2007

A Study on Bruce, Mississippi

Susan Nicola Penman

A STUDY ON BRUCE, MISSISSIPPI

by

Susie Penman

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

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SUSIE PENMAN: A Study on Bruce, Mississippi

This is a paper about the people who live, or have lived, in Bruce, Mississippi. Between September 2004 and March 2007 I made photographs in the town; between September 2005 and December 2006 I conducted 19 interviews with 19 different town residents. Each interview was slightly different; the questions I asked varied according to such factors as the occupation and age of the interviewee, the position the interviewee had in the town society, and the particular issues I was interested in exploring at the time. My questions changed and developed as I learned more about the town. As a result, the transcripts of my interviews yielded different aspects of life in Bruce as they were perceived by different people. I have divided my work into four different segments: the growth and development of Bruce; the reasons for living, or not living, in Bruce; the negative aspects of living in a small town; and the positive aspects of living in a small town. As all the work I did as my research is very subjective, my conclusion is limited to my own personal feelings about life in Bruce, as well as any conclusions I reached concerning the thoughts and opinions of my interviewees.

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pity this busy monster,manunkind,

not. Progress is a comfortable disease:
your victum(death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness
-electrons deify one razorblade
into a mountainrange;lenses extend

unwish through curving wherewhen until unwish
returns on its unself.
A world of made
is not a world of born-pity poor flesh

and trees,poor stars and stones,but never this
fine specimen of hypermagical

ultraomnipotence. We doctors know

a hopeless case if-listen:there's a hell
of a good universe next door;let's go

- e. e. cummings

Wayne Edwards, Value Extraction/Quality Control Manager at Weyerhaeuser, November 2005

"Well, I think it's just a comfort level of knowing people. You just--if your family lived here for more than two generations, then you're practically related to everybody. And you just know everybody. And overall, the people here are friendly. They're good people. Just good hard-working people."

--

Wayne Edwards

Autumn Franklin, employee of Waller, Inc., Bruce Telephone Co., November 2005

"Like when we have the Sawmill Festival or anything, they always make it center around the mill somewhere. The Sawmill t-shirt, they always draw the mill or wood or something about it. It's—apparently it's pretty big around here."

--

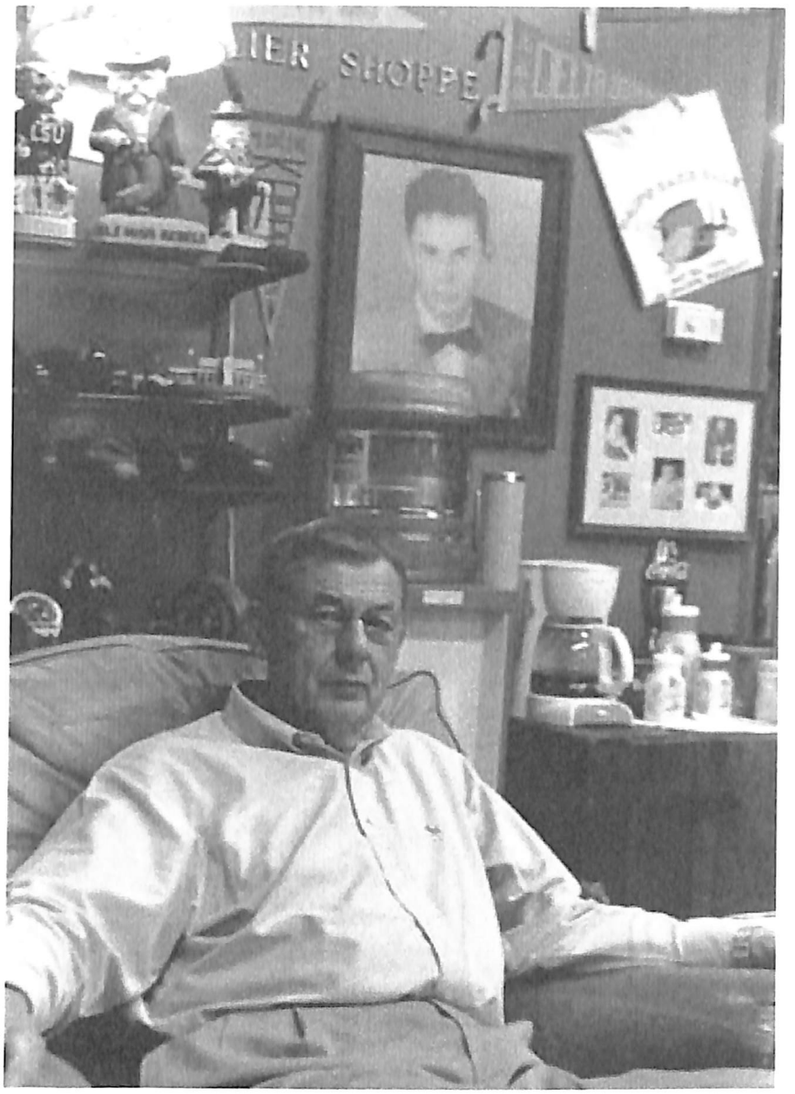
Autumn Franklin

Ann Ivy King, head librarian of the Bruce Library

"I think every town has to find a way to really take pride in something to make up for all that--all that stuff that you don't get--you don't have a Wal-Mart, you don't have a McDonald's, you don't have a mall. You have to find something to make up for that."

--

Ann Ivy King

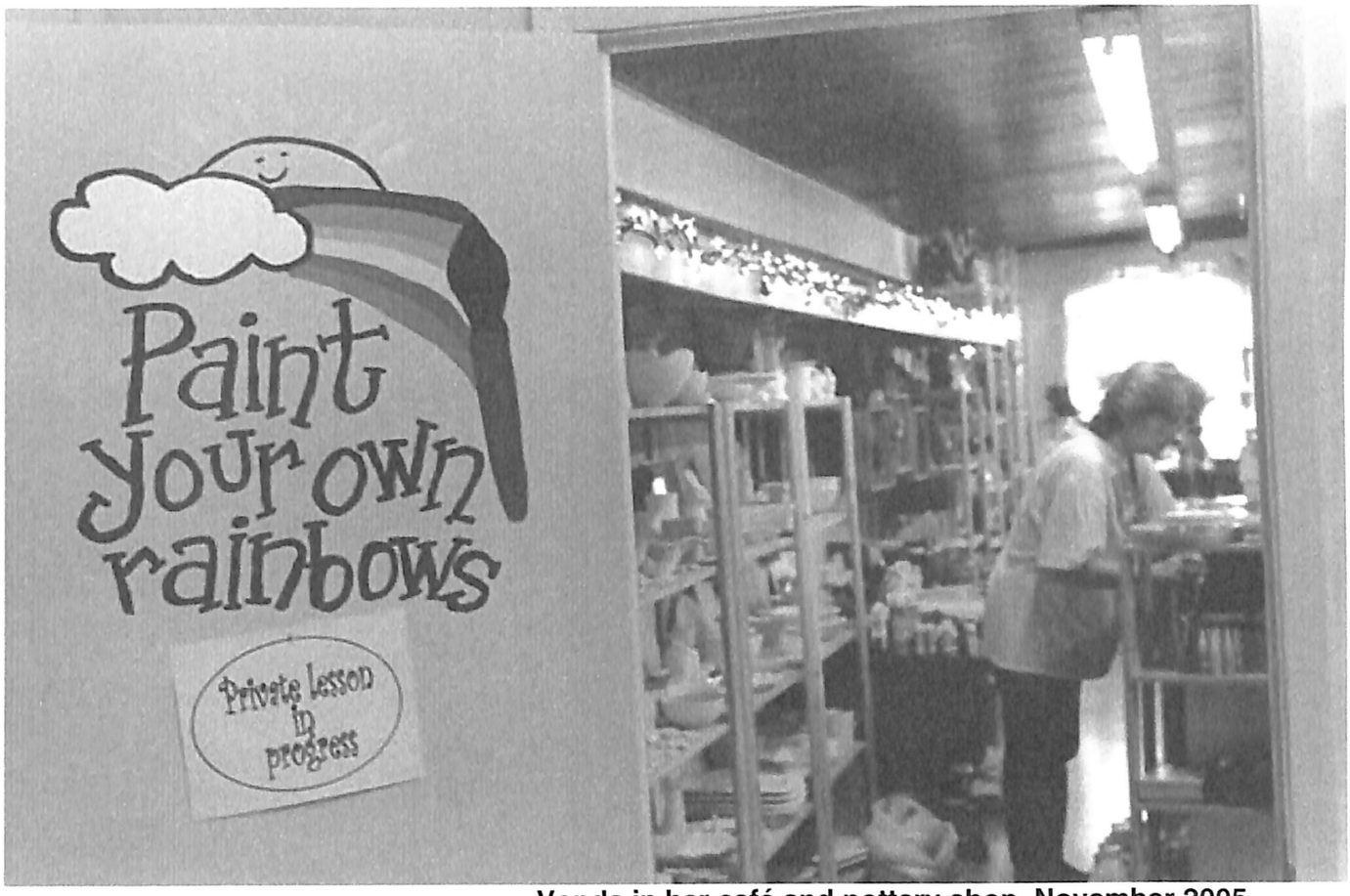


Rex Jarrett, owner of the Cavalier Shoppe

"Everything is healthy and well in Bruce, honey."

--

Rex Jarrett



Vonda in her café and pottery shop, November 2005

"I think a lot of times that's what happens, is people just decide to go back to the smaller things that they didn't think was so hot to start with and one day they wake up and find out it is."

