Watauga County as 'difficult to live in' for eight years in a row (Watauga County Habitat for Humanity, 2009). Obviously, the price of housing is affected by a more complicated process than merely supply and demand. Part of reason for this complexity is due to the fact that Boone houses Appalachian State University, home to 16,968 students. Student enrollment at Appalachian has increased by 68.89% (from 10,047) since 1981, a significantly higher rate than the non-student population in the county (Appalachian State University, Headcount Enrollment History Fall 1981-2009). The vast majority of students rent and consequently, the number of rental units have increased dramatically, especially in Boone.

During the same time frame, the mean cost of a single family house has risen by 77.5% while median family income has increased only 30.3% (U.S. Census 2008; North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2010). These figures indicate that residents' income in Watauga County is not keeping pace with housing cost. These impacts do not just affect the single family home market either. For example, in 2000-2002 the author rented two different apartments through Appalachian South Apartments in Boone. A comparison of the prices for those units now with what was paid for them eight years ago showed that the price for one of the units had increased 46.2% while the other had increased 62.7%. Since income has only increased 30% in the past 29 years, it obviously hasn't been able to keep up with recent spikes in housing cost (Appalachian South, 2009).

3.2.2 Housing Availability and Type Distribution

The majority of housing units in Watauga County are single family homes, making up 64% of all units. Of the remaining units, 15.8% are located in buildings composed of five units or more (U.S. Census 2008). While there is a lack of evidence in support of this fact, it seems likely that the percentage of multifamily housing units is much higher within Boone than it is in the county as a whole.

3.2.3 Accessibility and Barriers

The nature of accessible housing in Watauga County is somewhat ambiguous in comparison to the way it is analyzed in other areas. The notion of accessibility is frequently analyzed in conjunction with racial segregation. Since the vast majority of Watauga County residents are white, it makes issues of race and housing almost nonexistent. On the other hand, issues of class and income and housing accessibility are quite relevant and yet there appears to be very little research done on the topic. As shown

in the affordability section above, the price of housing in Watauga County can act as a barrier to low income residents.

3.3 Resources Available to Cost Burdened Residents

HUD was initiated in 1965; its mission is to “create strong, sustainable, inclusive communities and quality affordable homes for all...free from discrimination.” (U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2010). In Watauga County, HUD funds are distributed through the Northwest Regional Housing Authority (NWRHA), which is the only HUD approved agency in the area. The NWRHA was founded in 1979 and since that time the nonprofit agency has helped hundreds of thousands of families receive aid. The NWRHA’s largest program, the Housing Choice Voucher program currently assists 300 households in Watauga County through 75 different landlords. Each year approximately \$1.5 million are spent in Watauga County to help families meet the costs of housing.

Currently, 140 households are on the waiting list with an approximate waiting time of 6-18 months. To compare the length of wait time, a family in Hickory, North Carolina can expect to wait four years while Charlotte residents typically wait seven years (Ian Fowler, founder of NWRHA, personal communication, October 2009). The other major source of aid comes from Habitat for Humanity. The Watauga County branch was started in 1987 and has built 20 affordable houses in that time, averaging approximately one per year (Watauga County Habitat for Humanity, 2010).

While the housing situation in Watauga County has progressively worsened during the past 25 years, interest in affordable housing has been increasing lately. The Boone Area Chamber of Commerce houses a division entitled the Watauga County

Economic Development Commission whose mission is, in part, to “address the issue of affordable housing and...[work] with local and state agencies to bring more affordable housing options to Watauga County” (Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, 2010).

Additionally, the Watauga County Board of Commissioners created a seven member Plan Oversight Group that is in charge of developing Watauga County’s new Comprehensive Plan which is called “Citizens Plan for Change.” The group was formed in 2007 and spent two years working with members of the community in order to understand the desires and needs of county residents. In November, 2009, the committee produced a list of ten topics that county residents felt the comprehensive plan should address; the development of affordable housing came in at number seven, coupled with economic/employment development (Calhoun, 2009).

The NWRHA was also previously involved in the construction of affordable housing units. In the 1980’s approximately 65 affordable houses were constructed. During the 1990’s the housing authority built the White Laurel complex that provides affordable apartments as well as single family homes. Around the year 2000, the NWRHA converted an 18 unit apartment complex into Valley View Condos which were available for purchase to low income families. However, since the early part of this decade, NWRHA has been priced out of the market and is unable to construct any affordable housing in Watauga County at this time. The company is still involved in the construction of affordable housing in areas nearby, including Ashe County but the price of land in Watauga has risen so much that it is extremely difficult to build affordable housing (Ian Fowler, founder of NWRHA, personal communication, October 2009).

3.4 Difficulties for Understanding the Nature of Change in Watauga County

This research requires assessment of the relationship between economic shifts, social justice and housing in Watauga County. Is the current housing market creating a situation where native Appalachian residents are finding it harder to remain in the communities their families have called home for generations? The data obviously suggest that the cost of housing is a burden but it is very difficult to conclude that the native population is bearing the brunt of disadvantage. At the same time, the data does not prove that native residents are not feeling this pressure at greater rates than newcomers.

The problem is that there is virtually no data that distinguishes between native Appalachian residents and newcomers in relation to housing situations. Native Appalachian people are hard to distinguish from mainstream society largely because they are not a visible ethnic or racial minority. Birthplace or the length of time a family has lived in Appalachia is indicative of member's status as a native resident or newcomer and there is virtually no data concerning this variable. The closest information we have available is concerned with the length of time a family has inhabited the associated housing unit. However, in a county that has seen its population double in a couple decades, these numbers do not tell the whole story.

In order to account for the lack of available statistics, a case study approach in the analysis of gentrification will be used. Triplett was chosen as the case study because the community is believed to have experienced a much slower rate of development than the rest of the county. Census data is used to display how Triplett and the surrounding area differs from other areas of Watauga County. Additionally, a GIS model (Badurek and

Chamberlain, 2010) has identified Triplett as a community that is likely experiencing gentrification.

3.5 Elk Township

The U.S. Census divides Watauga County into 15 townships, and Elk Township is the one that includes Triplett. Before moving to Triplett specifically, this section examines the Elk Township as a sub region of Watauga County. In order to gain an understanding of the ways in which Elk relates to the rest of Watauga County, U.S. Census data from the year 2000 is displayed graphically.

Figure 3.1 shows that Elk Township is included in the lowest class of occupied housing units. In fact, with only 161 occupied units, Elk comes in at the second lowest in the entire county, only North Fork has fewer with 86. This shows that Elk has one of the lowest population densities of any township in Watauga County and indicates that it has experienced a much slower rate of development than other areas. At the same time, Figure 3.2 shows that Elk has the second highest rate of unemployment in the county. Only the town of Boone has a higher rate of unemployment and that is likely due to young people with loose ties to the university who remain in the area. While the above figures indicate that residents in Elk Township experience abnormally low population densities and unemployment rates, Figures 3.3 and 3.4 display aspects of Elk that are much closer to the rest of Watauga County. In both median household income and median home value, Elk represents the middle of the rung, albeit on the lower side in both categories, eighth and twelfth respectively. It seems that while residents of Elk experience high levels of unemployment, the median household income is not significantly impacted.

3.6 Triplett

The community resides in some of the lowest elevation in the county along Elk Creek. Access to the community is extremely limited; the primary entrance is through Elk Creek Rd. which takes a right off of southbound Old Highway 421 about a mile before Parkway Elementary School. The road drops close to a thousand feet in approximately two miles. Often extremely curvy and precarious, Triplett residents attribute the slow rate of development in the valley to the difficulty of just getting there.

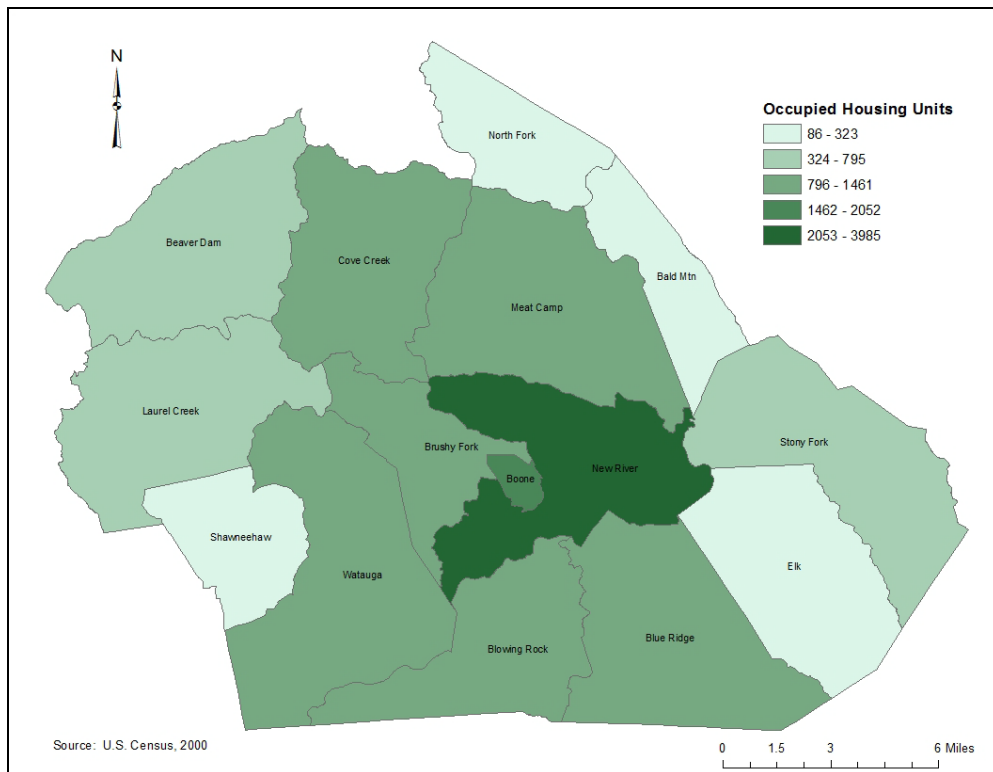


Figure 3.1 Watauga County occupied housing units by township (U.S. Census 2000).

