

# **WAUCOMA TWILIGHT: GENERATIONS OF THE FARM**

*Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Waucoma is built along the banks of the Little Turkey River, flowing through the rolling farmland of Fayette County in northeastern Iowa. This rural village is far from the reach of suburban sprawl; the closest cities are Waterloo, Iowa, a 53-mile drive to the southwest, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 86 miles to the northeast, and Rochester, Minnesota, 90 miles to the north. The largest village in Eden Township, Waucoma counted 277 residents in 1990. Adding the families dispersed on the farmsteads dotting the township, the community's total population numbers 727.

I first visited Waucoma in the summer of 1978, after Michael and I were married in Philadelphia. We traveled to Waucoma so that I could meet his grandparents, retired farmers. As a confirmed city dweller, I had never spent any time on a farm, and I could only vaguely imagine what it would be like to live in a place the size of Waucoma. It seemed to me that Waucoma and Philadelphia, where I grew up, were universes apart.

I returned to Waucoma for my second visit when Michael's grandfather died, a year later. Our trip triggered Michael's fond memories of childhood visits to the farm. He told me stories about days spent playing in the gully, a treelined ravine carved through the pasture by a stream meandering to the river. He described his delight, as a child, riding on the old Ford tractor, perched on his grandfather's lap. And I heard about escapades such as crossing a pasture patrolled by a bull, accomplished with the assistance of an experienced farm dog. Everyone in the family talked about how things had changed on the farm and around town. Unoccupied or demolished buildings presented a new facade, and, compared with memories of past activity, life in Waucoma seemed especially subdued.

These reminiscences sparked my interest in Waucoma, and Michael and I discussed the possibility of making a film about the farm. We envisioned long tracking shots, moving through the vacant barn, revealing abandoned implements and idle stanchions. Our filmmaking proceeded no further than the shots we imagined as we explored the empty buildings on the Balk farm, but a few years later I seized the opportunity to take an academic leave of absence from the University of Minnesota and return to the farm and Waucoma. Rather than make a film, I decided to make documentary photographs representing the way of life experienced by farm families in Waucoma.

## THE FARM IMAGE

As it turned out, in the fall of 1985 I wasn't the only person interested in representing the changes taking place in farm communities. The farm economy had been hit hard by the combination of deflated land values, escalating interest rates, and depressed commodity prices, and the media offered numerous accounts of the impact of the "farm crisis" on rural communities and farm families. Television networks sent their news anchors out to rural farm communities, and CBS went so far as to broadcast the evening news from a midwestern farm town. The lives of individual farm families provided the media with a narrative angle on the story.

Over and over, images of farm auctions appeared on the television screen or the printed page. Sound bites featuring the inexplicable cadence of the auctioneer as he offered equipment and machinery for sale served as a backdrop for the dramatic tension built up in these stories. People were shown bidding competitively for the spoils of the sale, while friends and family nervously paced at the edges of the crowd and the defeated farmer tried to appear proud and resolute, unbroken by the loss of his livelihood. Sometimes women were shown weeping.

These emotional dramas became the media's symbol for the troubles plaguing the American farm family. Scenes of auctions and farm protests, and stories about farmers confronting rural bankers and businesspeople cumulatively created an image of a turbulent heartland. Waucoma seemed to escape the full impact of the crisis as it was made manifest on the television screen. The despair and violence chronicled by the media were not apparent in Waucoma, although I heard a number of heated arguments among farmers about the state of the farm economy and its impact on friends and neighbors. In more subdued conversations, some farmers weighed the pros and cons of getting out of farming.

I took special note of local auctions and made sure to photograph as many as I could, because I was curious to see whether my portrayals of these events would echo media representations. Four auctions took place in Waucoma during the height of the farm crisis, but only two were farm auctions. I was able to attend and photograph three. I found the nonfarm and the farm auctions equally instructive. Each offered the careful observer an indication of the broader, more subtle dimensions of rural change.