--

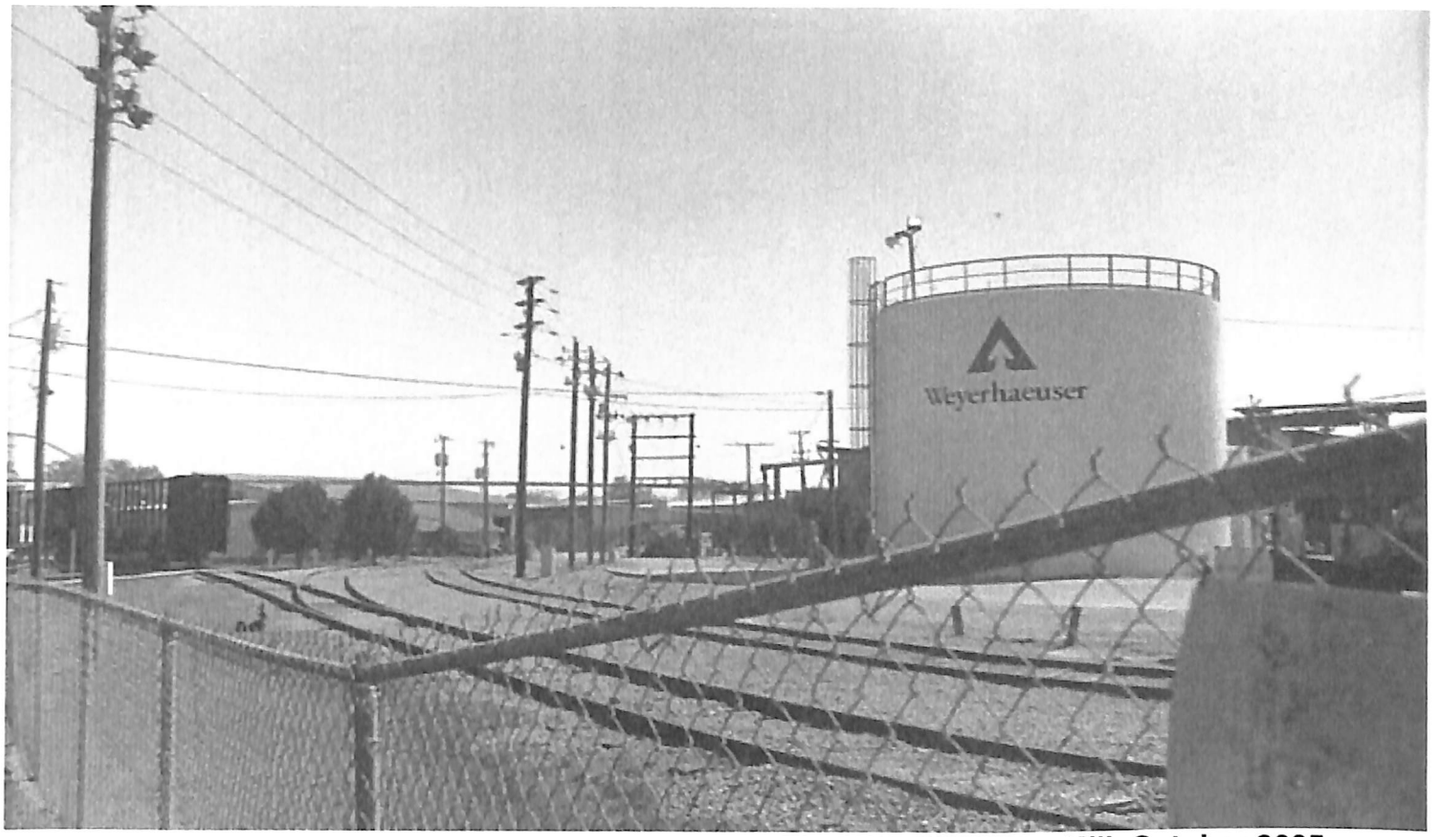
Vonda Keon

The general store, October 2005

"You go out here to a high school football game on a Friday night in Bruce, and the stands are packed. And everybody knows everybody and everybody's cheering for the team. And part of that is because you know everybody and you know the kids on the team and you know who their momma is and their daddy is and everything. And part of it is because there's not anything else to do on Friday nights, so you do go to the ballgame."

--

Gwen Embry

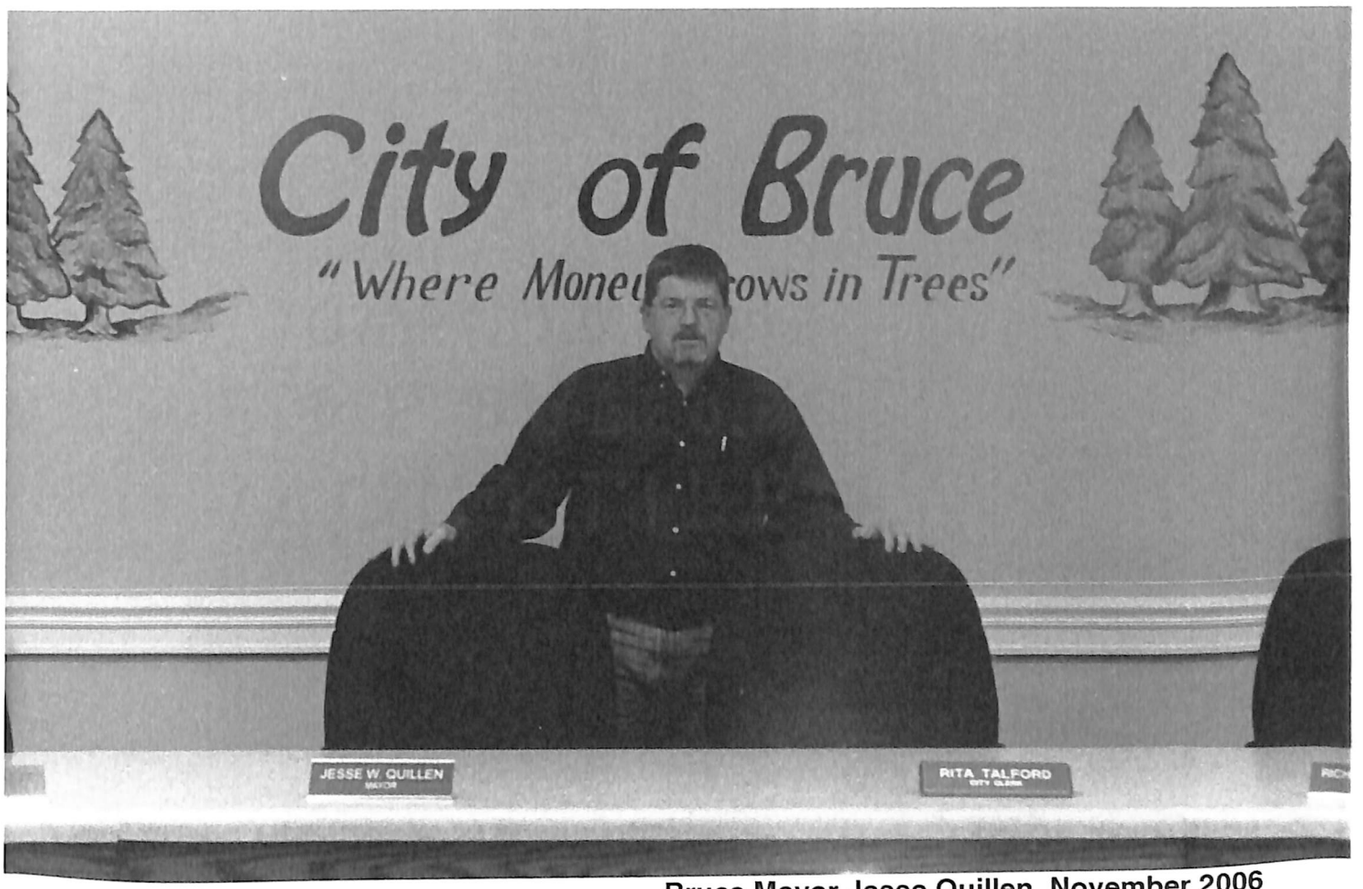


The Weyerhaeuser Mill, October 2005

"...There's actually quite a few people who move away from Bruce because of jobs...They want something better. They don't want just a job in order to pay bills. They want, like a lot of other people, they want to make a lot of money."