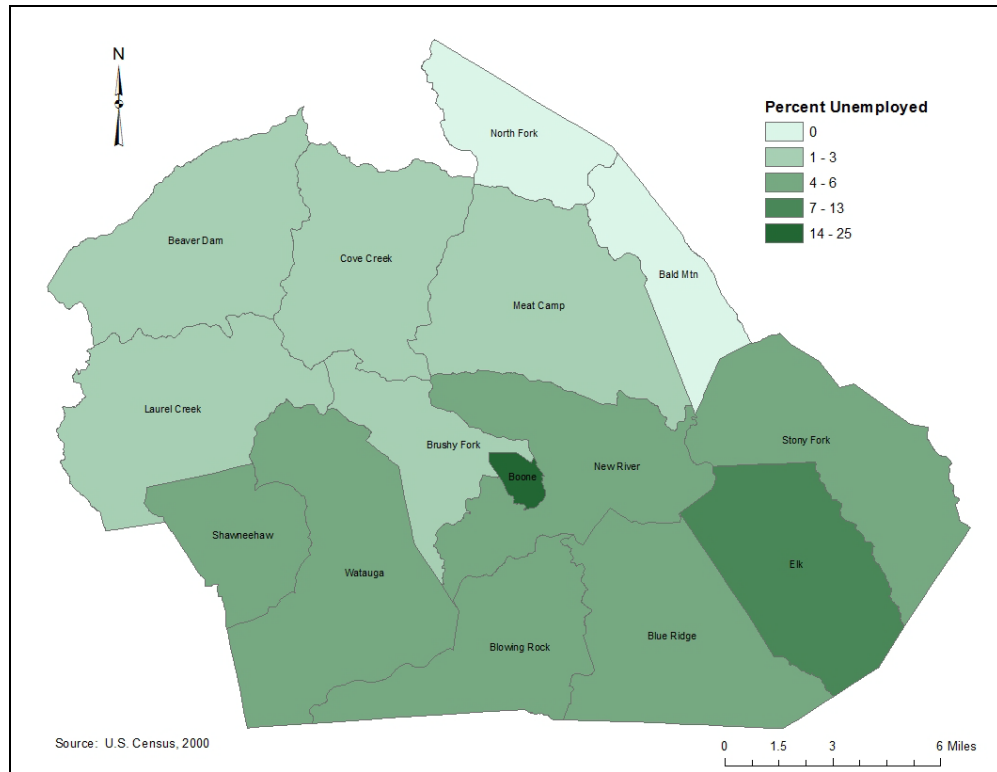


Figure 3.2 Watauga County percent unemployed by township (U.S. Census 2000).

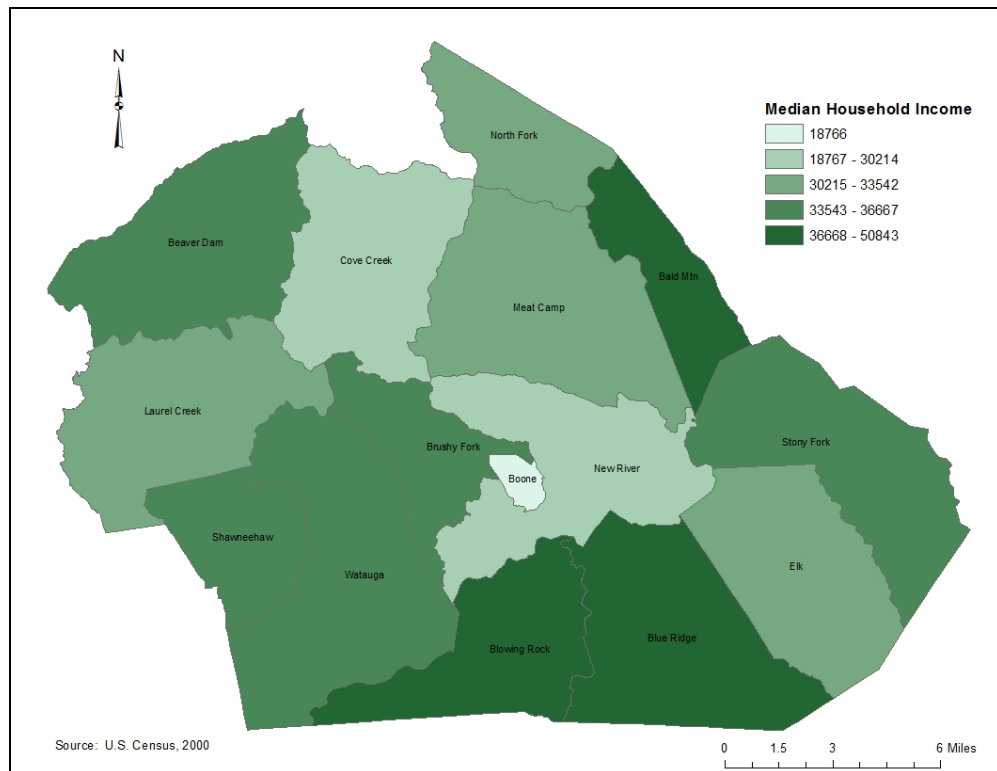


Figure 3.3 Watauga County median household income by township (U.S. Census 2000).

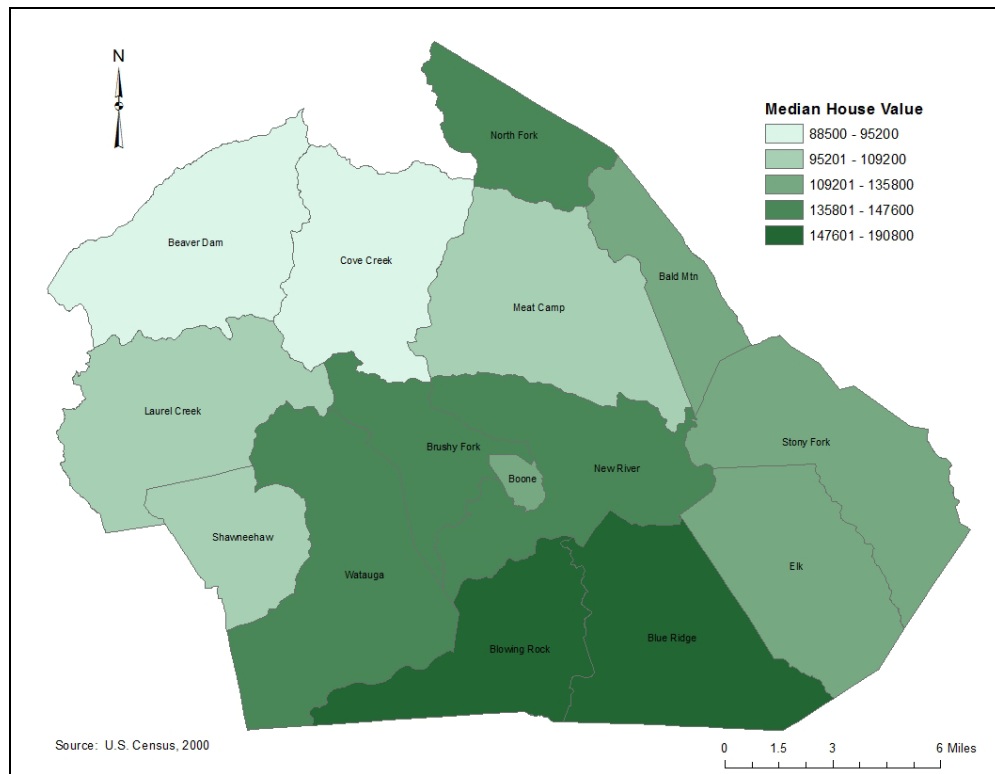


Figure 3.4 Watauga County median house value by township (U.S. Census 2000).

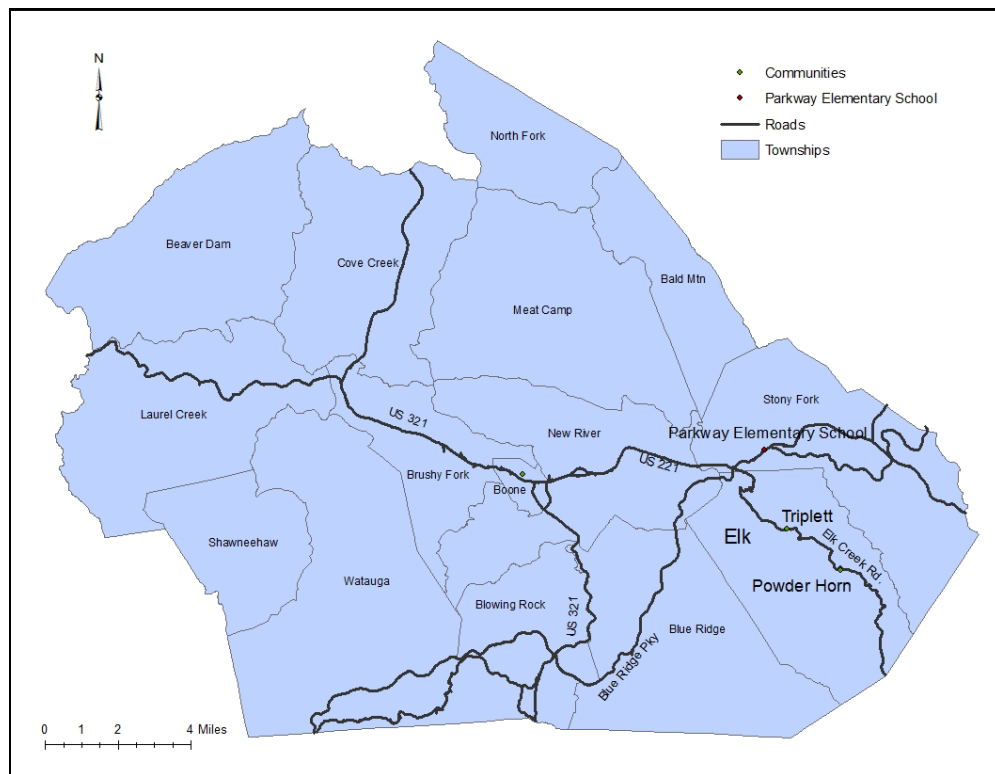


Figure 3.5 Location of Triplett in Watauga County.