## **THE MYERSES**

The Myerses' auction seemed deceptively familiar as I stood among the farmers and the machinery, listening to the monotone of the auctioneer. I had seen this image so many times that it seemed as if I was reexperiencing the auction rather than attending for the first time. All the familiar elements were there: the crowd of farmers moving from one item to the next as the auctioneer called the sale, the stalwart family endeavoring to present a controlled facade, and friends offering their support. I recognized many local farmers. They had come to see if they could pick up some necessary equipment at a good price and to make their contribution to the total proceeds tallied by their neighbor.

Outside, farmers moved from tractor to corn planter to combine, obediently following the route set out by the auctioneer. The hum of the auctioneer and the crowd seemed relentless. Inside the house, another drama was unfolding. Members of the community sat in the spacious kitchen, providing their moral support for the family. Women had brought food with them, and everyone shared a meal, passing the afternoon in conversation as the sale droned on. When I entered the kitchen, I was welcomed among these friends and neighbors, and I sat with the women at one end of the room, opposite from the men, gathered in another corner. The friends in the kitchen settled in for the duration, while I shuttled between the events inside and outside the house.

Finally, the last item was sold and the crowd began to disperse. Men worked together to load up their newly acquired equipment, and little by little the tools that had been used to farm the Myer's land were taken away, leaving behind an empty silence. I went back into the house and found even more people there than before. The kitchen buzzed with conversation. Tears were shed. Later on, when I said my good-byes, I was encouraged to say. When I explained that I had a long drive back to the city, I was immediately given a heaping plate of food and a hot cup of coffee to take on the road. Their sustenance and warm farewells eased by my 1709-mile journey home.

There was a difference between this scenario and the media portrayals I had seen, although on the surface it may have appeared similar. These farmers were not bankrupt' they chose to pull out of farming before things got any worse for them. As in many farm families, both husband and wife had held off-farm jobs to supplement their farm income for quite a while. "Buck" worked as a mail carrier, and his wife, Sandy drove a school bus route each day. Their decision to quit farming was the inevitable conclusion of years marked by deteriorating economic conditions and an increasing reliance on the income

drawn from off-farm jobs. Buck and Sandy still live on their farm-they didn't sell the land. Neighboring farmers rent it now, expanding the productivity of their own operations.

## **ETHEL JACK**

On Sunday, October 6, 1985, Ethel Jack's house and most of its contents went on the auction block. Ethel planned to move to a retirement home in Decorah, a larger town 30 miles to the northeast. Because her apartment would be small, she selected a limited number of things to take to her new home and offered the rest for sale. The media chose not to examine the significance of sales such as this one, even though all the compelling narrative elements were present—the auctioneer's drone, the seller standing by as possessions passed into others' hands, the ogling crowds. Like the Myerses', Ethel Jack's auction exemplified changes taking place in rural communities. A select group of widows living in Waucoma formed Ethel's immediate social circle. One by one they pass on, and, as a generation vanishes from Waucoma, few youngsters replenish the population.

Ethel was a member of the community's educated elite. She had been a teacher and traveled widely in her younger days. Memorabilia of her journeys were mixed among the more usual sale items. None of Ethel's family remained in the area, but her friends stood with her as she watched her possessions pass on to other people. The auction crowd included people Ethel recognized and strangers from other towns, avocational and professional auction shoppers, and casual onlookers. Some people came to buy while some came to see their friends and neighbors and reaffirm their ties to the community.

Tables, chests of drawers, and chairs described in the sale bill as "Antique and Collectible Furniture" were sold along with the more common household goods. These "antiques" were set apart because of the high price they might fetch. In the poster advertising the sale, they had already lost their identity as Ethel's dining room table or rocking chair. They were commodified as authentic country antiques, more valuable than the rest of her things because they are harder for urban consumers to find.