--

Joe Massey

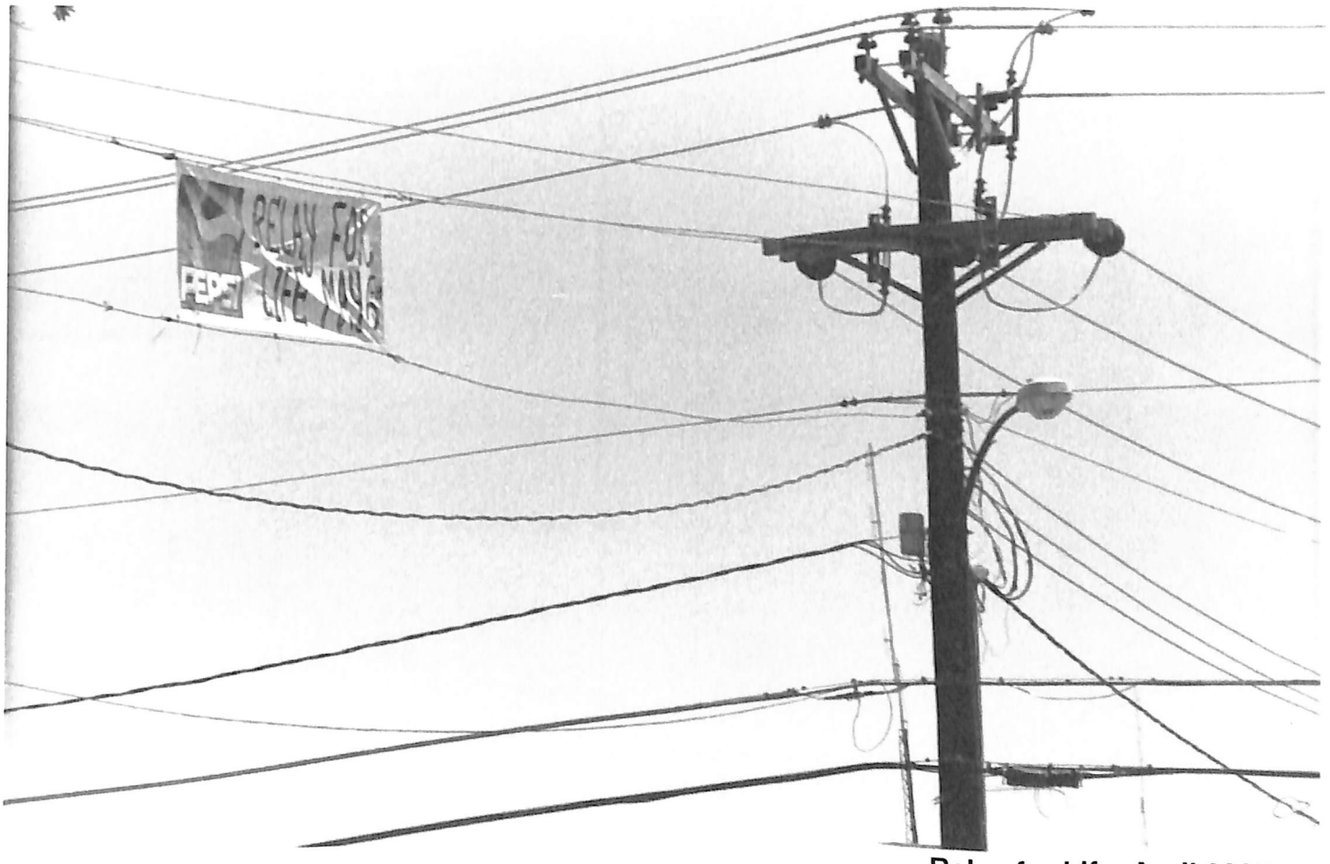


Bruce Mayor Jesse Quillen, November 2006

"I've been from Bruce all my life."

--

Bruce Mayor Jesse Quillen

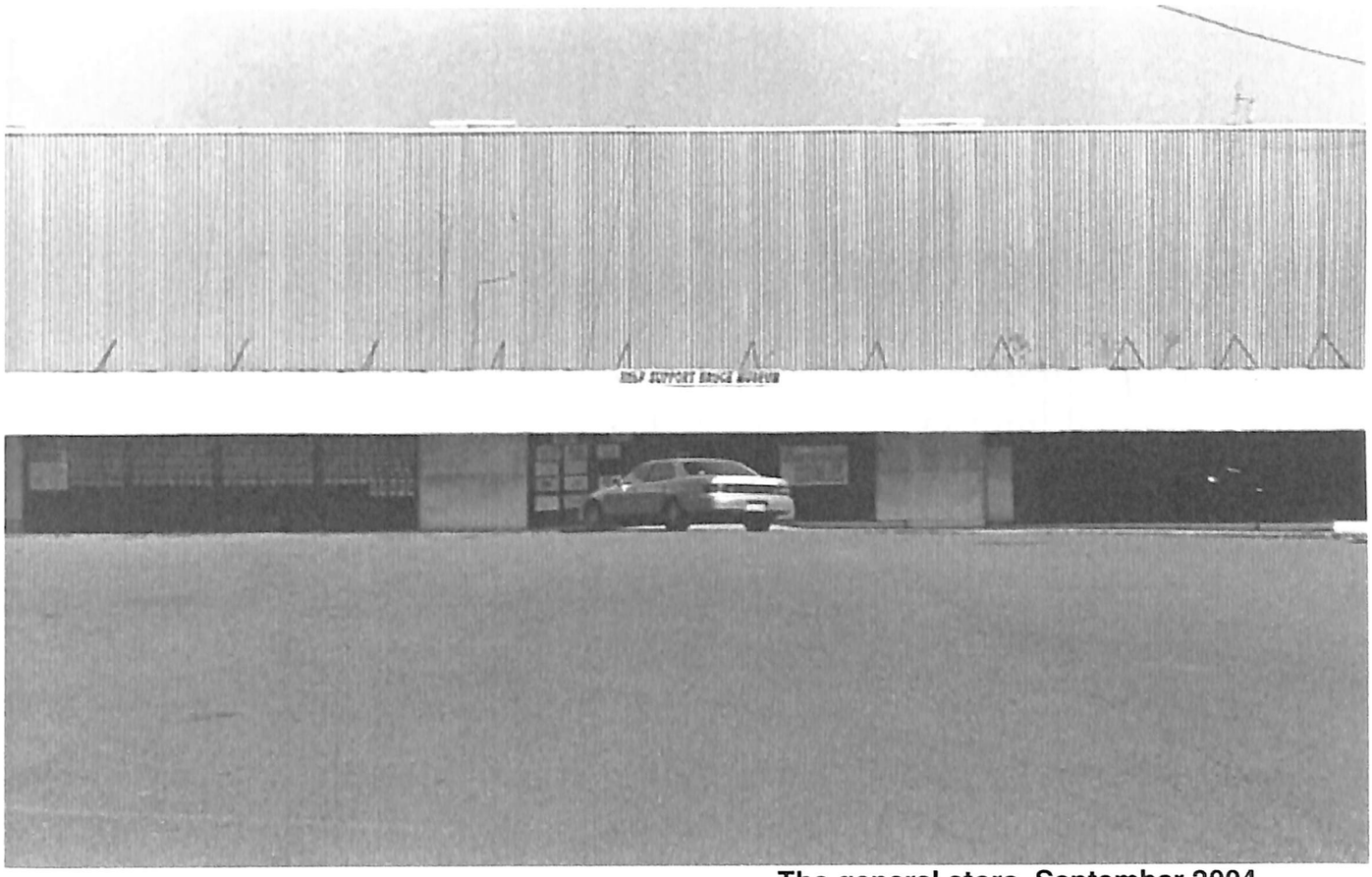


Relay for Life, April 2005

"...It's really big. But you know, most of the people that walk--you know, half the community's lost somebody to cancer. It seems like it. If it's not someone in your family, it's somebody that's close to you or something, you know. One of my classmates has had--she's just finished her second bout of chemo with her second diagnosis of breast cancer and she's forty eight. You just don't—we all have friends or somebody that's been affected by it, so we're affected by it."

--

Connie Collins



The general store, September 2004

"A lot more people move out than move in. People go to school, then—why? Why move back to Bruce?"

--

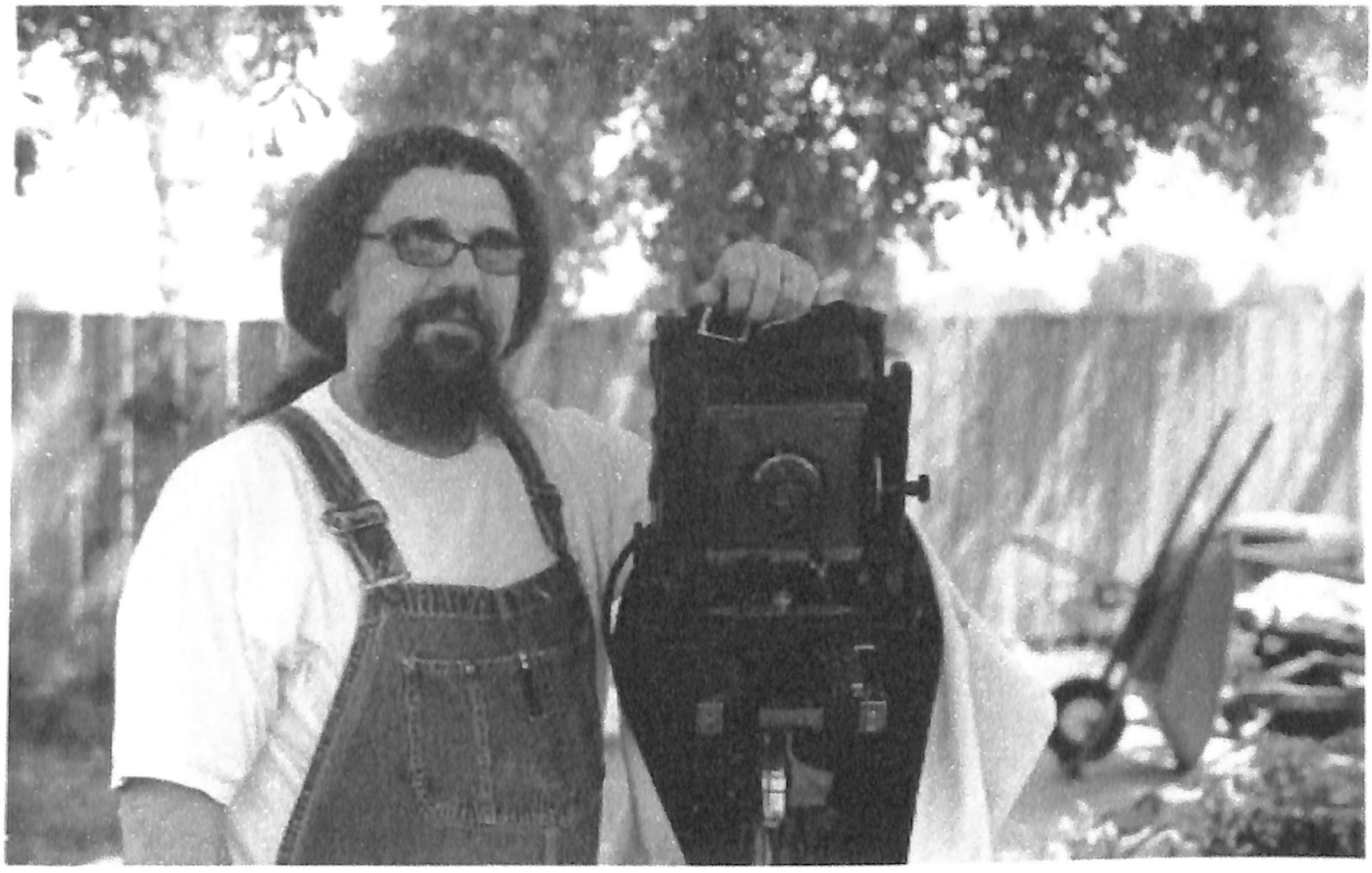
Ed Alexander

The Local Community, April 2005

Ain't no better place, I'm gonna tell you...I'm one of these guys, who—you're talking about home staying, I'm home staying. No other town don't entice me.