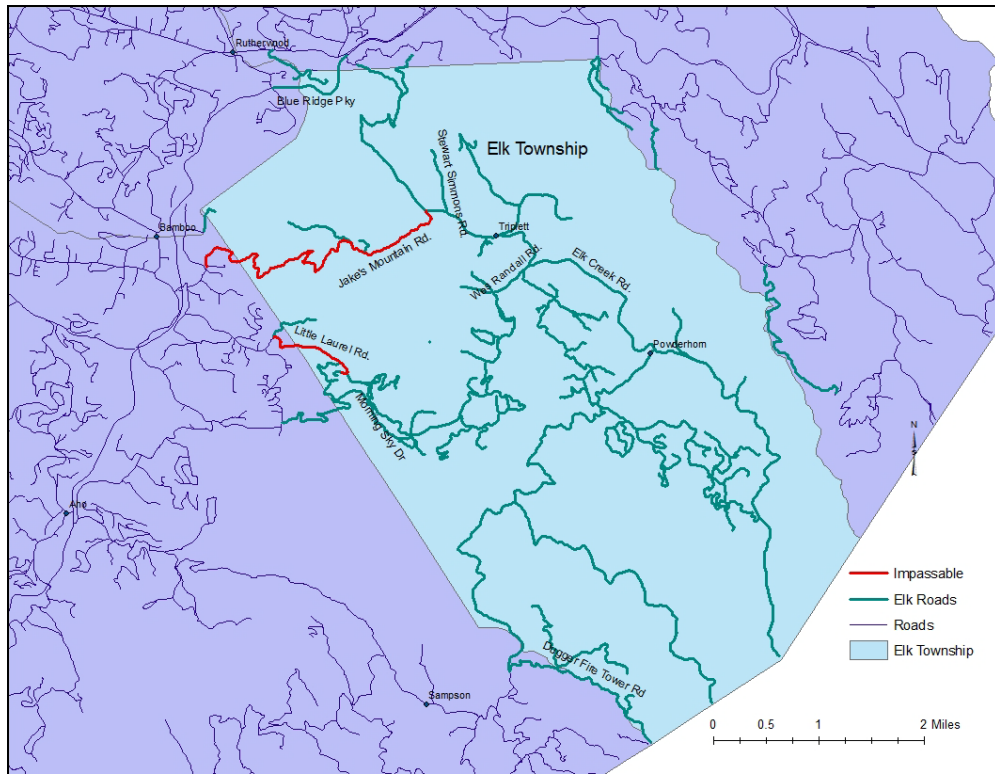


Figure 3.6 Limited access to Triplett.



Figure 3.7 Photo taken from Blue Ridge Parkway. Triplett lies at the bottom with Heavenly Mountain displayed above.

3.6.1 Boundaries of Triplett Community

Due to the rural nature of Triplett, determining the dimensions of the community is difficult. The center of the community is generally said to be the fire station located near the Elk Creek Rd. and Jakes Mountain Rd. intersection. However, this may be reminiscent of the old country store that used to be located across the street, at the corner of Elk Creek Rd. and Stewart Simmons Rd. The fire station and the road are named after Stewart Simmons, the deceased owner of the country store. Currently, the only aspect of the location, other than the fire station, that would indicate the center of a community is the public dumpsters.

There are several ways the boundaries of Triplett could be drawn including census tracts and fire districts. Due to the rural character of the area, population densities are so low that both these methods yield extremely large areas (the fire district services 510 people across 20,000 acres). Two former residents were asked to describe the boundaries of Triplett. Both responded that Triplett includes Elk Creek Rd., from where it meets Highway 221 all the way to Darby as well as all adjoining roads. This description of Triplett coincides relatively closely with the Elk Township as it is defined by the census. For the most part, this is how the community will be delineated in this research. However, there are times when the Triplett and Powder Horn community boundaries are used for analysis purposes. These dimensions were used in order to offer a comparison of development between Triplett and Powder Horn, a gated community established in the 1970's. Many families that have been established in Triplett for generations point to the establishment of Powder Horn as the initiation of modernization in the community.



Figure 3.8 Near the intersection of Highway 421 and Elk Creek Rd. Residents mark this as the upper boundary of Triplett.



Figure 3.9 Intersection of Elk Creek Rd. and Darby Rd. Residents mark this as the lower boundary of Triplett.

3.6.2 Landscape of Triplett

Triplett is located in rugged terrain that limits access to the community. Currently, the vast majority of land parcels are residential. The settlement patterns of Triplett are similar to what is typical in southern Appalachia. Many lots have gardens on their property but the frequency has diminished in recent years, partly due to the fact that many young adults leave the community after high school. There is a small amount of land devoted to agricultural purposes, mostly very small Christmas tree farms. There are currently four churches in the community but the number fluctuates as congregations argue, separate and make amends.

Elk Creek Rd. is intimidating for many people and consequently, few people choose to live in the valley. It is interesting to notice the different types of houses as one drive down into the valley. At the very top, near US Highway 221, there are a few newer homes that look very similar to vacation homes that can be seen across Watauga County. However, as one travels down Elk Creek Rd., residential patterns are more typical of what would be expected from a traditional Appalachian neighborhood. It is common to find a lot with a main house accompanied by several smaller houses or trailers. It is important to note that while this arrangement may look unkept to many middle class Americans; to many Appalachian natives this kind of settlement is expected. It is common for parents to live in the home place while their children's families live in adjacent trailers. This arrangement displays a kinship network and a connection with the land that is absent from most modern housing arrangements.

3.6.3 Transportation

Since Triplett is a rural community, residents rely heavily on personal vehicles to get around. Public transportation is absent entirely from the community as it is located approximately 10 miles outside of Boone. Elk Creek is the only road leading in and out of the community that can be used on a daily basis. Jake's Mountain Rd. does connect Elk Creek Rd. to Deerfield Rd. but the road is extremely rugged in sections and many four wheel drive cars won't make it through unless they have a substantial amount of clearance. There are a couple other routes back to Boone but they all require access to gated communities.



Figure 3.10 Common residential arrangement in Appalachia. Main houses are often accompanied by smaller housing units.

Other than that, one would have to drive all the way down to Wilkes or Caldwell counties and then back up Highway 421 or Highway 321 in order to get back to Boone.

Currently, most of the roads are kept fairly well but this has not always been the case. As recently as 15 years ago some of these roads were extremely rough and a four-wheel drive was required to live in many homes. Even today, as Figure 3.6 shows, many roads either dead-end or turn to dirt and become so rough that they are not navigable by most standards. There are no formal sidewalks that facilitate walking but this is not usually an issue due to the low volume of traffic. However, there are a few spots along Elk Creek Rd. that are very narrow and curvy and walking along these areas could be very dangerous as drivers would have a hard time seeing pedestrians. At the same time, the nature of the terrain in these areas all but prohibits sidewalks as the road is built on the side of a mountain.

3.6.4 Community Institutions

Other than the fire station—which is where all community functions like pig-pickins and meetings are held—the only community institutions to speak of are churches. At this time, there are four but the number fluctuates considerably. Currently, there are no parks in the community although some residents have expressed the idea that until the Reynolds Blue Ridge (formerly Laurelmor) development, the community had access to a 6,000 acre playground that is now restricted to landowners. Within the last 15 years, a small park was located at a waterfall in the area but it was not on public land. When the land sold the new owner put a gate across the road which has effectively cut off access to the general population. Children that grow up in this community attend Parkway Elementary School which is located very close to where Elk Creek Rd. meets Old US Highway 421.

3.6.5 Quality of Life

Any statement pertaining to quality of life provides more information about the person making the statement than it does about the area or people the statement is about. Triplett is a rural community and many of the amenities associated with urban areas are absent from this area. Due to the current landscape, rural dwellers have to travel further to obtain daily necessities such as gas, food and other household items than urban residents; the nearest grocery store is approximately six miles from the center of Triplett while the nearest gas station is eight miles. However, there are areas in the Elk Township that would require significantly more time to reach these amenities. Since employment is all but absent from the community, residents are forced find work in Boone so commute time is more of a factor than for people living in town.

However, the absence of all these characteristics is not to say that the community has a low quality of life or that there is not a sense of community among residents. Much has been written about the ambiguous nature of Appalachia communities (Beaver, 1986; Keefe, 2008). Ethnographers have shown that while many Appalachian areas display few obvious signs of community, kinship networks ensure that people come together in times of crisis to provide financial and emotional support to those in need. It is not uncommon for pig-pickins to be held in order to raise money for a community member who has been hospitalized or for the men in a community to gather for a barn raising. Additionally, many of the residents of Triplett have chosen to live here precisely to avoid the ‘amenities’ that many urban residents cannot live without. The current research indicates that many Appalachian residents feel that a relationship with the land, simple living, and

taking it slow are the amenities that rural community provides that can not be found in urban areas.

