

## Preface

**W**HY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT THE future of small towns in the Heartland? If many of them disappear and become latter-day ghost towns, what real difference will it make to most of our lives? Though the small town claims an iconic place in the American psyche, we are considerably less alarmed by the emptying out of prairie and plains towns than by the endangered status of the polar bear, an altogether more universally vulnerable symbol and one that our kids can easily comprehend and mourn the loss of. You don't need to be a coastal elitist or a laissez-faire apologist to make the case that the hollowing out of the Heartland is an inevitable result of boom-and-bust cycles that, by their very nature, must have winners and losers. And there is more than a grain of truth to such an analysis in that many mining or frontier towns have ceased to exist over the years as their fortunes have waned. But this time it is different. The hollowing out that we describe here is more widespread, debilitating, and, we will contend, ultimately detrimental not only to the region but to the nation as a whole. What is happening in many small towns—the devastating loss of educated and talented young people, the aging of the population, and the erosion of the local economy—has repercussions far beyond their bound-

aries. Put simply, the health of the small towns that are dotted across the Heartland matters because, without them, the country couldn't function, in the same way that a body cannot function without a heart.

As we neared completion of this book, almost seven years after we first began, we were asked to show more explicitly why hollowing out mattered. Because we are, first and foremost, researchers, we put this same question to several people whose roots in the Midwest run deep. Their responses varied from apoplexy to bewilderment that we should even ask. "Of course it matters," they chorused, and, in their separate ways, they went on to say why small towns are worth saving. One person talked about how much of the nation's natural resources and the world's food comes from this region and said that this alone should be incentive to devote attention to the challenges facing the countryside. Another pointed out that if alternative forms of energy and food production are the waves of the future, then the Midwest and rural areas more generally will be ground zero for the rolling out of the green economy and sustainable agriculture. A third alluded to the historical centrality of the region to the health of the nation and said that, despite the recent downturn in manufacturing and the wholesale reordering of agriculture, the Heartland and its thousands of towns could, with the right policies in place, once again thrum with success. And a fourth said that not caring about the rural crisis was akin to saying that the North should have let the South secede in the mid-nineteenth century; America is strongest when it is unified.

As we digested the assorted responses to the question of why we should care about small-town America, we instinctively knew that they contained some basic truths about the challenges that rural America faces. We had seen firsthand the herculean efforts that some small towns make to survive and the ferocious love that inhabitants feel for their dot on the map. And yet it was in the

younger generation's stories about coming-of-age in the Heartland that the most important lessons about the workings of small towns were revealed. The time we spent living in Iowa brought home to us the fragility of places that on the surface appear prosperous. One patch of bad luck—a shuttered factory or the realization that there aren't enough children to keep a local school open—can bring a community to its knees. We came to learn how the precarious existence of the northeastern Iowa town we would get to know so intimately was mirrored in hundreds of other places throughout the nation. We also found that because of the slow and insidious nature of this threat, the rural downturn is happening in what amounts to splendid isolation.

We are not experts on rural America, small towns, or regional development. In fact, in our combined professional lives, we have spent all our time and spilled all our ink on urban issues and problems. But as converts are often identifiable by the strength of their zeal, our immersion in this issue fueled a great desire to place the hollowing-out phenomenon on the crowded national to-do list. We do so because we believe that there are more than quaint postcard images of sepia-toned Main Streets at stake. We should care because the Heartland is the place where our food comes from, it is the place that helps elect our presidents—who would doubt the centrality of winning in Iowa for Barack Obama's campaign?—and it is the place that sends more than its fair share of young men and women to fight for this country. The future of the many towns that give the Heartland its shape and its sinews is of vital importance, and we believe that ignoring their hollowing out will be detrimental in the short and long terms. Though we are faced with an economic crisis of ever-widening and catastrophic proportions that will undoubtedly siphon our attention and resources, it would be a mistake to overlook the crisis in rural America that has slowly developed over the past two decades. In many ways the travails of hollowing out

small towns and their Main Streets were an ominous harbinger of economic hard times to come. It is unfortunate that so few people were paying attention that the warning slipped by unheeded.