On wooden clothing racks, layers of hand-embroidered linens and lace were hung out for public inspection. None of the young women I met in Waucoma had time to carry on the tradition of making hand-tatted or embroidered linens, but in stylish homes I saw manufactured country-style linens substituted for old-fashioned handwork. Some of Ethel Jack's possessions were taken away by strangers, but most were dispersed

among members of the community, integrated into the new life-styles crafted by subsequent generations. The meanings they held for Ethel have lost their currency, but, in the homes of other Waucoma residents, the cultural heritage of the community perseveres.

Soon after Ethel Jack moved to her new apartment in Decorah, she died. In accordance with the instructions she left in her will, her ashes were scattered across the fields of her family's farm, their homeplace.

## **THE ORTBERGS**

Like many young people from Waucoma, the Ortberg family moved to Texas to find work. The poor farm economy in Iowa during the 1980s had decreased job opportunities throughout the state, and reports circulated that Texas offered a booming economy and surplus jobs. Many young people in Waucoma already had friends who had moved to Texas and hoped to join them there. Scott Ortberg grew up in a neighboring town, and he became friends with a Waucoma boy at the consolidated school. They formed a band, and through their gigs Scott got acquainted with people from Waucoma. He told me the band gave him "the freedom to be a little nonconventional" and that was why he liked being a musician. When Scott had learned about a house for sale in town, he had looked at it and decided to buy it on the spot, but, when Scott and his wife failed to find sufficient full-time job opportunities in the area, they felt compelled to move on.

They left Waucoma, "the ideal place to raise a family," Scott told me, and headed south to unfamiliar territory. A job offer awaited Scott: K Mart manager training, then a position at a K Mart store. Before they left, the family bought a small space in the local newspaper, the Waucoma Echo. In it they expressed their appreciation for the many friends they had made in town, and they declared their affection for the community they were forced to leave behind.

A variety of household goods were offered at the Ortberg auction, and they differed in kind from those at Ethel Jack's moving sale. Cars sat on the lawn in front of the house awaiting the first bids, and a set of golf clubs also caught my attention. On the porch, an unusual array of items were being sold: electric guitars, amplifiers, and speakers, leftovers from Scott's days in the band.

The crowd reflected the youth of the sellers. This was one of the few times I saw a group of young people gathered in Waucoma. Scott's wife and kids had already left for Texas, and during this auction none of the neighbors congregated in the kitchen, sharing food and talk. Scott's friends showed their support outside, where it was snowy and cold, engaging him in conversation as he assisted the auctioneers with their inventory. That's where I talked to Scott too, while he took a break from monitoring the progress of the sale.

The house itself went on the block last. It had once been the residence of Charles Webster, son of Waucoma's founder and first mayor. Charles was elected to serve on the Iowa railroad commission and became a prominent political figure. I heard many stories recounting the fabulous parties given in the old Victorian house Scott was about to sell. As ninety-three-year-old Maude Adams recalled:

*Oh, they had the money. He was a state officer, and they spent most of their time in Des Moines, and then they'd come home. And they would throw lavish parties. And lots of times they'd have the state officers up here for 'em. And our DAR minutes showed that they had these parties, because we have some write-ups. My daughter and I have some write-ups from the DAR meetings. And they were really very elaborate parties, they were really something.*

The Webster house is one of the few remaining Victorians in Waucoma, built during an era of prosperity. I toured the empty house while the auction continued outside. My cold toes brought me inside, and my curiosity propelled me up several flights of stairs.

Evidence of the house's grandeur remained, but the distinct functions served by its many rooms no longer played a part in the lives of its inhabitants. Rooms once at the core of household activities—the large dining room, the parlor, the music room—exhibited signs of neglect. But the kitchen had been updated and seemed out of place in the otherwise grandiose and dilapidated house. Cheaply bought suspended ceiling, carpeting, and plywood paneling clashed with the original decorative hardwood trim in other parts of the house. The splendor of the Webster house remained only in the memories of elderly Waucoma residents. For years people with modest incomes had moved into the deteriorating mansion and set up their households in a few rooms, closing off the other sections to conserve heat and energy. Unused portions of the house were left in disrepair.