3.6.6 Demographics

All housing units in Triplett are single family houses or trailers; there are no apartments in the entire community. The majority of houses in Triplett are owner occupied but there are rental units as well as a few second homes that remain vacant for long periods of time. The community has been growing older as most members of the past couple generations have left the area after high school either to attend college or in search of better jobs. However, there has been a small, but substantial influx of middle age people who have moved back to the community to raise a family after they have finished college or technical training. Most members of the community are employed in working class level jobs; construction, medical services, childcare, foodservice, and jobs based in the tourist economy are all commonly held by residents. In general, Triplett can be characterized as a relatively poor community of small landholders.



Figure 3.11 Central Triplett

3.7 Development and Tourism in Triplett

Triplett is often cast as a part of the county that has experienced a slower rate of development than many other areas. In order to determine the extent to which this is true, the rate of building construction in Triplett was compared to other unincorporated communities within Watauga County (see Table 3.2).

| Community Name | Structures in 1950 | Structures in 2000 | Number Built | Percent Change |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Grandfather | 16 | 135 | 119 | 744% |
| Sampson | 19 | 75 | 56 | 295% |
| Pottertown | 62 | 112 | 50 | 81% |
| Kellersville | 67 | 188 | 121 | 181% |
| Matney | 67 | 292 | 225 | 336% |
| Triplett | 69 | 180 | 111 | 161% |
| Peoria | 77 | 187 | 110 | 143% |
| Powder Horn | 80 | 400 | 320 | 400% |
| Zionville | 102 | 273 | 171 | 168% |
| Rominger | 154 | 384 | 230 | 149% |
| Mabel | 172 | 336 | 164 | 95% |
| Sugar Grove | 189 | 467 | 278 | 147% |
| Bethel | 191 | 408 | 217 | 114% |
| Deep Gap | 218 | 532 | 314 | 144% |

Table 3.2 Rate of growth in Watauga County Townships 1950-2000 (Source: U.S. Census 2000).

Of the 14 Watauga communities that were analyzed, only three had fewer buildings constructed between 1950 and 1999 than Triplett. While Triplett comes out right in the middle when percent change is considered, most of the communities which displayed slower growth rates had more structures in 1950 than Triplett does in 1999. These two observations together, suggest that while Triplett has traditionally been an underdeveloped part of the county, the trend has started to shift over the past few decades. Additionally, the increased notoriety brought to the area with the announcement

of Laurelmor/Reynolds Blue Ridge will likely increase the rate of development in the near future. Further GIS analysis of Triplett and Powder Horn was conducted in order to ascertain the differing degree of development between the two communities (see Figure 3.12). Powder Horn is gated and private and Triplett residents have mentioned tensions between the two communities. Some even refer to the establishment of Powder Horn as the initiation of modern experience. This analysis compares the rate of development in the two communities by determining the year parcels were developed and then examining trends.

| Decade | Number of Developed Parcels Triplett | Number of Developed Parcels Powder Horn |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Prior 1950 | 27 | 18 |
| 1950-1959 | 6 | 10 |
| 1960-1969 | 13 | 8 |
| 1970-1979 | 22 | 114 |
| 1980-1989 | 17 | 104 |
| 1990-1999 | 39 | 64 |
| 2000-2009 | 29 | 77 |
| Total Number of Developed Parcels | 153 | 395 |
| Total Number of Parcels | 427 | 1,437 |
| Percent Developed | 35.8% | 27.5% |

Table 3.3 Comparison of rates of development in Triplett and Powder Horn (Source: U.S. Census 2000).

Table 3.3 and Figure 3.12 both display the differing rates of development between the Powder Horn gated community and Triplett. Prior to 1970, Triplett and Powder Horn had experienced comparable rates of development. During the 1970's, the private, gated Powder Horn community was established and the two communities were sent down very different paths. The nature of these differences will be discussed in the next chapter. This discussion will examine the perspective of Triplett residents in order to understand the experience of native's residents, followed by a comparison of newcomers.

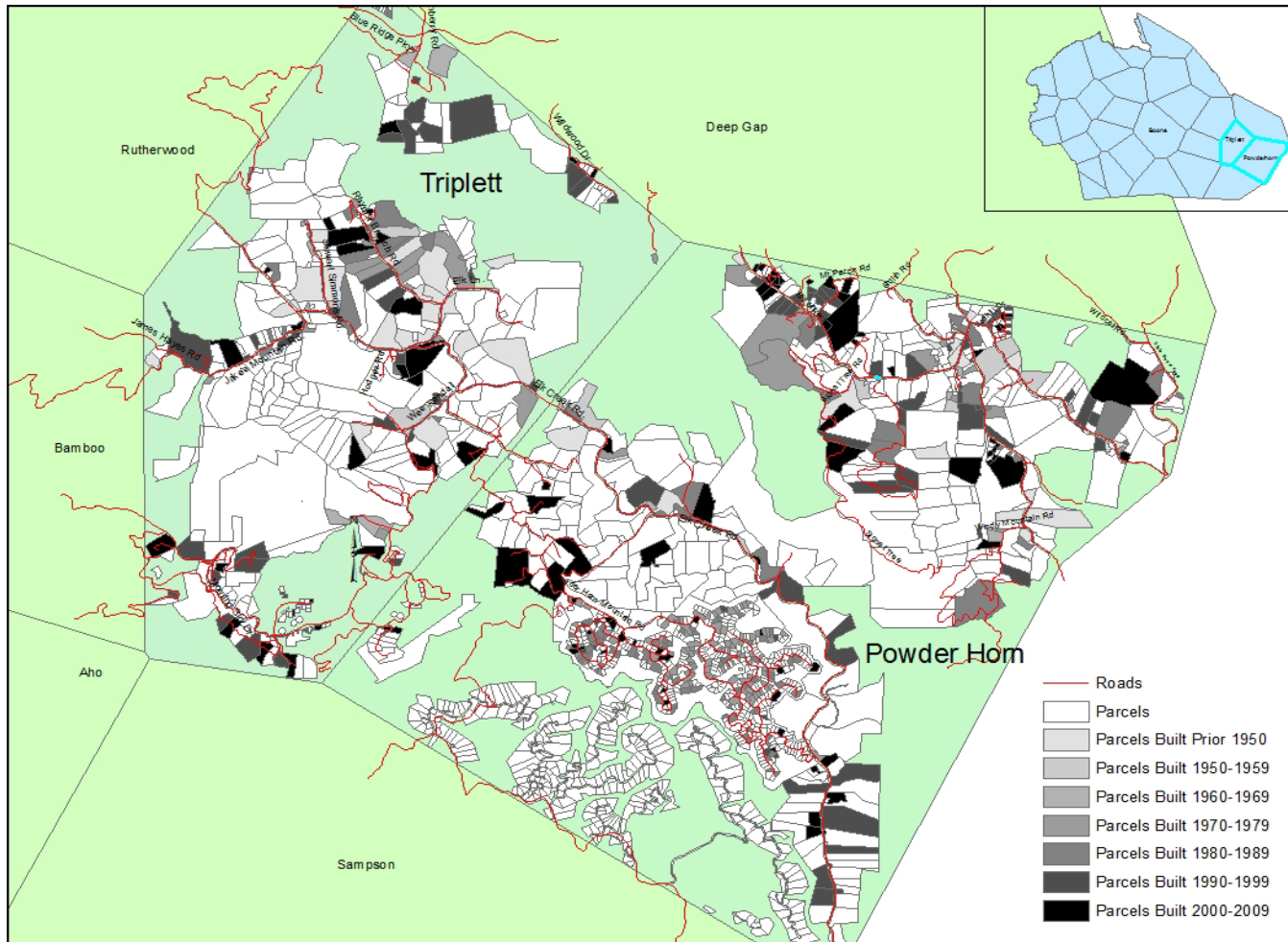


Figure 3.12 Comparison of development rates between Triplet and Powder Horn (U.S. Census 2000).

Chapter 4

Qualitative Assessment of Triplett and Watauga County, North Carolina

4.1 Methods

Six interviews were carried out with old-timer Triplett residents in the spring of 2009 with the goal of understanding the community's experience with development. An additional six interviews with Watauga County newcomers were carried out in the spring of 2010. Informants were selected by age and gender in the hopes of gaining insight into how perspectives may be different based on these criteria. A sample size of 12 was used to enable the research approach to be ethnographic in nature. This approach was used to allow informants the most freedom in their responses. This freedom provided informants with an avenue to express their experience rather than restricting them to short, precise responses to a questionnaire or survey. The sampling technique used follows ethnographic guidelines found in Bernard (2006) and Schensul et. al. (1999).

The goal was to have an even number of informants in each age group but younger residents were more difficult to locate—this is probably indicative of the fact that many people leave Triplett shortly after high school in an attempt to find a job. These interviews will help determine whether Triplett is gentrifying by examining the following seven indicators of rural gentrification. These indicators include:

- 1) A sense of loss of people, places or social institutions
- 2) Conflicting feelings about the definition and function of community
- 3) A shifting sense of place
- 4) Shifting land use patterns
- 5) Privatization of resources
- 6) Conspicuous consumption of the countryside
- 7) Issues of housing affordability

The second sample comprises six individuals who own their own home and have lived in the area for less than ten years. This set is used to compare how responses may vary between established residents whose families have lived in Watauga County for generations and people who have moved to the area more recently.