--

Police Chief Stan Evans

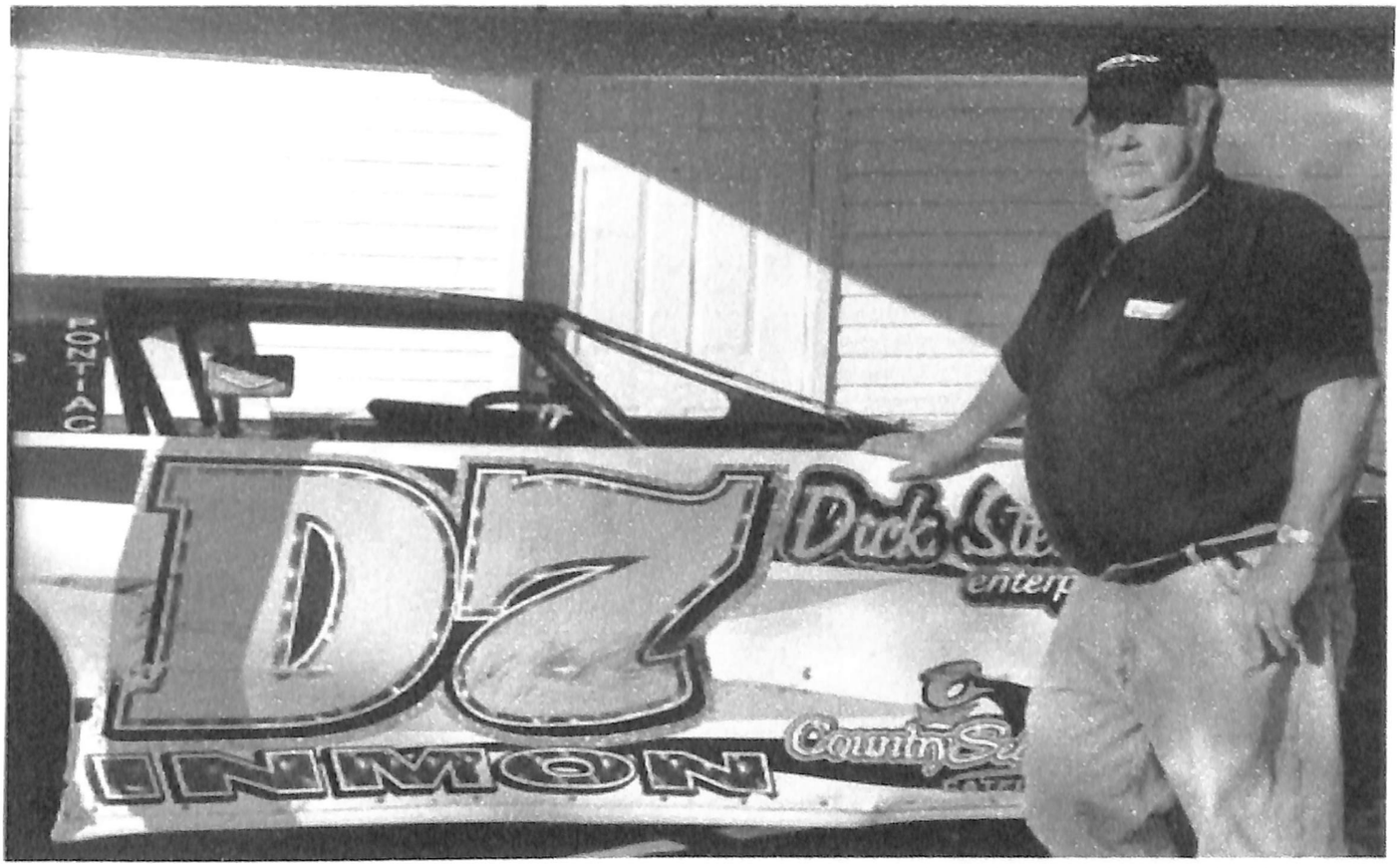


Euphus Ruth, April 2006

"Bruce will always be like Bruce. Little towns like that never change."

--

Euphus Ruth



Jerry Inmon, October 2006

"That's what would really be good, if there was enough job opportunities local to keep everybody to want to stay at their hometown or something but naturally it's not always going to do that."

--

Jerry Inmon

Bruce Square, April 2005

"The house I lived in was an older house and it had skeleton keys and you could go up here to Spratlin's [*hardware*] and buy them. So if somebody really wanted to get in the house all they had to do was go to Spratlin's and buy a key and they could get in my house."

--

Wayne Edwards

THE GROWTH OF BRUCE, probably Mississippi's youngest town, has not been short of phenomenal. Under the leadership of Mayor H. R. Smith it is building for permanency. In the modern brick building above is located two progressive stores and a theatre on the ground floor; while above are the Masonic Hall, the City Hall, and several offices. (Stepp Photo)

Top photograph: the general store around 1930

"Work is scheduled to begin on the big lumber mill at Bruce. At least 200 workmen will start work June 1. It is expected that the population of the town Bruce will reach 1000 in a short time. In the meantime, many people have signed petitions to incorporate the village under Mississippi laws and have the petition presented to Governor Dennis Murphree."

--

Article from the *Monitor-Herald*, dated May 12, 1927, printed in the 50th anniversary edition of the *Calhoun County Journal*

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In that fall of 2004, however—the beginning of my sophomore year—I took a Southern Studies class in which each student in the class was assigned to photograph life—in particular, the people—in a particular small town. There were six towns the class was to work among, all within thirty or so miles of Oxford. Bruce was one of them, and by default (I believe nobody had jumped at the opportunity to work there, and I was indifferent to what town I worked in) it became the town I was to photograph. To make a long story short, I had a great time making photographs in Bruce—such a great time that I felt as though I'd formed some sort of bond with the place, a bond that I was interested in keeping, perhaps even strengthening. And so a year later, I took another Southern Studies class—this time, a field studies class that focused particularly on the art of the interview and the oral history. In keeping with my interest in Bruce, I decided to write about it for my final paper in the class, fully aware that the resulting paper would grow into my thesis.

When I began writing that first paper about Bruce a year and a half ago, I wanted to write a paper about the lumber mill in Bruce. I wanted to interview people and I

wanted them to express their dependence on the mill and a certain sentiment that somewhere within them there lingered a fear that if it closed, life as they knew it would be over. I wanted it to be dramatic and I wanted to in turn create a dramatic work documenting a small town's dependence on a large industrial giant and the effects of that dependence on the community.

I figured that things wouldn't work out exactly as planned, but I prepared myself for that. I figured that the drama wouldn't create itself, and that somehow I would have to paint a dramatic portrait myself. Now I look back and realize that wouldn't have been a truthful thing to do. I think that happens a lot; the facts about a place may not be skewed, but the manner in which they are presented paints a skewed portrait. I am glad that things didn't go the way I thought they would, because now I am dealing with the truth as it stands. And I think I prefer that.

I realized that my original idea would not go as planned after two interviews, because while the lumber mill was no doubt an important part of life in Bruce, not everybody had anything profound to say about it. That aside, the town was not dependent on the mill alone. It was a huge part of the town in a physical sense, but there were other big factories in town that were equally crucial to the local economy. It would have been impossible to focus on the mill alone.

A backup plan hatched out of the two interviews I'd conducted, though: the idea, simply put, of life in a small town. How do citizens of Bruce perceive small-town life, and how is that perception formed? How conscious is their attachment to place and home, and how is that attachment affected by the size of Bruce? After talking to only two people I realized that my own notion of small-town life (an image I'd always

assumed was slightly skewed) didn't include much of what had been mentioned in the interviews. I was interested in exploring those factors, some of which were about the pros and cons of living in a town as small as Bruce; attitudes regarding the advantages and disadvantages of community life; and reasons for living in, and for leaving, a town like Bruce.

As far as methodology goes, the people I interviewed were not selected in any formal way. Some I picked because they were of a certain age or gender. Others I decided to interview because they seemed to know a fair bit about the town. Others I talked to because of their occupations. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that every single interviewee had a different experience of Bruce. I talked to two employees of the Weyerhaeuser lumber mill, one who was in his thirties and had lived in Bruce his whole life, the other who was in her fifties and who moved to town thirty years ago from a neighboring community. I also spoke with civic and religious leaders in town, although the word "leader" is subjective, as many of my so-called "regular" interviewees held some type of leadership position anyway. The youngest interviewee was a girl of 22, born and raised in Bruce. Another was a businessman who decided to open his shop in Bruce after moving to the town 39 years ago. One interviewee grew up in Bruce, moved away, and came back to raise his family; another had a similar experience when she had her own children. When I talked to these people, I tried to set all of my presumptions aside. I was interested in each and every one of them, and for different reasons. They all came from different walks of life, and all had a distinct point of view. They all treated with me a measure of respect and kindness that formed a deep impression on me, and I learned

something quite profound from all of them. They were receptive to me; they were candid with me; they remain important to me.

Why immerse myself in this small Mississippi town? It is hard to know exactly where to begin. I love Bruce, Mississippi, and I never thought I would. And it's not like I ever hated it. I just never thought I'd love Mississippi, any of it. I have lived in Jackson since 1994, and I have spent most of my years in Mississippi planning an escape. For a while, I thought I wanted to move to a big city. And part of the time, I was very focused on moving back to the places I had lived in before moving to Jackson: Scotland, Jamaica and Atlanta. I wanted escape the heat, the accents, the boredom, the rednecks, the state that I thought held nothing for me, that I didn't love, and that I resented for bringing my life to what I perceived as some sort of standstill. I don't know why I felt so strongly. Technically, Mississippi never wronged me. Maybe I unconsciously resented the act of switching homes so many times. On the other hand, maybe I had grown accustomed to picking up and moving, and viewed it in a favorable way in order to easily deal with leaving chunks of my life behind in places. I grew up learning how to pack suitcases, how to wrap china up in cheap moving paper, and how to fold cardboard boxes up so they wouldn't have to be taped. I grew up thinking of everything as temporary. I tried to teach myself to like that temporary feeling, and I think to a certain extent it worked.