Bidding for the renowned house was to open at \$5,000, but the auctioneer couldn't coax anyone to make an offer. The sale was postponed, and the house was left empty, a gloomy monument to a bygone era. A few weeks after the auction, I noticed that a new tenant had moved into part of the house, another family adapting to changing circumstances, living in the remnants of a community landmark.

## **AGRIBUSINESS AND FARM COMMUNITIES**

These three auctions suggest the kinds of changes transforming rural farm life. The Myerses' auction was the culmination of the long-term changes farmers have faced, not the result of an unforeseen farm "crisis." Media reports, focusing on the present, failed to mention that farmers have suffered through economic crises in the past—in the 1870s, 1890s, 1920s, and 1930s—or that farmers have become increasingly vulnerable as local economies have been absorbed by the capitalist world economy. Farm families' diminished capability to direct the course of their operations has also resulted from the vertical integration of agriculture and the emergence of agribusiness.

As historian John Shover (1976:148) observes, agribusiness has become a fully integrated production system, including "the manufacture and distribution of farm supplies plus the processing, handling, merchandising, and marketing of food and agricultural products plus farming itself." The fate of the family farmer hinges not only on his labor, knowledge, and management skills but also on the state of international markets, political circumstance, and corporate interests. To compete in the marketplace, family farmers play a capital-intensive, high-risk game. Modern farm equipment, designed for large-scale corporate production, not single-family operations, is exorbitantly expensive. To make the most efficient use of their machinery, many family farmers purchase or rent more land. They buy seed, herbicides, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers.

Dairy and livestock production demand specialized equipment and feeds to increase efficiency and productivity, and to meet government and industry standards. To finance these production costs, farmers rely on credit, piggybacked on whatever land debt they may have incurred. Farmers are dependent on agricultural manufacturers for farm equipment and supplies, and on financial institutions, which lend them essential capital. Shover characterizes modern agriculture this way: "Raw materials are being gathered from decentralized production stations, which we used to call farms, transported to food manufacturing plants, converted into marketable products, and merchandised

through an intricate network. Complex credit devices generate the capital to sustain the whole operation" (1976: 148).

As consumers of mass-produced agricultural equipment and supplies, farmers themselves provide agribusiness with a market. Simultaneously, farmers work to produce raw materials that will be utilized and marketed by agricultural corporations. Farmers constitute an economic resource used by agribusiness; the bigger their operations, the more efficacious. Corporate farmers and other large-scale producers offer agribusiness a more uniform market and a more predictable partner. Within this economic context, family farmers struggle to maintain financially solvent operations.

The way of life represented in news reports during the farm crisis failed to account for these facets of contemporary farming. Farmers' dependence on a complicated network of economic and political forces beyond their reach was never examined. Instead, family farmers were represented as heroic, beleaguered individualists struggling against adversity, quintessentially American. The media attributed the spate of farm auctions to a brief economic downturn, coupled with bad luck or poor management skills. But the squeeze farmers felt in the middle 1980s was part of a more complex web of changes that have been transforming rural life. Farm auctions provided the media with an easily digestible synecdoche.

The Jack and Ortberg auctions suggested additional dimensions of changing farm life. As farms have grown larger to keep pace with agricultural practice, and mechanization has reduced the number of people needed to perform farm labor, rural towns and villages have shrunk. The continually diminishing farm population triggers the loss of businesses, local institutions, and public services. Communities atrophy. With fewer farm families to support it, the rural community cannot sustain the infrastructure upon which its social and cultural life rest. Depopulation has dealt a crippling blow to the integrity of farm communities, and the Jack and Ortberg auctions offered additional evidence of the changes affecting Waucoma. Family, farming, and community combine to forge the characteristic way of life experienced by family farmers, and any attempt to understand and portray farm life must examine these interwoven strands.