4.1.1 Sampling Procedure

Relations with members of the Triplett community were initially established by the author while attending Parkway Elementary School and it is through these connections that the search for informants began. Initial contact was made with a male, age 28, who has been a friend for over 15 years. A list of community residents he felt would be willing to participate was compiled during these preliminary conversations. Possible informants were contacted via telephone and during casual conversations each resident was asked if they knew of additional persons willing to participate. Essentially, the sampling method employed was the snowball method outlined by Bernard (2006).

Finding willing participants proved more difficult than anticipated. The first four willing participants were all male so it appeared gender may have been a factor—because the researcher is male, females may have been more hesitant to participate. As the research

proceeded, gender seemed to become less of an issue as two women did agree to participate. The difficulty may have been that the search for participants was too formal. In some conversations, residents stated that most members of the community would be willing to hold a casual conversation in their front yard about almost any topic but if they were told they were participating in an interview, they would walk back inside and the conversation would be over. The goal was to have a sample that included four informants over the age of 50 and four under the age of 35 in order to investigate how perspectives may differ with age. Due to the demographic nature of the residents who agreed to do interviews, three age categories were used (see table 4.1). I was able to find the names of three additional residents under 30 but none were willing to be interviewed.

| Old Timers | Under 30 | | 40-55 | | Over 65 | |
|------------|----------|---|-------|---|---------|---|
| | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 |

Table 4.1 Demographic characteristics of old-timer sample from Triplett.

An additional goal of the sampling process was to choose equal male and female participants for each age category. This would have enabled analysis of gender's influence on perspective as well as age. In the end, both female informants were between the ages of 40 and 55. The small sample of men and women inhibits conclusive findings about the role gender plays in perspectives on development. While it was not considered during the selection of informants, it appears that place of birth plays a key role in the formation of perspectives on modern capitalist development in the community. Four of the six informants were native to Appalachia, all born in Watauga County. While the other two are native to North Carolina, they were born outside the Appalachian region. They were included as old-timers due to their long standing commitment to the community. For example, one of these

residents has been invited to be buried at the local church. Additionally, they married into families that are native to the area. For the purposes of this research, it seems these individuals have been absorbed into the community for a sufficient period of time to be considered old-timers even though they were born outside the community.

In the second sample, there was no discrete community that was investigated. Instead, informants were chosen based on their length of residency in Watauga County. In order to find a sample in which to contrast newcomers and established residents, the second sample is composed of people who have lived in Watauga County less than ten years and own their own home. An attempt was made to restrict this group to people who live on the eastern side of the county because this is the area in which Triplett resides.

| Newcomers | Under 30 | | 35-50 | |
|-----------|----------|---|-------|---|
| | M | F | M | F |
| | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 |

Table 4.2 Demographic characteristics of newcomer sample.

The same snowball technique was used in the second sample to locate informants. The author contacted a couple who fit the requirements for the sample and asked if they knew of anyone else who met the same criteria. The process continued until a sufficient number of informants were located. In the end, six people were interviewed, four men and two women. Participants' ages in the newcomer sample does not coincide with the old timer sample. This fact inhibits the ability to compare how responses may vary with age between the two samples. Despite this, several aspects of the responses will be compared in the discussion below.

4.1.2 Data Collection

Ethnographic data has been observed by the author over the entire length of residency in the county, during casual conversation among residents and in visits to Triplett. More structured conversations have yielded written notes and formal interviews were recorded. During the interview process, data was collected through two main avenues. All informants permitted the interview to be recorded on my iPod. This enabled careful reexamination of interviews during transcription and the write up of field notes. The ability to listen to the interview over again frequently shed light on parts of the conversation that were missed the first time.

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------|--------------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|------|
| Old-timer Sample | Years in County | 28 | 47 | 30 | 48 | 48 | 34 |
| | Years of Education | 12 | 14 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| | Occupation | U | Fire | Ret | Nurse | Nurse | Ret |
| | Marital Status | S | M | W | M | M | M |
| Newcomer Sample | Years in County | 6 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| | Years of Education | 16 | 16 | 15 | 22 | 16 | 16 |
| | Occupation | Book | P.T. | Book | Ther. | U | S.E. |
| | Marital Status | M | M | R | R | S | R |

Table 4.3 Comparison of old-timer and newcomer samples. U=unemployed, F=firefighter, Ret=retired
Book=ASU bookstore, P.T.=physical therapist, Ther.=therapist, R=in a relationship

Since interviews did not occur with all the people who had agreed to participate, the only knowledge of their opinions are through informal conversations in the search for

informants. Most of these conversations were over the phone but some were in person and some were even through e-mail and online chat services. Additionally, some informants were able to provide insight into the feelings of other family members and friends that were not willing to participate. In these instances, responses were recorded in a notebook. Appendices A and B list the interview questions for the old-timer and newcomer samples respectively.

4.2 Landscape

There are some differences in housing style along Elk Creek Rd. that shed light on variations in lifestyle. After turning onto Elk Creek Rd., the first left arrives at the house shown in Figure 4.1. This house can be contrasted with the living arrangement shown in Figure 4.2 which lies as far up Jake's Mountain Rd. as a car is easily able to maneuver. These two houses are extremes, and most people living in Triplett experience a lifestyle somewhere in between. However, it is useful in displaying the tremendous disparity between those with access to resources and those with relatively little access.

Figure 4.1 depicts a house that decorates the land. It was obviously built with the spectacular view in mind. It should also be noted that this house is currently empty and on the market. Figure 4.2 depicts a living arrangement that could hardly be called a house at all. A person living in this dwelling obviously experiences a tremendously different lifestyle than a potential buyer of the first house.

4.2 Findings from the Old-timer Sample of the Triplett Community

4.2.1 Sense of Loss

As recently as 50 years ago, Triplett was relatively self-sufficient, with their own country store that provided most of the daily necessities. A substantial amount of food was locally produced. Several informants referred to pictures of the valley that depict an agricultural community with corn being grown all the way from the valley floor to the ridge line. Today, very few even attempt to make a living in the agricultural sector and those that do choose to make an attempt at Christmas trees rather than food—the closest thing to a traditional farm is a small garden in somebody’s backyard.



Figure 4.1 House overlooking Triplett.



Figure 4.2 Housing arrangement along Jake's Mountain Rd.

Historically, the country store/post office was an outlet for news and gossip as well as a place to meet people. Several informants said that during this time, they knew everybody that lived in Triplett by name while they currently only know a handful. Functioning as a cohesive element, the store grounded the community and provided a place to keep in touch. Additionally, the community used to be known for its baseball team. There was a baseball diamond in one of the churchyards and teams from all over Wilkes and Watauga Counties came to play. Triplett was known as the team that never loses because if they were in danger of being beat, they would start a fight and there would never be a finish to the game. Neither the country store nor the baseball diamond is currently present in the community. The popularity of baseball has declined throughout the area, not just in Triplett. There used to be several other teams in the area and an established schedule that has declined significantly over the past couple decades.

The fire department has even ceased to put on pig-pickins; Triplett used to be known for their pig-pickins for miles. Residents provided unique reasons why pig-pickins are no longer held. Some community member felt that they had been held too frequently and that community members got tired of going. Others pointed to the fact that the food was no longer homemade and that it had been bought in grocery stores. One informant that had been involved in the organization of pig-pickins up until the cessation of their use blamed changes in transportation networks. Prior to the construction of the 'new' four lane 421 highway, Elk Creek Rd. connected with Highway 421, the major highway for people traveling into Boone from the east. When the community put on a pig-pickin', they would put a sign up at the intersection of Elk Creek Rd. and Highway 421 to attract customers. The informant said that by the time anybody arrived at the bottom of the hill, "they'd figure well might as well eat 'cause I don't know when we're ever getting out of here." When the new four lane Highway 421 opened a couple miles to the north, the volume of traffic on the old highway decreased dramatically. As a result, Triplett's pig-pickins no longer made a profit. There was not enough extra traffic generated by the sign at the intersection of Elk Creek Rd. and Highway 421. The reasons why the country store went out of business are very similar in that it was the result of improved transportation networks. Residents started making trips to Boone and Wilkesboro more regularly. The necessities were cheaper at the large grocery stores and slowly, the local store lost its clientele.

There are very few community events held today that bring people together in a fashion that resembles the power baseball and gossip once held. To be able to say you know every single person in your community by name indicates a unity currently absent in Triplett. It does not appear to be because the community has grown significantly either. While there

are more residents in Triplett now than there were 30 years ago, growth has been very slow and population density remains low.

Almost every conversation or interview eventually turned to the topic of the 'old timers' and what their perspective would have been; or is in the very few cases where they are still around to have a perspective. Thoughts on how the old timers felt about development were very similar; everyone agreed that they want their community to stay the way it has 'always' been. All the informants suggested that the old timers would have been adamantly opposed to the Laurelmor development. This notion leads to the sense that there is a break in perspective; that they somehow would have felt differently about the topic than the people having these discussions at this current moment in time.

The residents themselves attribute these different viewpoints to differences in perspective caused by time and memory. One informant said that the old timers were more likely to hold a negative view on development because they remembered what the Triplett community was like in the past. The community used to be more self contained or self sufficient; it was less dependent on the nearby towns of Boone and Wilkesboro. Younger residents are less likely to resent development because they have never experienced the community in that light. Throughout their memory, Boone served to meet the daily necessities, not the community itself. As transportation networks improved, it became more cost effective to shop in Boone and Wilkesboro instead of at the local country store. As a result, some of the younger members of the community do not even remember that a country store ever existed. Additionally, they have grown up accustomed to the presence of newcomers in their neighborhood and it has become commonplace for neighbors to come from a very different background with a much different economic history.