There is another issue to deal with here: the issue of home. My problem was that I couldn't locate mine. It lay somewhere between three countries, three states, and countless apartments, houses, and bedrooms. How could a place as far away as Scotland be considered home? Does being born in a place connect you to it in any significant way

if you left before you could even form a real impression of it? I began to ridicule, in a way, the idea of loving a piece of land. That's how I viewed patriotism and love for a place. It's only soil, I kept thinking. I did not consciously try to keep my ties to Scotland and Jamaica and the rest close to me when I moved to the United States. Naturally, I didn't think of our moving in these terms at the time. We moved. It was simple. I got over it, I cut ties with old friends, I made new ones, I packed more boxes, I went to new schools. Life continued, and I adjusted the best I could, and I think I did a pretty good job.

Now I am twenty-one years old and I am still in Mississippi. I spent my high school years trying to hatch some dramatic plan involving trans-Atlantic as well as trans-Pacific travel, but the furthest I ever got was two family trips to Australia and Scotland. And while they were satisfying, they were not enough; the satisfaction was temporary. I wanted to move away. I moved to Jackson in 1994: excluding one year spent in Atlanta and the four years I've lived in Oxford at Ole Miss, I have lived in Jackson ever since. The temporary portion of my life seemed over when I entered college, and I was dealing with a sort of permanence that I'd never had to deal with before. I didn't like it. I felt trapped.

And so I blamed Mississippi. The more time I spent in one place, the more I tried to convince myself that I had to get out. I was willing to cut ties again. Home is something I never knew where to place, and all of a sudden I automatically began calling Jackson my home. And I thought that was unsettling. I tried to convince myself that the only reason I was thinking of Jackson as home was because I'd spent the most time there. And while I resented the fact that I'd been in one place for so long, that excuse was easier

for me to admit to myself than any other options—namely, the one that lingered in the back of my head and told me I actually liked the place, that I actually felt connected to it in some way. I denied this. Sometimes I still do. Why should I like Mississippi? I disliked it for so long. And so it was illuminating for me, talking to people in Bruce and getting to know the town a little bit, because it made me question my own feelings regarding home. The different things that tie people to a place were addressed in my interviews, which I realize now were constructed around my own desire to figure out what tied me to certain places.

In conclusion, my thesis will explore different aspects of life in Bruce. Some things there are significant in their uniqueness, while others are significant in their familiarity. Bruce struggles with education, just as much of Mississippi does. It struggles with zoning laws, jobs, and its attempts at making a name for itself in a time when small towns are cherished for their uniqueness but also easily eclipsed by the growth of other towns. Bruce is a small town much like any other small town, in that its issues are concentrated and clear, and its efforts to remain a thriving community must be just as concentrated and clear.

Economics aside, however, there are aspects of life in Bruce that speak to me on a purely emotional, almost personal level. The town is not a beautiful place in a physical sense. The hills and pine trees and farmland surrounding the town are attractive, and I enjoy them and I like driving through them and exploring the area, but Bruce itself appears to be a poor, unkempt little town, a place good for day-trippers who want some gas and a hamburger from Sonic before heading off somewhere else. Of course, this doesn't go for the whole town, and I understand that there are unsightly elements of all

towns, whether they are large or small. Bruce, however, has often struck me as a place that could use some cleaning up.

But what Bruce lacks in physical and geographical beauty it makes up for with the endearing nature of its people; its small, sometimes sloppy-looking businesses; the single traffic light in town; and the ever-empty gazebo (not a courthouse, not anything grand)—a gazebo, pure and simple, that sits in the middle of the town square, while ominous logging trucks circumnavigate it. The town has always been, for me, a weird and hypnotic place, unique with its piney scent and its talkative people and its logging trucks and numerous churches and vague inferiority complex. I am intrigued by all of that.

This paper will consist, in large part, of many quotes from the nineteen interviews I have done in Bruce over the past year and a half. There are some things—many things—that my interviewees said that I cannot put in my own words. I want to build this thesis on their words, as well as on how some of their thoughts, ideas, and feelings relate or compare to one another. In addition, I will record my reactions to many of the things my interviewees mentioned. That said, my goal is to remain more of a background voice than a dominant narrator. All of my work thus far has taken shape around the words, thoughts, answers, ideas, and feelings of the people I have interviewed. I would like it to remain that way.

A Few Facts About Bruce

Bruce was incorporated in 1927, which means that it isn't 100 years old yet. That's something I find hard to comprehend. Even within America, which is by no means an ancient empire, Bruce is new. At the time of my writing this, it is a mere eighty

years old! That means that the idea of living in Bruce for one's whole life could also, in some cases, apply to the town: to live in Bruce for its whole life.

What I didn't realize when I began my fieldwork was that there are actually two lumber mills in Bruce: the older E.L. Bruce mill, which shut down in the late nineties but has recently reopened its doors, and the Weyerhaeuser mill, which has been operating in the area since 1972. The E.L. Bruce mill, the namesake for the town, began operating in 1927 and turned Bruce into a boom town of sorts. According to a history of the town written by former city official and school administrator Q.T. Crowsen and printed in the *Calhoun County Journal's* special 50-year anniversary (of the town, not the paper) edition, the town of Bruce was officially recognized by then-Mississippi Governor Theodore G. Bilbo in 1928, the year its population reached 618. Two interesting news items from the May 26, 1938 edition of the *Bruce Beacon* were printed in the same anniversary edition of the paper, both regarding Bruce's mushrooming population and both portraying the town as one full of potential:

> LARGEST CITY IN CALHOUN—Starting from a field eleven short years ago, Bruce, Miss., today can boast a population of 1,105. The largest city in Calhoun County, the largest city in Mississippi for its age, and one of the largest in the US for its age, Bruce, in the 1930 census had nearly 1,000 population after the town had been in existence only three years. Tabulation of the reports taken about three weeks ago showed that the town has over 1,500 and is now well on its ways toward the 2,000 mark.
>
> CENSUS PROVES BRUCE TO BE FASTEST GROWING TOWN—Bruce, the biggest little town in the world, has 1,505 persons it was learned after a final tabulation of the census was made Tuesday night. Said to be the nation's largest and richest city for its

> age, the population of Bruce in eleven years increased 1,505 percent. That is, the population increased from none in 1926 to 1,505 in 1938. Located in the richest farming area in the world, Bruce is said to be the richest town in the world in agriculture and industry for its age. Started as an industrial center with lumber as its chief means of support, Bruce soon became the center of one of the richest farming counties ever known.

Reading these articles, it sounds like Bruce's population growth was virtually unstoppable. That said, Bruce's population currently hovers slightly above the 2,000 mark, and has done so for most of its existence. It sits rather quietly 27 miles south of Oxford and is the largest city in Calhoun County. It is a working-class town, where factories, mills, farms, and trucking companies provide a large portion of the jobs, and whose citizens don't often pursue college educations. The town is not exactly growing, but it is very much alive, and has been ever since its birth.

A quick breakdown of Bruce's population yields results similar to those of other small Mississippi towns. According to U.S. Census Web site, www.census.gov, its population was 2,097 as of 2000. 46 percent of the population is male; 54 percent is female. 53 percent is white; 44 percent is black; 1.2 percent is Hispanic or Latino. The median household income (as of 1999) is $20,417, as compared to the national average of $41,994. Of the 2,097 people living in Bruce in 2000, 589 of them—29.3 percent—were below the poverty line. Bruce is not a wealthy place.

It is, however, a relatively normal place statistically in comparison to the rest of the state. The woods and hills of north Mississippi nurture the town, and the growth of nearby towns like Oxford provide it with a slight economic cushion. The town of Bruce, in the year 2007, is doing well.

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A backup plan hatched out of the two interviews I'd conducted, though: the idea, simply put, of life in a small town. How do citizens of Bruce perceive small-town life, and how is that perception formed? How conscious is their attachment to place and home, and how is that attachment affected by the size of Bruce? After talking to only two people I realized that my own notion of small-town life (an image I'd always

assumed was slightly skewed) didn't include much of what had been mentioned in the interviews. I was interested in exploring those factors, some of which were about the pros and cons of living in a town as small as Bruce; attitudes regarding the advantages and disadvantages of community life; and reasons for living in, and for leaving, a town like Bruce.

As far as methodology goes, the people I interviewed were not selected in any formal way. Some I picked because they were of a certain age or gender. Others I decided to interview because they seemed to know a fair bit about the town. Others I talked to because of their occupations. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that every single interviewee had a different experience of Bruce. I talked to two employees of the Weyerhaeuser lumber mill, one who was in his thirties and had lived in Bruce his whole life, the other who was in her fifties and who moved to town thirty years ago from a neighboring community. I also spoke with civic and religious leaders in town, although the word "leader" is subjective, as many of my so-called "regular" interviewees held some type of leadership position anyway. The youngest interviewee was a girl of 22, born and raised in Bruce. Another was a businessman who decided to open his shop in Bruce after moving to the town 39 years ago. One interviewee grew up in Bruce, moved away, and came back to raise his family; another had a similar experience when she had her own children. When I talked to these people, I tried to set all of my presumptions aside. I was interested in each and every one of them, and for different reasons. They all came from different walks of life, and all had a distinct point of view. They all treated with me a measure of respect and kindness that formed a deep impression on me, and I learned

something quite profound from all of them. They were receptive to me; they were candid with me; they remain important to me.