To be fair, we should say at the outset that when we started our research we had no real idea that we would be talking about the future of small towns. As with most projects there was a great deal of serendipity involved, and we initially intended to examine only the experiences of young adults from nonmetropolitan America. That we should be even doing this is ascribable to the vision of Frank Furstenberg and the largesse of the MacArthur Foundation. In the fall of 2001, the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, headed by Furstenberg and supported by the foundation, embarked upon a project to interview young adults in several different locations in the country. The group had already settled on the coastal bookends of New York City and San Diego, and Midwest metropolitan and suburban sites in the Minneapolis/St. Paul and Greater Detroit areas. But Furstenberg felt that something was missing from this plan, and so we were summoned to a meeting at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City, where he and several senior colleagues outlined to us their vague wish list for a fifth site. They wanted us to find a place that was “small, you know, like a small town with one school” and that was “in the middle somewhere” and “far away from a big city and the ocean” and “in one of those red states.” There was some talk of wanting the site to be in the Bible Belt and of having us work in two different places, but that was quickly quashed, and we were given the lunch break to consider how we might meet the aspirations of Furstenberg’s organization and where the ideal place for the research might be. Though at least one of the senior scholars at this meeting was visibly aghast that a pair of greenhorns should be entrusted with developing a research site, as we talked things over at lunch we felt that we could do the job and that we knew a town that could be the perfect site. Pat had

first visited Ellis\* when he was traveling through America in 1989. He had become friends with a native who had been on a summer exchange program in Dublin, and, as the town fit the parameters of small, nonmetropolitan, and in the middle, we were sure that it could be just the place. After our meal we were asked to point out “where this Ellis is” on the map. The response was positive. We were soon dispatched to interview young adults who had attended Ellis High School in the late 1980s and early 1990s about their transition to adulthood and to see how it compared with that of their peers on the coasts and in the cities and suburbs of the Midwest.

The research network had decided to do what columnist David Brooks was soon to advocate in an article called “One Nation, Slightly Divisible,” in which he famously described the cultural divide between coastal America and Middle America. Though Brooks falls into exaggerated characterizations and stereotypes of his own, he does so to make the larger point that we know very little about “Red America as seen through Red America’s eyes.”<sup>1</sup> The Heartland Project, as the Iowa research was dubbed, was a first step toward just that kind of understanding, and we were surprised at the path that the project came to take.

During the first interviews with these young Iowans originally from Ellis, we stumbled upon the key event that helped us to understand not only their individual trajectories but also the waxing and waning fortunes of their hometown. As they explained to us, the biggest question facing anyone who grows up in a small town is whether he or she should leave or stay. A little further down the road, those who make the initial decision to leave, usually after

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\*Ellis is a pseudonym. The convention in ethnographic research is to protect the community and its residents’ privacy. So, though the quotes and stories we share are absolutely true, some minor details and names have been changed to guarantee confidentiality.

graduating high school, must decide whether to return to the cozy familiarity of their hometown or to continue building lives elsewhere. The fact that this small-town rite of passage should be so intimately bound up with the very future of the Heartland allows us to see how the hollowing-out phenomenon plays out in the lives and decisions of young people, and how their pathways are shaped by the communities and people who surround them as they grow up. Though socioeconomic cycles affect the conditions that shape these places and expand or constrict the options available to small towns, it is people's actions that ultimately determine whether a place hollows out. In what follows, we give voice to this process through the words and experiences of young people from a typical small town in rural Iowa. We do so because, in the end, we can come to know this problem only through these testimonies, and they allow us to comprehend what can be lost if hollowing out is not addressed. We believe that saving small-town America ought to be a priority, and in the pages that follow we show how it might be done.