One of the most poignant statements made in the entire research process was in response to a question about the direction of development in Watauga County. The informant sat silent for almost a full minute and finally responded with a quote from an old minister, "...everybody's getting rich off the land around here except the people with family buried on it." The level of discontinuity between locals and newcomers in this statement is striking and reveals the extent to which the mobility of modern America has affected the area. In addition to discontinuity in Watauga County, there is also discontinuity in the community itself. Triplett is a dynamic community and a blanket statement pertaining to the overall view of development can hardly be made.

4.2.2 Gender and Power

Early in the research process, gender seemed to be the variable with the most predictive power concerning perspective on development. The two native, female informants held the most negative view on development by far. However, after listening to their interviews a few times, it seems I may have gotten representatives from at least two, and likely three, spheres of the Triplett community, one with very deep roots in the community and others that have moved there more recently. This seems likely because the women explicitly state that most of the men they know personally are more against the Laurelmor development than they are themselves. This statement does not coincide with the findings of this study and suggests that there is some discontinuity within the community. It also suggests that while gender may appear to be significant within my sample, it is unlikely that it is significant in the same way in the community as a whole. Instead, I suggest that the female informants are representative of a sphere of the Triplett community that participates

in an alternative version of modernity in which the traditional elements are embraced and incorporated into the modern.

The female informants referred to themselves as “country folk you know, we just don’t like people intruding in on us..., we like our elbow room...especially when they slip in...used to know everybody that went up and down the road but no more...forget it...but what can one person do? We can complain about it and write to you know our leaders...but that’s about it, I ain’t got enough power or money to get ‘em to listen...”

These statements sum up the perspective of the sphere of Triplett residents who have very deep roots in the community. They are Appalachian natives. They were born a few miles further down in the valley and have never lived anywhere else and identify themselves accordingly as country folk. Outsiders are seen as an intrusion because they represent the breakdown of community; people no longer know all their neighbors. While the above statements reveal the uneasiness locals feel toward outsiders, it also reveals that they don’t believe anything can be done about it. Within the community itself, the belief that the Triplett experience is different than the mainstream experience is present. They feel that their desires for their own community are secondary to the influential power afforded by those with larger bank accounts.

Many aspects of modernity like automobiles and electricity are accepted but many others, such as conspicuous consumption and rationality are scorned; because of these characteristics, I argue that these residents have reworked aspects of modern life to coincide with traditional values that has created a lifestyle unique to Triplett.

No other subgroup within the sample was as adamantly opposed to outsiders and development as the two female informants. The perspectives of the remaining four

informants can also be broken into two subgroups. One is composed of two men who are native to Appalachia but who are much less hesitant about development than the two women are. There are two possible explanations for the differences. In one case, the man's family moved to Triplett from Florida in the late 1970's, just a couple years before he was born. In this sense, he is not completely a member of the mountain community; while he was born and raised in Appalachia; his family is from outside the region which could have influenced his perspective. Additionally, he is by far the youngest informant and his experience has been affected accordingly. In the other case, the man was definitely a member of the mountain community, his family has lived in Watauga County for six generations but the extent to which the Ginn Company had provided monetary support for the fire department admittedly influenced this man's perspective. In fact, the monetary support had been so substantial that the fire department was able to permanently employ this informant whereas previously he had been only a volunteer. While he is hesitant about the direction of development in general, he believes the Laurelmor development to be more environmentally conscious than others. He even went so far as to say he preferred the fact that the area would be a single development instead of a comparable number of independent lot developments.

The final subgroup is composed of two men born outside of Appalachia who moved into the region about thirty years ago. One of the informants said he "thought the world was going to hell in a hand-basket" and that while it is taking longer than he anticipated, the outlook is still grim, and he didn't want to participate in its collapse. His wife was from Appalachia and they moved back to the region to 'escape' aspects of the modern world that they did not appreciate. The insinuation is that Appalachia offers an experience different than that of mainstream America, that it is a place to escape the modern world.

4.2.3 Land ownership

One of the most revealing topics of discussion during the interviews was the idea of land ownership. This is a topic where several of the informants feel the inhabitants of Laurelmor will hold a different perspective; their idea of the meaning of owning land will be very different. Members of the Triplett community take land ownership very seriously. One informant, a native of Watauga County, stated that “purchasing land should be looked at as a commitment similar to marriage, a lifelong commitment that becomes part of the structure of you. The purpose of land ownership is to live on it, to take what you need but to ensure that it remains in good enough health for somebody else to use it for the same purpose when you are done with it.” Obviously landownership means a lot to the people in Triplett. There is a belief that people buying lots in Laurelmor will not see land ownership as a commitment but as an investment. Most of the owners will only visit their property for a few weeks and it will remain empty for the remainder of the year. In the minds of some of the Triplett residents, empty houses represent people that do not want to participate in community, that take what they want when they want and then leave with little concern for anybody else.

4.2.4 Land Rights

While there is the possibility for conflict between the two opposing perspectives, the notion of private property rights seems to override the possibility. All informants proclaimed that people should be able to do what they want to with their land. One said that the only time any one person should assert any influence over what his neighbor does with his land was in a situation where one landowner ‘s activity threatens the health of the other. For reasons I have not been able to identify, the notion of health in this case does not extend to economic health. Residents acknowledge the development will increase cost of land and

provide relatively low paying service based jobs. This will contribute to a situation in which local people are finding it harder and harder to remain living in their home. For some reason, they do not seem to feel this activity warrants any kind of response on their part or they feel that their response will be seen as insignificant among the more affluent and powerful.

Mountain culture has a strong history of personal property rights and the modern world has done little to diminish this belief. What modernity has done is to change land use patterns. Historically, these communities allowed people to do what they wanted to with their own land but the catch was that everybody farmed. Today, very few people farm and land use practices are much more varied but personal property rights remain very strong. The result is a culture that maintains traditional beliefs in property rights; perhaps to a fault.

4.2.5 Rate of Change

All informants agreed that there has been a discrepancy in the rate of change and development in Triplett and the rest of Watauga County. There is a sense that development in Triplett has occurred at a much slower pace; one informant even called the community “the armpit of Watauga County.” The comment was not meant in a demeaning way toward the Triplett community, it was more critical toward the surrounding area for its ‘progress.’ Resentment and appreciation intertwine to create a complex impression of us and them.

When responding to questions about the lifestyle of potential inhabitants in the Laurelmor development, a very vivid sense of common identity emerged among the interviewees. Everybody expressed the belief that there would be minimal interaction between residents of the two communities. One informant called Laurelmor residents “mud ass rich people,” while at the same time identifying himself and Triplett residents as small land holders. He even went so far as to say that if he won the lottery today, there is no way

he would buy property in Laurelmor. Obviously, the division between the two communities is more than monetary or class based, it is cultural as well.

4.2.6 Conclusions

When Triplett residents refer to the fact that they no longer know all their neighbors, they are likely referring to their inability to reproduce their native culture. Traditional Appalachian culture relied on the shared experience of the ancestors to stress egalitarianism. As more newcomers move into a community, the shared experiences of the ancestors broke down. The mechanism that had solidified community membership and identity is no longer present. Now, economic and monetary differences between community residents are much more pronounced, visible and important in daily life than they were 40 years ago.

4.3 Newcomers

Due to the fact that the newcomer sample is comprised of people with relatively new ties to the county and because the sample is not representative of a community with discrete boundaries, analysis of the second set of interviews is unable to comprise any kind of community history as was possible in the above section. Instead, responses will be analyzed in a more linear format.

4.3.1 Employment

Initially, the newcomer sample was to include people living in Watauga County for ten years or less that moved here for reasons not associated with Appalachian State University. As the search for participants ensued, it became apparent that these two criteria together were very difficult to meet. Even people who did not personally relocate to Watauga County for reasons associated with the university frequently moved to the area with

someone who did relocate for those reasons. In the end, only two of six participants were living in Boone for reasons completely independent of ASU. On the other side, only two participants moved to Watauga County for employment reasons directly associated with ASU. However, an additional two participants moved here as a result of a significant other finding employment with the university. In addition, these two individuals eventually became either students of ASU or found employment with the university.

4.3.2 Ties to Watauga County

Half of the newcomers to Watauga had some sort of previous experience with the area prior to making it their home. One attended Appalachian State University to obtain their college education, one had parents who owned a vacation home in the area, and the third had been coming to the area for outdoor activities including rock climbing. One of the three who did not have any previous experience in Watauga County is married to a man who received an undergraduate degree at Appalachian State before relocating to Durham for employment.

All informants recognized the role of Appalachian State in the development of the county as a whole as well as its influence in their personal decision-making. It is believed that the university provides the catalyst for growth that separates Watauga County from the rest of the region. This distinction between Watauga County and neighboring counties is seen as positive; newcomers all believed that the university plays a beneficial role in the culture and economy of the area. Growth is seen to benefit the area as long as it is controlled and in check. If the corresponding infrastructure keeps pace with pure growth then it is believed that everybody benefits. The underlying impression one gets from these conversations is that none of these people would have relocated to the area if the university influence was not present.

Informant's responses to questions about change in the county varied considerably. The most noticeable variation comes from people moving to the area before the housing crisis compared to those coming to the area after the housing crisis. People who moved here prior to the recent economic downturn and housing bust maintain that Boone has grown; their responses all indicate that there has been significant development and construction. The two informants who moved here more recently, during or after the housing crisis, report that they have 'actually seen an emptying out' of local businesses. This is not to say they are really worried about the economy of the area; they actually think the Boone area has been impacted less by these downturns than many other parts of the country. What is important to note is that this perspective is markedly different than any other response in either sample.