## **RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES**

Studies of rural communities frequently proceed from a conceptual distinction between rural and urban life. Rural and urban communities have been differentiated in terms of



the nature of interpersonal interaction found in each. Ferdinand Toennies's (1887) opposition between *gemeinschaft*—organic social relationships characterized by reciprocal bonds of sentiment and kinship—and *gesellschaft*—rational, mechanistic social relationships, goal oriented and impersonal—offered an early theoretical conception of the social changes resulting from urbanization and industrialization. Toennies's ideas reflected the importance scholars attributed to the changes they were witnessing, and the works of Emile Durkheim, Robert Redfield, and Charles Horton Cooley echo Toennies. Many social theorists have argued that the bureaucratized character of everyday interaction in urban environments produces alienation and that city life excises the communal character of rural social interaction (see Wirth, 1938). Upon further investigation, however, scholars have discovered that aspects of city life have *gemeinschaft* characteristics, and the experience of rural residents includes the impersonality of *gesellschaft*. It has become clear that rural and urban cannot be so easily dichotomized.

The fundamental issues these distinctions seek to explicate are the nature and degree of industrialization's influence on everyday life and how that influence is manifested in different environments and at different points in time. Sociologists and historians have both taken a keen interest in these questions, offering a multidimensional understanding of the course of modern social change. Rather than preserve the view separating rural from urban, Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (1985:9) astutely observe that "it might well prove more fruitful to explore rural regions by placing them in context: by understanding their history as one dimension of broad social and economic transformations that, in different forms and degrees, affected all of American society."

The geographic separation of rural and urban communities no longer insulates one from the influence of the other. New modes of transportation, mass media, telephones, and postal services had brought cities and villages closer by the end of the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century rural communities have been pulled further into the urban orbit through the hierarchical integration of national and local governments, economies, and religious and associational structures. Rural and urban communities need to be viewed as part of the same continuum, but the direction of influence radiates unmistakably from the city to the countryside. Dan Rose's (1989) use of the term *colonization* aptly suggests the power of urban corporate elites to transform the cultural, material, and economic circumstances of others who wield less social and economic influence. The battery of changes issuing from the city have metamorphosed the countryside, and places such as Waucoma have gradually lost their distinctive cultural stamp.

During the height of the farm crisis, many voices expressed fear of losing a valued way of life. The media carried the admonitions of rural activists, social critics, and urban sentimentalists, warning that as family farms vanished so would the way of life they engender. But family farms have been vanishing for decades, fueling the depletion of the rural population, and students of the rural community had observed their steady disappearance before the 1980s. Citing census data, John Shover (1976) points out that every year since 1820 the proportion of rural to urban population has declined. By 1920, more than half the population of the United States lived in places with more than 2,500 inhabitants. The rate of rural exodus accelerated during the 1940s, completing the transformation of the United States from an agrarian to an urban nation. By 1980, only 3 percent of the population still held farm jobs. The nostalgia for the rural way of life so pervasively peddled by the media during the 1980s bore little resemblance to reality.

Still, farmers seem to maintain a hold on public consciousness. Drawing on opinion polls conducted by Roper and Gallup in 1985, Mark Friedberger (1988) points out that the public felt especially sympathetic toward family farmers and favored government support during the farm crisis "because of their vulnerability." Gallup figures suggest in addition that farm life has played an appreciable role in the experience of many urban residents: Polling showed that four out of ten people interviewed had lived or worked on farms themselves, and half that number still had relatives living on farms. The strength and endurance of the agrarian heritage in the United States confer mythic stature on the family farmer. Like the cowboy, whose image pervades popular representations of the American past, the family farmer is deeply embedded in our sense of who we are and whence we have come. The abundant media coverage of the farm crisis revealed the cultural significance of the family farmer and heightened our sense of impending loss.