Why immerse myself in this small Mississippi town? It is hard to know exactly where to begin. I love Bruce, Mississippi, and I never thought I would. And it's not like I ever hated it. I just never thought I'd love Mississippi, any of it. I have lived in Jackson since 1994, and I have spent most of my years in Mississippi planning an escape. For a while, I thought I wanted to move to a big city. And part of the time, I was very focused on moving back to the places I had lived in before moving to Jackson: Scotland, Jamaica and Atlanta. I wanted escape the heat, the accents, the boredom, the rednecks, the state that I thought held nothing for me, that I didn't love, and that I resented for bringing my life to what I perceived as some sort of standstill. I don't know why I felt so strongly. Technically, Mississippi never wronged me. Maybe I unconsciously resented the act of switching homes so many times. On the other hand, maybe I had grown accustomed to picking up and moving, and viewed it in a favorable way in order to easily deal with leaving chunks of my life behind in places. I grew up learning how to pack suitcases, how to wrap china up in cheap moving paper, and how to fold cardboard boxes up so they wouldn't have to be taped. I grew up thinking of everything as temporary. I tried to teach myself to like that temporary feeling, and I think to a certain extent it worked.

There is another issue to deal with here: the issue of home. My problem was that I couldn't locate mine. It lay somewhere between three countries, three states, and countless apartments, houses, and bedrooms. How could a place as far away as Scotland be considered home? Does being born in a place connect you to it in any significant way

if you left before you could even form a real impression of it? I began to ridicule, in a way, the idea of loving a piece of land. That's how I viewed patriotism and love for a place. It's only soil, I kept thinking. I did not consciously try to keep my ties to Scotland and Jamaica and the rest close to me when I moved to the United States. Naturally, I didn't think of our moving in these terms at the time. We moved. It was simple. I got over it, I cut ties with old friends, I made new ones, I packed more boxes, I went to new schools. Life continued, and I adjusted the best I could, and I think I did a pretty good job.

Now I am twenty-one years old and I am still in Mississippi. I spent my high school years trying to hatch some dramatic plan involving trans-Atlantic as well as trans-Pacific travel, but the furthest I ever got was two family trips to Australia and Scotland. And while they were satisfying, they were not enough; the satisfaction was temporary. I wanted to move away. I moved to Jackson in 1994: excluding one year spent in Atlanta and the four years I've lived in Oxford at Ole Miss, I have lived in Jackson ever since. The temporary portion of my life seemed over when I entered college, and I was dealing with a sort of permanence that I'd never had to deal with before. I didn't like it. I felt trapped.

And so I blamed Mississippi. The more time I spent in one place, the more I tried to convince myself that I had to get out. I was willing to cut ties again. Home is something I never knew where to place, and all of a sudden I automatically began calling Jackson my home. And I thought that was unsettling. I tried to convince myself that the only reason I was thinking of Jackson as home was because I'd spent the most time there. And while I resented the fact that I'd been in one place for so long, that excuse was easier

for me to admit to myself than any other options—namely, the one that lingered in the back of my head and told me I actually liked the place, that I actually felt connected to it in some way. I denied this. Sometimes I still do. Why should I like Mississippi? I disliked it for so long. And so it was illuminating for me, talking to people in Bruce and getting to know the town a little bit, because it made me question my own feelings regarding home. The different things that tie people to a place were addressed in my interviews, which I realize now were constructed around my own desire to figure out what tied me to certain places.

In conclusion, my thesis will explore different aspects of life in Bruce. Some things there are significant in their uniqueness, while others are significant in their familiarity. Bruce struggles with education, just as much of Mississippi does. It struggles with zoning laws, jobs, and its attempts at making a name for itself in a time when small towns are cherished for their uniqueness but also easily eclipsed by the growth of other towns. Bruce is a small town much like any other small town, in that its issues are concentrated and clear, and its efforts to remain a thriving community must be just as concentrated and clear.

Economics aside, however, there are aspects of life in Bruce that speak to me on a purely emotional, almost personal level. The town is not a beautiful place in a physical sense. The hills and pine trees and farmland surrounding the town are attractive, and I enjoy them and I like driving through them and exploring the area, but Bruce itself appears to be a poor, unkempt little town, a place good for day-trippers who want some gas and a hamburger from Sonic before heading off somewhere else. Of course, this doesn't go for the whole town, and I understand that there are unsightly elements of all

towns, whether they are large or small. Bruce, however, has often struck me as a place that could use some cleaning up.

But what Bruce lacks in physical and geographical beauty it makes up for with the endearing nature of its people; its small, sometimes sloppy-looking businesses; the single traffic light in town; and the ever-empty gazebo (not a courthouse, not anything grand)—a gazebo, pure and simple, that sits in the middle of the town square, while ominous logging trucks circumnavigate it. The town has always been, for me, a weird and hypnotic place, unique with its piney scent and its talkative people and its logging trucks and numerous churches and vague inferiority complex. I am intrigued by all of that.

This paper will consist, in large part, of many quotes from the nineteen interviews I have done in Bruce over the past year and a half. There are some things—many things—that my interviewees said that I cannot put in my own words. I want to build this thesis on their words, as well as on how some of their thoughts, ideas, and feelings relate or compare to one another. In addition, I will record my reactions to many of the things my interviewees mentioned. That said, my goal is to remain more of a background voice than a dominant narrator. All of my work thus far has taken shape around the words, thoughts, answers, ideas, and feelings of the people I have interviewed. I would like it to remain that way.

A Few Facts About Bruce

Bruce was incorporated in 1927, which means that it isn't 100 years old yet. That's something I find hard to comprehend. Even within America, which is by no means an ancient empire, Bruce is new. At the time of my writing this, it is a mere eighty

years old! That means that the idea of living in Bruce for one's whole life could also, in some cases, apply to the town: to live in Bruce for its whole life.

What I didn't realize when I began my fieldwork was that there are actually two lumber mills in Bruce: the older E.L. Bruce mill, which shut down in the late nineties but has recently reopened its doors, and the Weyerhaeuser mill, which has been operating in the area since 1972. The E.L. Bruce mill, the namesake for the town, began operating in 1927 and turned Bruce into a boom town of sorts. According to a history of the town written by former city official and school administrator Q.T. Crowsen and printed in the *Calhoun County Journal's* special 50-year anniversary (of the town, not the paper) edition, the town of Bruce was officially recognized by then-Mississippi Governor Theodore G. Bilbo in 1928, the year its population reached 618. Two interesting news items from the May 26, 1938 edition of the *Bruce Beacon* were printed in the same anniversary edition of the paper, both regarding Bruce's mushrooming population and both portraying the town as one full of potential:

> LARGEST CITY IN CALHOUN—Starting from a field eleven short years ago, Bruce, Miss., today can boast a population of 1,105. The largest city in Calhoun County, the largest city in Mississippi for its age, and one of the largest in the US for its age, Bruce, in the 1930 census had nearly 1,000 population after the town had been in existence only three years. Tabulation of the reports taken about three weeks ago showed that the town has over 1,500 and is now well on its ways toward the 2,000 mark.
>
> CENSUS PROVES BRUCE TO BE FASTEST GROWING TOWN—Bruce, the biggest little town in the world, has 1,505 persons it was learned after a final tabulation of the census was made Tuesday night. Said to be the nation's largest and richest city for its

> age, the population of Bruce in eleven years increased 1,505 percent. That is, the population increased from none in 1926 to 1,505 in 1938. Located in the richest farming area in the world, Bruce is said to be the richest town in the world in agriculture and industry for its age. Started as an industrial center with lumber as its chief means of support, Bruce soon became the center of one of the richest farming counties ever known.

Reading these articles, it sounds like Bruce's population growth was virtually unstoppable. That said, Bruce's population currently hovers slightly above the 2,000 mark, and has done so for most of its existence. It sits rather quietly 27 miles south of Oxford and is the largest city in Calhoun County. It is a working-class town, where factories, mills, farms, and trucking companies provide a large portion of the jobs, and whose citizens don't often pursue college educations. The town is not exactly growing, but it is very much alive, and has been ever since its birth.

A quick breakdown of Bruce's population yields results similar to those of other small Mississippi towns. According to U.S. Census Web site, www.census.gov, its population was 2,097 as of 2000. 46 percent of the population is male; 54 percent is female. 53 percent is white; 44 percent is black; 1.2 percent is Hispanic or Latino. The median household income (as of 1999) is $20,417, as compared to the national average of $41,994. Of the 2,097 people living in Bruce in 2000, 589 of them—29.3 percent—were below the poverty line. Bruce is not a wealthy place.

It is, however, a relatively normal place statistically in comparison to the rest of the state. The woods and hills of north Mississippi nurture the town, and the growth of nearby towns like Oxford provide it with a slight economic cushion. The town of Bruce, in the year 2007, is doing well.

Chapter 1:
On the Growth and Development of Bruce

"I honestly believe that in a small town it's a war. Success is really, really hard to come by in this day and time."

--Bruce Mayor Jesse Quillen

At any given time, most communities are in the process of changing. Past changes may not be apparent to a present-time observer, but current changes certainly are. Bruce is no exception. In its eightieth year as an official town, it is apparent that these changes have slowly but surely crept in—and as a result, its people and town leaders have in turn had to adopt certain policies of change. For example, many interviewees were conscious of the town's need to promote itself in certain ways. What struck me in particular was how so many people mentioned similar, specific things in their interviews. I also want to focus, in this chapter, on the leadership in town, and how town leaders approached the topic of change. One of my most interesting interviews was with Mayor Jesse Quillen, who has been Bruce's mayor for several years. Other interviewees also mentioned the town's leadership quite often, and I would like to include that. In a town so small, the leadership of the town automatically falls under some pretty close scrutiny. I was also impressed, however, by the progressive ideas that not only the mayor, but also the other interviewees ("regular" townspeople, if you will) had regarding

development in Bruce. It seems to have grown into an issue that is important to many people in town.