Responses from residents who moved to Watauga County merely three years earlier stand in stark contrast to those given by the newest residents. Informants who moved to Boone before the housing crisis still speak of the growth experienced in the area recently. Discussion often reverted to the notion that Watauga County has become more crowded; businesses have grown, there are a greater concentration of restaurants, hotels, and banks. Similar to all other respondents, this growth is seen to be largely associated with the growth of ASU. The consensus is that if Appalachian State continues to grow, the surrounding area will grow as well. The newcomers tend to view this growth in a positive light. The university is seen as "keeping the area alive" and it is believed that Boone "is run by the university."

Newcomers also tended to mention image when discussing how Watauga County has changed. People who had ties to the area prior to setting up permanent residence were especially inclined to discuss the impact a shifting student body identity has had on the

make-up of Boone. These comments paint the Boone of twenty years ago as a “ski resort town with a hippy school...it was a small town. But now it seems like a tourist town and the hippy school is now a sorority, fraternity, athletic, football crowd.”

The notion of image also comes up when newcomers explain their motivations for moving to the area. As stated earlier, all newcomers moved to the area for employment related reasons; however, several of these informants had other job opportunities to choose from. What caused Watauga County to stand out were frequently their ideas about what living in a mountain town would be like and the perceived unique qualities of the sought lifestyle. One informant stated that part of the reason Boone was chosen was due to the fact that “it is unique because it is in the southeast and it has seasons...it is progressive and rural...high morality coupled with progressive views.” Some were attracted to the area because it seemed to be home to people who wanted to have a simpler lifestyle.

Others spoke of their memories of childhood vacations in the mountains and how these memories shaped their impression of the mountain people and culture. Watauga County was experienced as a place where people of all backgrounds came together and celebrated their differences in a way that was respectful to each other and the local population. The locals were seen as moral and religious but not in a pushy or showy way. They stood up for their beliefs yet let you keep your own beliefs at the same time. These qualities created an image in one individual’s mind that drew him back to the area again and again; eventually to take up permanent residence. The image of the area that this individual held in his mind was crucial in enticing him back to the area; without it, he never would have moved here.

4.3.3 Land Ownership

Land ownership is viewed similarly across the board. Newcomers often spoke of a coming of age experience associated with land ownership; it means that you are grown up, an adult. Owning your own land brings with it freedom and security as well as responsibility. Some even went so far as to describe it as “quenching a primal desire for territory derived from our cave man ancestors.” The experience is seen as breeding responsibility because it fosters a connection with your land, your neighbors and your house. When something in your house breaks, it is your responsibility to fix it, or to live with it being broken. There is nobody else to pay for it or to take responsibility. These experiences are also seen as fostering a sense of territoriality. This experience is often tested when what happens on the land around you impacts your property. Some informants spoke of neighbors selling off timber or of undesirable landscaping practices that upsets their own feeling of territoriality. Some informants voiced complaints that the zoning laws did not enable a person to restrict what their neighbors did to their land. Many of the perceived benefits of owning property are financial. Property is seen more as an investment than an expense; security can be found in this investment. These responses indicate the perspective of property as a commodity that can be bought and sold for profit.

4.3.4 Scenic Qualities of Watauga County

When asked about the scenic qualities of the area in which they live, all informants agreed that it is a beautiful part of the world to live in. For the most part, they also agreed on what qualities about the area created its beauty. Sweeping vistas, forests, streams, valleys, shades of green, rock outcroppings, the seasons, change and ruggedness are all parts of the

local aesthetic that draw newcomers to the area. It is also believed that these qualities should be protected against destructive forces that threaten them, including growth.

4.4 Highlighting Similarities and Differences

As rural communities grapple with restructuring, the changes are not felt uniformly. People respond differently to these stressors both across and within communities. Nelson (2001) stresses the importance of understanding the different layers of experience to these trends in rural areas. Keeping these layers of experience in mind, this research requires an attempt at drawing out trends among newcomers and old-timers as well as between the two groups.

Established residents in Triplett all speak of a sense of loss; although they may highlight different community assets as being lost. Some stress the loss of natural biodiversity and wildlife as a result of habitat destruction and deforestation. Others concentrate on the breakdown of community solidarity due to the influx of new residents. Despite these differences, residents agree that the cause of these changes is overdevelopment. There is also a high degree of variability in residents' response to these changes. Some residents take advantage of new opportunities that come with growth and development while others attempt to reject the new lifestyles all together.

Similar to the old timer sample, responses among the newcomers display both similarities and differences. Employment is the main reason people relocate to Watauga County and, typically, employment is associated with ASU in some way. Newcomers tend to highlight the unique qualities of Watauga County that result from mix of the small southern town feel with a progressive university culture.

There are also trends that emerge between the two samples. Old timers are capable of discussing change to a much greater extent than newcomers. This is largely due to the longer period of time old timers have in which to reference; newcomers are hard pressed to talk about change when they have only lived in the area a few years.

For the purposes of this research, some of the most important differences between newcomer and old timer responses are in reference to questions about land ownership and scenic qualities of the area. Old timers tend to approach land ownership on a different level than newcomers. While both groups refer to the responsibility of owning land, old timers are more likely to refer to commitment to community and place while newcomers are more likely to refer to investment and image—a kind of rite of passage, becoming an adult. Additionally, there are some important differences concerning scenic qualities. Old timers do not stress natural beauty to the extent that newcomers do; they are much more concerned with human-environment interaction being evident on the landscape. Instead of referring to sweeping vistas, rock outcroppings and other aspects of the raw power of nature, they stress homes that are lived in, farms and ranches that interact with the land as opposed to homes decorating the land. Both groups held reservations about the rates of development in Watauga County but for different reasons; newcomer because development threatens environmental stability and old timers because their lifestyle is threatened.

Chapter 5

Interpreting Perceptions of Rural Gentrification

5.1 Introduction

After receiving little attention for decades, rural gentrification is a phenomenon that has generated increased interest in recent years, especially in the British countryside and the Rocky Mountain West. This thesis research has attempted to establish the degree to which gentrification may be taking place in rural communities in the Southern Appalachian region of the United States. A set of seven indicators of rural gentrification was developed based on previous work on the subject by geographers in the United States and Britain. These indicators include:

- 1) A sense of loss of people, places or social institutions
- 2) Conflicting feelings about the definition and function of community
- 3) A shifting sense of place
- 4) Shifting land use patterns
- 5) Privatization of resources
- 6) Conspicuous consumption of the countryside
- 7) Issues of housing affordability

This section will provide a synthesis of the preceding four chapters. In the process, each of these indicators will be tied to the data and stories discussed above. Many of these indicators

overlap and are represented through responses to the same questions as other indicators. Special consideration will be given to the layers of meaning outlined by Nelson (2001). This is of crucial importance because the experiences outlined in chapters three and four are manifest differently across communities but also within communities themselves. There is no universal experience of modernity, capitalism, restructuring or gentrification. Different aspects of these experiences are highlighted by different residents. Some are concerned with the environmental and ecological impacts of growth and cite the disappearance of biodiversity and wildlife as their chief concern. Others cite shifts in community identity and housing stock as critical changes in the landscape while still others see most of these changes as beneficial. These layered differences of experiences are not only visible between the two samples but within each sample as well.

5.2 Sense of Loss

A sense of loss of people, places or social institutions has been outlined as one indicator of gentrification by Ghose (2004) and Philips (1993). For over a century, Appalachia has experienced strong outmigration of people as the national economy shifted toward industry. Recently, with the creation of tourist and development economies, this trend has shifted somewhat. As shown in Chapter 3, Watauga County's population has nearly doubled in the last 40 years. However, in Triplett, the lure of better wages in other places has continued to pull young people to urban areas; even if these areas are as close as Boone. Of the approximately twenty kids from Parkway school that lived in Triplett while the author attended there, only three remain.

The country store is one of the most obvious community institutions that Triplett has lost over the past 30 years. In Appalachia, country stores, along with church, often

functioned as the center of community interaction. Residents of Triplett maintain that nothing has replaced the cohesive role the country store once held. The store was a place to hear news and meet people. Residents explain that at this time, everybody in Triplett knew everybody else. When the store closed, residents lost the major means of keeping touch and 30 years later, residents only know about half of the other people that live in the community. Local baseball teams are another community institution that has faded from the area. Baseball games functioned in ways similar to country stores by providing a time and place for members of the community to meet and interact.

5.3 Definition and Function of Land and Property

Asking informants what land ownership means to them revealed some stark differences in the meaning of community between the two samples. Established residents tended to view land ownership as a commitment to the land itself, and also to the community, present and future. Newcomers typically speak of land ownership in a different way; they speak of responsibility but not commitment. Most newcomers feel that being able to purchase your own house means that you have finally become an adult, that you have achieved a certain level of independence and that you are being responsible with your money, as long as you are in a home you can actually afford. There is no doubt that most people view land ownership as a more involved experience than renting. However, it is clear that long term residents view land ownership as a deeper commitment. The qualitative differences in these responses indicate that long term residents experience commitment to the community in a different way than newcomers.

One of the most revealing questions asked in the interviews was concerned with identifying the scenic qualities of the region that are important. Responses were markedly

different between newcomers and established residents. Newcomers tend to stress natural scenery; vistas, ridgelines, rock outcroppings, valleys, and streams in their response to this question. Established residents tend to stress a lived in landscape as the scenic quality that they cherish the most.