Perhaps what we lost, most of all, was our innocence. The majority population, urban dwellers, know or remember little of the details of everyday life on the farm. We remain content to preserve a pristine myth built on the image of a simpler life devoted to husbanding the land. It may be that we hang on to the farm image because it offers urbanites the possibility of an alternative life-style, a "frontier" not yet closed. But during the farm crisis many people saw, for the first time, that farming is a risky business enterprise as well, and that, like other small businesses, contemporary family farms have fallen prey to encroaching conglomeration and corporatization. A conclusion easily drawn from media coverage of the farm crisis was that the family farmer is going the way of the cowboy, destined to be a heroic figure from the American past.

Although my own interest in Waucoma grew out of an initial assumption that life in a farm community would be drastically different from anything I had experienced, I was proven wrong. I discovered many interconnections between my past experiences, my interests, and my ideas, and those of people I met in Waucoma. Rather than studying a different culture, I found that in many respects I was encountering a similar culture in a different milieu. The vast gulf between living in a city, squeezed amid traffic, crowds, and tall buildings, and living in a rural farm community cannot be minimized. But, in spite of these very different environments, I found continuity. I began to probe the similarities and differences between life in the city and life on the farm, and the genesis of change in Waucoma.

This book explores the nature of family farming as a way of life, as experienced by farm families from Waucoma, Iowa. From the majority perspective of an urban dweller, I have attempted to understand, as photographer Jacob Riis put it, "how the other half lives." Rather than work within the assumptions of what I have referred to as the myth of the farm way of life, I have attempted to penetrate this comforting cultural narrative to examine the complexity beneath its surface. I have begun with a critique of the imagery created by the mass media during the farm crisis of the middle 1980s, and images remain a major preoccupation of this work. By combining ethnographic fieldwork, photographs, and interview materials, I hope to offer an alternative set of images representing family farming and the farm community.

A caveat must be offered as well. The photographs I present here do not enjoy privileged status. They are not objective visual documents; I make no claim of photographic truth. As do mass media images of farm life, my pictures reflect a point of view. They follow from my interests as a researcher. And my images, just as do media images, conform to a set of visual conventions. They are different conventions, however, and the strategies employed diverge. When photojournalists (using still or video cameras) cover events, they follow formularized strategies under deadline and in conformity with the expectations of their editors and their peers. As successful professionals, they work within the canons of their craft (Rosenblum, 1978; Schwartz, 1992). The work presented here results from less codified routines, although it proceeds from an approach to photography emerging among social scientists who want to portray their subjects in both words and pictures.

## **ETHNOGRAPHY WITH PHOTOGRAPHY**

In August 1985, I began my study and moved to Waucoma. I lived with my husband's grandmother, Bathil Balk, in her farmhouse at the edge of town. None of her children remained in Waucoma; no one had chosen to assume stewardship of the farm. When Bathil and her husband, John, could no longer farm, they rented their land to a local farmer, a longtime friend and neighbor. They sold off their livestock, and another neighboring farmer bought the stanchions that remained in the barn. Several years after John's death, Bathil quit raising chickens and selling eggs. At eighty-seven years old, she surrendered her last remaining farm chore. I lived on the farm until December, the end of my academic leave of absence. Over the next two years I returned to Waucoma frequently and stayed at the farm for extended periods during the summer. Like many ethnographers, I was forced, once my leave ended, to conduct my fieldwork commuter style.

The methodological approach I took builds on the emerging traditions of visual anthropology and visual sociology (see Becker, 1981). My research apparatus combined the more routine tools used by ethnographers with a camera. In addition to doing participant observation, writing field notes, and examining pertinent documents, I made photographs showing everyday activities and events. I had two reasons for doing this: to utilize the photographs during in-depth interview sessions to elicit responses and to enhance what I could write about the character of life in Waucoma with a visual representation of the environment, the activities, and the people I found there. Used together, words and pictures increased the descriptive and analytical precision at my command. The approach taken here responds to Jon Wagner's claim: In the first place, there are too few visual studies of people acting in natural settings. We simply have not seen enough of what people do and the physical contexts in which it is done. In the second place, we know too little about how people themselves see the settings and their activities. Even when we have images of the people in the setting, we have little sense of what they make of it all or of the images themselves. (1979:286)

Deciding how and where to begin making photographs requires some strategic planning, because the act of photographing may serve as the community's introduction to the photographer, her activities, and her aims. John Collier, Jr. (1967) suggests photographing the physical environment at the outset, a dictum I took to heart. When I arrived, I began photographing the buildings in Waucoma, mapping the physical

surround. I tried to make my activities visible, so that residents would become aware of my presence. While photographing I could also observe ongoing patterns of daily activity, which I described in my field notes. These notes included a log of my photographic activities as well, providing a contextual reference for the pictures I shot.