Bruce is a working-class town. It always has been. It has a solid stake in Mississippi's lumber industry, thanks to the huge and very visible (within sight of the town square, in fact) Weyerhauser mill that provides about 200 labor-intensive jobs for the area. Bruce smells like pine trees, is surrounded by pine trees, and its motto—spread across signs marking the entrance to town as well as adorning all the city's trash cans—is "Where Money Grows in Trees." Its annual festival is called the Sawmill Festival, the museum the town is currently working on is called the Forestry Museum, and in addition to workers employed within the actual lumber mill, there is an employment domino effect of the logging industry in Bruce. The mill contributes to the town's identity as well. Ann Ivy King, the town librarian, has no direct connections to the mill but still believes it to be a part of her life:

> It's amazing how many ways it [*the mill*]gets into your life because the very first date I ever had, a guy from Batesville and I went out together. He came over here, and he said, 'I always know I'm in Bruce when I smell that old sour lumber smell.' And I was so offended, because I thought, 'That smells good. That's what Bruce smells like. It smells like the mill.' [*laughs*]

In addition to Weyerhauser, there are other factories in the Calhoun County area, some of which (Glenn Slacks, a clothing company, for example) have recently downsized or shut down. In fact, according to Calhoun County's community paper, the *Monitor-Herald,* at the beginning of March 2007, Klaussner Furniture announced that it would cease operations at its Bruce plant on April 27 due to a "sustained reduction of orders over the last 12 months." As a result, 114 people will lose their jobs, and the plant's production

will be consolidated into the company's North Carolina-based plants. Thus, the kind of manufacturing industries that have employed many town residents are now being seen as no longer reliable, as more jobs find their way out to areas where the labor is cheaper and the work force more readily available. No one seems to believe Weyerhauser will close down its operations in Bruce anytime soon, but the fact that other factories have closed or downsized in the area—and could continue to do so—weighs on the minds of townspeople, both town leaders and citizens.

James Wright, who manages the Piggly Wiggly in town and is a member of the Bruce Chamber of Commerce, was thinking of the situation up to "two or three years ago," when he said that an economist spoke to the chamber about the loss of manufacturing jobs in the near future. "We're going to be losing the manufacturing," he said. "And we continue to lose manufacturing jobs." On the other hand, Anthony Bollinger, who has been involved in several family-run businesses and now helps run The Bollinger Family Theater, expressed some slight frustration at the town's inability to support industry. He experienced the consequences himself about two years ago when his family opened an upholstery plant but had to close it after eight months due to an inadequate work force:

> Bringing in actual industry in this town is almost fruitless because the work force is not here. The labor force is not here. If you put in a furniture factory that needed two hundred people, you'd be hard pressed to find seventy-five that you'd even think about hiring, and most of them wouldn't be real experienced. Because most of the people that are working in that industry have got a job. They may have been on that job for a while.

But whether or not it is due to a lack of work force or a lack of manufacturing job opportunities—two opposites, strangely enough—the production that has been Bruce's

economic backbone for much of its existence is beginning to shrink. Mayor Quillen's focus is constantly on the future, and on the smooth transition from an industry-based environment to one that would function as a community in which the original form of jobs and economics would ultimately be replaced:

> It maybe isn't about right now. It's about preparing for what's to come. And again, I'm convinced we live in a changing world where some of the jobs we've been used to in the past are no longer gonna exist. So how do we thrive in that environment? And that's kind of my job. How do I position the town for that transition, for that environment? I'm trying to do that.

This talk of "transition" intrigued me. How do other small towns—or towns of any size, I suppose—approach similar, conscious efforts to change the way they go about the business of being a functional, if not thriving, community?

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"But you know, you crawl before you walk. Walk before you run. And I want to run."
---Mayor Jesse Quillen

Mayor Quillen's big idea for Bruce is for it to develop its own sort of character—find its niche, so to speak—and that this will bring in more people and ultimately help the town survive. And so right now Bruce is going through a phase where it is figuring out how exactly to best sell itself to other people—both potential tourists and potential residents—without losing its character. The Bruce Chamber of Commerce has even created a video titled "Welcome to Bruce, MS!" that describes Bruce as "a place with a progressive attitude" and touts the friendly, local atmosphere in town; there is, I hear, even a Bruce advertisement on the radio. These things, especially the video, are major

points that many people mentioned in their interviews. On a more basic level, however, the appeal of the town lies as much in its people as it does its attractions, and as Ann Ivy King pointed out to me, those people are a prideful people:

> There's so much community pride and town pride in any small town. I think about like when we have our Sawmill festival, and Vardaman has their Sweet Potato festival, and Water Valley, their Casey Jones stuff. And they actually think their Casey Jones stuff is better than ours, and we think our Sawmill's better than their Sweet Potato, and it's just I think every small town takes so much pride in whatever it is that sets it apart, whether it's the mill that's here or those sweet potatoes or those watermelons. It's just--I think every town has to find a way to really take pride in something to make up for all that--all that stuff that you don't get--you don't have a Wal-Mart, you don't have a McDonald's, you don't have a mall. You have to find something to make up for that.

But finding that "something" is not a quest for the town so much as it is a newly-adopted policy. I was interested in Mayor Quillen's way of approaching the situation. His language reflected his previous experience as an insurance salesman, as he described Bruce's development as something he had been trying to "sell" for years. "What we have to do is develop that niche, whatever that may be," he said, "And sell the idea that it's no longer necessary to go after a pretty large industry to come in and to kind of hang your hat on that one thing as being successful." When I asked him what that niche could be, he said:

> They like the Wal-Marts, they like the Home Depots, they like the restaurants. And those are good things. But then again, they don't like the crowds, they don't like the traffic, those kinds of things. So they come home to a quieter, less noisy place. That is my selling point right there. You've just made my sales pitch for me. I think that's what we're all about.

In addition to focusing on Bruce's potential niche, Mayor Quillen also emphasized the importance of the town to simply appear clean. He used the phrase "curb appeal" to point out that cleanliness contributed to a town's ability to remain "unique and different." He also said that the community had to be smarter in the ways of developing its own "niche."

When I asked Daniel Hathorne, the pastor of Bruce's First Baptist Church, if Bruce might ever wither up and die, like nearby Coffeeville, he replied that it possibly could, but that he thought the town had managed to "build enough uniqueness" in order to survive. All this talk of "uniqueness" and the town "finding its niche" leads to the only real conclusion it could lead to: Bruce must sell itself as a community worth visiting.

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I guess, I don't know, they [*out-of-towners*] are looking for that small-town experience, you know...That's what it seems like. It really feels like the people who don't have it are looking for it and the ones who do have it don't appreciate it.

--Ann Ivy King

Bruce, as a town, is beginning to realize that in order to bring in some additional money, it must focus on tourism. It is doing this in various ways. One way is through the E.L. Bruce Forestry Museum, which was originally the town's general store and is now (beginning in fall 2004) in the process of being restored to its original 1920's condition. The museum will focus on the town's history and legacy as a lumber town, and serve as a location for various functions such as school homecomings or gatherings. Another way in which the town hopes to attract tourists is through individual efforts like the Bollinger Family Theater, an impressively professional Branson, Missouri-themed music show that caters toward a family audience, as well as efforts to attract customers

by certain shops in town, like Jeffrey's and Artifacts on the square. This proactive attitude toward the town's growth is headed by Mayor Quillen, whose eagerness to seize upon opportunities that could lead to growth was evident in everything he said; over and over again he stressed the single point that "there has to be a different way of growing a small community these days than in times past."

But how different were "times past"? Bruce native Vonda Keon, who was raised in town but lived in Tupelo and Texas for over twenty years before returning home to raise her children, remembered a time about thirty-five years ago, when Bruce actually got busy on Saturdays—a shopping day during which the town swelled with customers gliding in and out of dress shops and shoe stores. This memory struck me as significant, as Vonda's description of Bruce circa 1970 mirrors the future the town's leaders are currently trying to craft for the town. And if mobility, as Vonda said, is partly to blame for the decline in Bruce's commerce, it is now what could potentially resurrect it in the form of out-of-town visitors:

> We had everything we needed right here. You had a hardware store, if you needed something for your house, you had the little lumber yard that you could go to, the little building store. We had something unusual for a small town--we had three grocery stores. And if you couldn't find what you wanted at one, you'd find it at the other two. And everything was always family owned, there wasn't any big corporation behind it or anything like that. It was a pretty self-sufficient little town. And then, as people got more mobile and started getting out and venturing out, it started getting easier and easier to go out and as [*pause*]--as some towns grow, then the little town is always going to end up suffering because it's going to lose its tax base because everybody goes out of town to shop. And that's pretty much what happened here.

Today, however, the focus is on bringing outsiders to Bruce more than beefing up the town for its own residents. When I spoke to Anthony Bollinger about the matter, he stressed that the town could do more to bring tourism to the area, and his language revealed to me an attitude that he and other business owners actually craved tourism for their own purposes as well as the town's benefit. He stressed Bruce's need for "a little motel in town" (currently, the town's only form of accommodation is the tiny Sawmill Inn, directly across from the Weyerhauser plant.) In a manner similar to Mayor Quillen's, Anthony said that "the one industry I keep telling everybody that this town has a real opportunity for is tourism." His remarks seem justified; the Bollinger Family Theater's often sold-out shows are full of ticketholders from out of town—Grenada, Durant, Southaven, Columbus, Greenville. He also said that the theater has affected business in town, Jeffrey's on the square apparently having experienced an increase in business on show days. "Our little town is majorly dependent on out-of-town traffic," he said. "Our population is only a little over two thousand. So you cannot depend any business on just the inside people. You have to pull them in."

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"I think we're very progressive for a small town."
--James Wright

As I mentioned earlier, I was very interested in how many people seemed to dwell on Bruce's need for change. So many people automatically seemed to view tourism—and the promotion of Bruce in general—as a crucial step in the town's future. But for any place going through any development, the measure of progress made can be hard to sift out from all the change. Mayor Quillen's attitude toward progress in Bruce was hard

to pinpoint. While he wouldn't take direct credit for being a progressive figure in town, it seemed as though he realized his outlook on all the growth-oriented happenings in Bruce was a bit unconventional in the sense that he envisioned for the town a level of prosperity it has never actually seen. Also, in interviews with other people, I heard the mayor described as a progressive man. It was a positive description, and it became evident to me that the mayor generally had the support of much of the town.