These differing responses hint at different meanings of community that are manifest on the landscape in a couple of ways. The first is that long term residents despise empty houses. One reason for this is that an empty house displays a landowner that is not interested in fostering a relationship with the land and the people. Empty houses represent landowners interested in investments or vacation homes as opposed to a landowner interested in engaging with and participating in the surrounding community.

5.4 A Shifting Sense of Place

Over the past 75 years, the American landscape has changed drastically and Appalachia is no different. The introduction of the automobile coupled with the rapid urbanization of the United States completely changed the way Americans experience community. One of the most drastic changes is the shift from an economy based on the land to one based on wage labor. Most people in Triplett no longer work in the community; almost all residents travel into Boone for employment.

An additional aspect of this shifting sense of place deals with residents' perceived shifting place in the economic makeup up the community. As discussed in Chapter 2, traditional Appalachian social organization tended to downplay the importance of class divisions based on income while stressing divisions based on status derived from the community's moral code. With the increase of private, gated communities that exclude established residents, there is an increased feeling of marginalization from places that were

traditionally shared among all residents as ‘public lands.’ While all Triplett residents agreed there is minimal interaction between old-timers and newcomers, the way they feel about this division varies tremendously—some residents take it as a personal attack while others don’t seem to mind at all.

5.5 Shifting Land-use Patterns

As discussed in Chapter 2, and mentioned in the above section, traditional Appalachian communities did not place much significance on class, these communities were largely egalitarian. One of the ways this egalitarian nature was manifest was through the conception of the hillsides as public lands. Even though this property was frequently privately owned, they were typically used by all members of the community as a kind of free range pasture for hogs. At the same time, Appalachian natives tend to stress the importance of private property rights.

While these two aspects of traditional Appalachian culture may appear to be contradictory at first glance, it seems likely they are manifestations of communities that are almost universally agricultural. It is easy for a community to be egalitarian when virtually every resident is economically dependent on agriculture. Even though some residents may own more (or more productive) land, the fact that status is derived from adherence to a moral code instead of economic variances, minimizes the importance of these differences. At the same time, it is easy to allow for strong private property rights when virtually all property is used for the same purpose, agricultural production. With recent shifts in national and international production of agricultural products, coupled with rapid in-migration into Triplett, the traditionally egalitarian culture has disintegrated over the past 50 years. Today, there is almost no land devoted to agriculture. Instead, the community is almost strictly

residential; in essence, a bedroom community of Boone. These changes in land use from largely agricultural to strictly residential and developmental can be interpreted as manifestations of rural gentrification.

5.6 Privatization of Resources

As noted in the previous sections, changes in the allocation and land use are the chief way long-term Triplett residents have experienced the privatization of resources. This shift was probably initiated with the movement from an agricultural economy to a service based economy reliant on tourism and development. As the number of farmers declined, the need for access to shared, public land decreased. The process has been accelerated over the past 30 years as gated communities have sprung up in Triplett. Additionally, there is increasing prevalence of individual landowners who post no trespassing signs.

One informant referred to the Reynolds Blue Ridge Resort as a former 6,000 acre playground that Triplett residents no longer have access to. Other residents were concerned with the development of some land by the CEO of Tropicana. While this is an individual case, not the combined impact of an entire gated community, the result is largely the same. This land is home to a small waterfall that used to be a community park, complete with picnic and camping areas. The new owner has removed the picnic area and posted no trespassing signs along the borders of his property.

5.7 Conspicuous Consumption of the Countryside

There is a certain amount of overlap between the two samples concerning the meaning of land ownership. However, several newcomers mentioned some aspects that were entirely absent from the old-timer sample. New residents to Watauga County often refer to land ownership as a status symbol, or as being indicative that they have achieved a certain

level of success in their lives, that they have gained financial independence and stability. These statements seem to refer to what land ownership represents to others as opposed to an internal commitment to the area.

These responses indicate that among newcomers, there may be an aspect of conspicuous consumption involved in land ownership. While all newcomers refer to a relationship with their land, they also refer to the status obtained in the process.

5.8 Housing Affordability

Chapter 3 illustrates that housing affordability issues are likely to permeate resident's experience in Watauga County. However, determining whether or not these problems impact old-timers more so than newcomers is difficult to determine. Since every person interviewed in this research was a home owner, there is no way to surmise that old-timers have more difficulty obtaining property or stable housing than newcomers.

5.9 Gentrification in Triplett and Watauga County

The bulk of gentrification in Watauga County probably occurred during the early 1970's. The development economy had been initiated in the 1960's and it was between 1970 and 1975 that it appears the area experienced the most pronounced shifts in economy and lifestyle. It has been said that the development economy has done more to shift the mountaineer's economy away from a direct relationship with the land than any other form of modern capitalist experience. This shift is the major avenue through which gentrification occurred.

The creation of an economy based on development caused land to be looked at as a commodity to be bought and sold; in other words, land became an investment. Old-timers perception of the purpose and function of land had always been wrapped up with the

agricultural economy; land was for farming and the value of land was associated with farming. When land began to be looked at as a commodity to be developed, the value rose considerably. This fact is illustrated in Chapter 3 which shows how much farm land was lost during this time as well as how much land values increased. These changes are what have caused Triplett to shift from a largely self sufficient farming community to a bedroom community of Boone, NC.

I propose that variations in the layers of meaning experienced among Triplett residents are largely associated with their experience in the community either before or after 1970. In other words, residents whose were established in Triplett prior to 1970 have the most negative view of development because they have memories of a very different Triplett than the one we see today. In this research, the two female informants who expressed strong negative feeling toward the direction of development in Watauga County are representative of people who were established in Triplett prior to 1970.

5.10 Generalizable Findings About Southern Appalachia

As a whole, Appalachia is frequently characterized as housing some of the poorest residents in all of the United States. The experiences of residents can vary tremendously depending on which part of Appalachia they call home. Central Appalachia experiences the tremendous influence of the coal companies. Since southern Appalachia contains no coal, traditional industrial activity has been confined to logging and deforestation.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, these activities have given way to the establishment of an economy based on development and tourism. This research has examined the impacts of this economy in Watauga County, North Carolina. In some ways, Watauga County is unique while in others it represents a typical southern Appalachian

county. What has emerged from this research is a portrait of what may be expected in southern Appalachian communities that are impacted by high rates of in-migration and development. There are certainly parts of southern Appalachia that are less impacted by development and tourism than Watauga County.

5.11 Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Work

One of the themes running through this research has been the perspective of Appalachia as a domestic colony of the United States. Chapter 3 showed that in Watauga County's development and tourist economy, this is largely manifest through the outside ownership of land. At the same time, one of the themes of Chapter 4 is the recognition by both old-timers and newcomers that Appalachian State University is the catalyst for growth and development in Watauga County. The recognition that many of the major decisions pertaining to Appalachian State University are made in Raleigh, coupled with the two themes mentioned above, creates an interesting picture that could be explored more fully. Is it possible that the outside control of decisions, such as the number of students Appalachian State University accepts in a year, is one of the agents of gentrification in Watauga County?

On a more local level, additional research conducted in the Elk Township area would be beneficial in enhancing our understanding of the possibility of rural gentrification. Triplett residents themselves state that the renovation of Powder Horn is likely to significantly impact their lives over the next few years. Additionally, the completion of Reynolds Blue Ridge resort in the near future will increase the number of newcomers to the area. The purchase of second homes in the area is likely to increase in the near future and it will be interesting to note how residents of the Elk Township respond to these changes. It

would also be useful to explore how the residents of Powder Horn and especially the future residents of Reynolds Blue Ridge respond to similar questions.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions: Old-timer Sample

1. What changes have occurred while you have lived in the area?
2. How do you feel about the direction of development in Watauga County?
3. How does the direction of development in Triplett compare?
4. How has Triplett handled these changes?
5. How do other generations feel about development?
6. Can you estimate how many households are in Triplett?
7. Is there a community center in Triplett?
8. Is this where community events are held? If not where are they held?
9. How many churches are in Triplett?
10. Is there a post office?
11. In what ways has Triplett grown?
12. What do you know about the Laurelmor development?
13. How did you find out about Laurelmor?
14. When did you find out?
15. Who will purchase lots and houses in the development?
16. How much do lots cost?
17. How do you feel about the Laurelmor development?
18. What do you think about the development changing hands from the GINN company to Reynolds Plantations?
19. Do you think development has affected the scenery?
20. Is the scenery an important part of the area?
21. How do you feel about 'non-native' people moving into the community?
22. Do the people that move into Triplett from other places participate in community activities?
23. How do you feel about the fact that that these are third and fourth homes as opposed to primary residences?
24. How do you feel about golf courses?
25. Has the development impacted property values?
26. What kind of jobs will the development bring to the area?
27. What does land ownership mean to you?
28. Where were you born?
29. How long have you lived in Triplett?
30. Do you consider yourself a native?
31. How many generations has the family lived in Triplett?
32. What do you do for a living?
33. How many years of education?

Appendix B
Interview Questions: Newcomer Sample

1. What changes have occurred in Watauga County while you have lived here?
2. What do you think about the direction of development in the county?
3. How do you think the direction of development in Boone compares to that of the surrounding area?
4. What drew you to Boone?
5. What does living here mean to you?
6. What does land ownership mean to you?
7. Is scenery an important aspect of this area?
8. Where were you born?
9. What do you do for a living?
10. How many years of education?

Biographical Sketch

I was born in 1981 in Miles City, Montana and spent the first years of elementary school in Missoula, Montana. I moved to Boone, North Carolina in July of 1990 and completed high school at Watauga High. In January of 2003 I began attending Appalachian State University, majoring in Geography. I received my BS in December 2007 and my MA in August 2010. I plan to begin doctoral work as soon as possible.