Seeing a stranger in their midst making pictures of town piqued the curiosity of many people, and they approached me to ask about what I was doing. When they asked why I was taking pictures, I told them I was studying Waucoma and the changes that had occurred over the years. Their responses took two forms: They either expressed surprise that someone found their town interesting or important enough to study or they told me how worthwhile my effort seemed, considering Waucoma's interesting history.

My camera became an important means of entering into the social life of the community. With it I could engage in a commonly understood activity while observing events. My picture taking provided people with an excuse to start up a conversation, and the longer I made photographs, the more people I met. I was able to move from photographing the environment to photographing public events as my contacts with community members rapidly multiplied. People began expecting me to appear with my camera. Soon I felt comfortable asking permission to photograph family activities, and I was always welcomed. To my surprise, families I had not even met knew about me and my work, and with only cursory introductions I was invited to photograph them. Waucoma families gladly accommodated my requests, and their cooperation expedited my fieldwork. I continued making photographs during the length of my stay, and I had compiled an extensive visual archive by the time I began interviewing farm families.

## **PHOTO INTERVIEWS**

My use of photography was informed by an awareness of the unique and contradictory nature of the medium. Photography is noted for its unquestionable veracity, yet photographs elicit multiple perceptions and interpretations. Paul Byers refers to photography as a "social transaction among photographer, subject and viewer." He explains, "The photograph is not a 'message' in the usual sense. It is, instead, the raw material for an infinite number of messages which each viewer can construct for himself. Edward T. Hall has suggested that the photograph conveys little new information but, instead, triggers meaning that is already in the viewer" (1966:31). I didn't consider the ambiguity of photographs a limitation. Instead, I exploited the multiple meanings viewers drew from the photographs I had made.

My approach to interviewing took shape in response to research examining the everyday use of photographic images. George Custen (1982), Paul Messaris and Larry Gross (1977), Christopher Musello (1980), and Michael Pallenik (1976) all show that, in certain contexts, viewers look "through" photographs, disregarding the formal elements of symbolic articulation and the constructed nature of the image. Instead, the photograph prompts personal narratives generated by the content of the image. Sol Worth and Larry Gross (1974) suggest that many viewers make "attributional" responses, assuming that the image carries no authorial intention or implied meaning, rather than making "inferential" assessments of the message intended by the photographer. My photographs of Waucoma provided the focus for group interviews with members of farm families. The interviews resembled what Christopher Musello (1980) calls "family viewing contexts," the settings in which families view and discuss their own photo albums. According to Musello, family discussions establish a "verbal context delineating what should be attended to and what significances are located in the image" (1980:39).

In making these ethnographic photographs, I worked to construct "a record about culture" (Worth, 1980). In this view it is not the photographs themselves but rather the analysis of them that informs. The photographs show concrete details of everyday activities and the contexts in which they occur and provide data about community life. They represent my initial inferences about life in Waucoma. My analysis of the images is informed by insights gained through ethnographic fieldwork and informants' responses to them. Operating from the assumption that the photographs I made would prompt multiple responses, I sought to study the range of meanings they held for different viewers in the community.

Interviews centered on discussions of the photographs. I prepared and assembled groups of photographs representing locales, activities, and events that appeared to be significant. I chose what to include and how to sequence the groups on the basis of analytical inferences I drew from my observations and field notes. The picture groups were (1) the physical environment, a photographic survey of Waucoma; (2) specific locales, such as churches, businesses, or the community center, and the public events or activities that occur at these sites; (3) farm families, including kinds of farm work, ways of organizing farm work, and family activities and rituals; (4) the town's annual Memorial Day celebration; (5) local auctions; and (6) the Sara Lee factory, 25 miles from Waucoma, a significant source of off-farm employment for local residents.

I interviewed members of five farm families, in groups defined by generation: grandparents, parents, and their adult children. Their ages ranged from twenty-three to

ninety-three years. By interviewing across generations, I hoped to be able to compare experiences and worldviews, attending to cultural continuity and change. I tried to choose families with all three generations present in the community, a difficult objective. I succeeded with two families.

## **WAUCOMA TWILIGHT**

I arrived at the homes of interviewees with a box of pictures and a tape recorder, and I was almost always beckoned to the kitchen table. I told people that I would be showing them my pictures of Waucoma, and some were anxious to see the outcome of my labors. I explained that I had tentatively arranged the pictures in groups, according to what seemed to belong together and what seemed important. I stressed that I was trying to gain a better understanding of their way of life and that the interviews were a key to my understanding. I also explained that I wanted to write about Waucoma and to show people what Waucoma is like by using photographs.

I asked a series of questions about the assembled groups of photographs: Do these pictures represent things that are important about living here? about being a part of a farm family? Which pictures are especially important? Which are not? If you were going to show people what it is like to live here, what else would you include? What kinds of things are missing? I also invited suggestions for changes in the orderings I had made. Then I gave them the photographs, group by group, and asked them to make comments. I did little to guide responses, particularly during the first interviews; if topics were raised that required clarification, I probed for further explanation. I took this approach because I was most interested in the range of responses the pictures might evoke and the intergenerational comparison among them. Viewers attended to the content of the pictures, and, as expected, they used them as prompts for talk about community events, institutions, and social relationships. Formal aesthetic properties of the pictures were not considered, nor were my intentions in making or ordering them ever questioned or discussed. The only comments made about the pictures themselves had to do with how "clear" or sharp they were, especially in comparison with viewers' own pictures. A typical reaction was "These pictures are so clear! You must have used a good camera!"

Using photographs of the community in interview sessions proved invaluable. The patterns of response to the pictures revealed distinctive social positions, group memberships, generational identifications, gender-related views, religious perspectives, and values. Variations in response suggested different levels of integration within, or alienation from, the community. The pictures helped sort through social roles, positions,

and worldviews, serving as a point of triangulation for the observational data and informal interviews I had already compiled.

## **PICTURES OF A COMMUNITY**

Whereas the media packaged visual symbols to illustrate reports about the crisis in rural farm towns, I set out to present a less formulaic and more probing image of everyday life in Waucoma. The conventionalized representations of the mass media suit the industry's need for quickly gathered and disseminated bites of information, substituting neat schemata for the tangled complexity of everyday life. Viewed uncritically, photographic images seem to offer an incontestable account of the events and objects they frame. But, when I showed people photographs of events in Waucoma and aspects of life in their community, the patterned differences in their responses offered evidence of the negotiability of photographic meaning, undermining the pictures' authority as "truth."

The photographs reflect the nature of my interactions with my subjects. When I made these pictures, they represented my views as an informed outsider. My experiences as a city dweller, far removed from farm life, influenced my portrayal of life in Waucoma. In all representations, the author leaves a discernible mark on the image conveyed. From the outset, I knew I would not create an impassive account of farm life, and I made no attempt to employ the canons of photographic "objectivity." Instead, I asked farm people to teach me about their way of life utilizing the depictions I had created. Ours was a collaborative process, and Waucoma farm families taught me how to interpret images of their lives. Photographs provide persuasive accounts of the world; our passive acceptance of the "facts" they offer forecloses further examination. My attempt here is not to persuade but instead to initiate a dialogue and, in the process, raise questions about the imagery we have learned to accept.