Mayor Quillen spoke a great deal about how things happen, or do not happen, in Bruce. One point he made was that while the town is small and it sometimes takes only a few people to get things done, the flip side of that is that it only takes a couple of people—literally—to prevent something that could be potentially helpful from happening in town. His example of this concerned an incident a couple of years ago, in which the city could have applied for a grant that Mayor Quillen thought was financially advantageous; two members of the Chamber of Commerce thought otherwise and Bruce never applied for the grant. Mayor Quillen also said that in small-town America, many problems in government resulted from a type of passivity—an attitude in which people sit back and wait for things to get done, which eventually results in the community being passed by. It was a mindset he described as hard to change, but I sensed from my interviews that it had indeed changed a bit—or had, at the very least, begun changing. At any rate, right now things seem to be more progressive than they've ever been because there is much talk of change and a clear focus on the town's future.

Jeffrey's is a large department store on the square run by Paula Jeffrey and her daughter Ellen Shaw, both of whom I interviewed at the same time in November. Their store, it seems, has seen an increase in business over the last two or three years. Some of

this might be the result of the increased tourism brought on by things like the Bollinger Theater and the Forestry Museum. All in all, there seems to be a renewed interest in the town and its ability to look good and attract outsiders, and the owners of Jeffrey's could attest to that. Like Anthony Bollinger, they stressed the importance of out-of-town business and said that tourism was the option that Bruce really needed to explore in order to develop, grow, and simply survive as a community. These types of comments interested me primarily because I often wonder what it is that can change a community's way of thinking like that. When did the people of Bruce realize that in order to continue and prosper as a community they needed to try? At what point did the town's residents realize that industry would not keep the town alive, and that tourism was its next-best option? And how many people in town are aware of that? The attitude that Bruce must put forth a concerted effort to grow is not an outlandish idea; it's more of a logical idea that most people seem to agree with, albeit admitting at the same time that not everybody wants the town to grow because growth means change and change does not necessarily translate into progress. In fact, change is often seen as a bad thing. Zoning laws, for example, are a "bad" change for some people in town who are not used to being told what to do. Nobody could tell me exactly why or when this notion began to change, but some seemed to have a few ideas. When I talked with Sister Mary Norris, who administers Bruce's only Catholic church, she described the town's attitude as one that changed because of the positive possibilities of the town rather than its shortcomings:

> I think the mentality of the town would not be that we have something that needs to be fixed, but that it would be more—that we can be better than we are. And I think it's an attitude more than a change in what happens, but I think people like Bruce. And that—not that it's something that's broken, but it's something that can expand.

As for pride in the town itself, Vonda said that she thought the new Forestry Museum would help "give people a little bit more pride in the way things look," perhaps in the sense that it could serve as a taste of what could be to come if people would only "pretty up their businesses." "I think when they start seeing that reality come in at the museum they'll start looking at things a little differently," she said. She also mentioned that people in town needed to educate themselves "on what it takes to keep the town alive" and realize that even though certain items (computer ink, for example) weren't available in town, shopping for things like groceries could be done in Bruce. "I think people need to start kind of coming to terms with that," she said. And while James Wright said he didn't know when the town became more active in revamping its image, he described the period prior to that of Mayor Quillen's "progressive" leadership as one that "might have been a little complacent." He said that a lot had happened in the years since his arrival in Bruce, a statement that fits the timeline of Jesse Quillen's position as mayor, a job in which Quillen has, according to Reverend Hathorne, done a good job of "trying to promote Bruce not as something it's not but something that it is."

Which raises the question: what is Bruce? Reverend Hathorne described it as "a good, safe community, [*with a*] decent school system, some industry, and close enough to areas of interest for people." He continued:

> [*Town leaders*] are promoting the things, the businesses here that I said, that have found their niche and have survived...And I think it's helping. I think people are seeing that, that honestly, compared to some places we don't have as much to offer, but if you're looking for a quiet town that's cordial and hospitable, I mean, it has some attraction.

When it came to portraying Bruce as a town worth visiting, there was little pretense. There was a general attitude that Bruce was a simple place, special and nice and pleasant

in ways that were often quite subtle. When I asked Ellen Shaw what the video being put out by the Chamber of Commerce was promoting, she replied, "Just living here in a small community mainly." In fact, as far as realizing that Bruce was unique enough to be worth preserving in the first place, Reverend Hathorne said he thought some people were aware of that but that some were not. "Some people just see this as a place to live," he said. "But I think there's some of us that do see it as a unique place, and it could be better. And so that's kind of moving, hopefully, in that direction."

The town seems ready to grow and change. But how will it do that? How are these ideas manifesting themselves, and how successful could those manifestations prove to be? One example of success in Bruce is the Bollinger Family Theater, probably the town's biggest attraction right now. Arguably one of the most glamorous things to ever happen to Bruce, it has drawn the attention of *Mississippi Magazine*, as well as newscaster Walt Grayson's television show *Mississippi Roads*. When I spoke with Anthony Bollinger, he spent a great deal of time discussing the success of the theater, which he started a couple of years ago. In addition to the theater, Anthony and his family have recently opened a restaurant that matches the humorous "country" theme of the show—a theme Anthony caters to by adopting the personality of Bubba T., a goofy hayseed with awful teeth and a corny sense of humor.

While the show has met with success, Anthony expressed a desire for further improvement on the town's behalf. He emphasized, for example, the need of the town to attract tourists and to perhaps build a hotel or a motel or a place for RVs to properly park. I suppose that since he himself has played the "tourism card" with his family theater, he understands the measure of success such an approach can bring. He also mentioned the

fact that most of the people in attendance at the theater are from out of town—as close as Pittsboro and Calhoun City, but seldom from Bruce. This struck me as odd, as so many people pointed to the theater when I asked them about tourism and new developments in Bruce. They were always quick to reference it, and even if they had not yet seen a show or even been inside the theater, it was consistently a point of pride for them.

Hometown visitors or not, Anthony was surprised that the theater had grown into such a large operation. He opened the matching restaurant (which shares a parking lot with the theater) last year because he'd always wanted to be in the food business, but also because whenever people buying tickets to the show asked him for restaurant suggestions, he would tell them to eat before entering Calhoun County. He got sick of doing that, decided to take matters into his own hands, and now runs a relatively successful restaurant, though it has been difficult and has required constant attention. Bruce resident Jerry Inmon, however, said that while he had yet to see one of the theater shows, he had eaten at the restaurant, and he approved of what the theater was doing:

> I'm gonna say [*the Bollinger family theater*] could be a step in the right direction for [*tourism in Bruce*]. And they say that it's built, I mean, you know, it's grew a lot since they opened it. And of course when they first started, nobody didn't think that in a small town like this they'd have a singing theater that would have that kind of talent in it, but they say it's real good, they say put on a good show.

As mentioned earlier, one effect the Bollinger Family Theater has had on town has been on local retail establishments. Jeffrey's, where one can buy everything from Christmas ornaments to sandwiches year-round, is one of the larger stores on the square, putting it in the position to win the attention of out-of-town shoppers. It is understandable, then, that the owners of Jeffrey's appreciate the growth. In fact, owner Paula Jeffrey seemed to

regard any anti-growth, anti-change attitudes as mindsets of the past—mentalities that were replaced with a new desire for growth or, as she put it, "something to offer for our children to stay here." Jeffrey's daughter, Ellen Shaw (who has evidently found enough in the town to keep her living there) embodied that attitude. She was adamant about Bruce residents supporting local businesses, believing that they must take the first step to success by shopping in town. Ellen herself is working on the restoration of the Forestry Museum and, like Vonda, saw the issue of supporting local businesses as something the town needed to work on:

> I think anybody's got room for improvement. I think that we could do more things to promote our town, but I think we're all working on that, so... I think they [*Bruce residents*] could just support their town...I think they just need to realize the importance of shopping here because that's what gives them a community and a town.

When I asked Paula what she thought the town could do in order to grow and improve, she mentioned the importance of the appeal the "atmosphere of a small town" had on visitors—the fact that in a place with fewer people, shopkeepers can afford to pay more attention to shoppers:

> Well I think that's the secret we need to find the answer to. [*laughs*] We've all tried. But I think we're doing--we're on the right track now. We all are drawing a lot of people in. I know we are. The Bollinger Theater is. I know the new place—Artifacts [*Ann Ivy King's store opposite the square from Jeffrey's*]--they draw a lot of people. And I think people enjoy the atmosphere of a small town. We don't have all the crowds and waiting in line, you know. You get a lot more personal attention.

What is perhaps most significant in all this talk of change, however, is simply that people in Bruce—a town that hasn't exactly thrived on change and innovation—want this

change to happen in the first place. "I think the attitude's changing," Paula said. "I think we all want it to grow...We don't want it to die. We want it to continue to grow and get bigger... I think the future looks better now than it ever has." James Wright, speaking as a businessman, spoke about growth as something that wasn't a choice so much as it was a necessity dictated by such factors as labor, the cost of medical insurance, property, and sales. He spoke about it in terms of being vital for any businesses in town to continue to grow in order to survive, but also expressed a desire to see the town itself grow, saying that though the trend in Bruce was a very slight decrease in population, the Chamber of Commerce was making efforts to "get folks to visit Bruce, get folks to move to Bruce." Bruce Police Chief Stan Evans agreed, saying that while there needed to be some sort of limitation on housing, he still felt that Bruce should grow, ever so slightly:

> I think we should grow. Now, are we going to grow by leaps and bounds? I don't think so. I think we'll grow to—I think our growth will come from places like Oxford and Grenada. There are people that want to come and live in small towns, want to escape the city life. That's what Bruce is gonna benefit from. I just hope Bruce can keep the perspective that okay, we want to grow but we slowly want to grow. We don't want to outgrow—you know what I mean, we don't want to create a lot of problems. We want to keep this rural town and make sure it stays a town and that people do know people, people do help people.

Jerry Inmon, who runs a small garage in town, also said he wanted the town to become more prosperous and grow, but not too much. "As far as changing a lot of stuff, I mean, Bruce is a good place to live," he said. "I've been to a lot of places. I've never been to a place I like any better. So I mean, I just stay with it. I figured I'll probably be here from now on. Hopefully."

There are other sides to the growth issue, however. One has more to do with businesses themselves than the local customers who are being encouraged to support them. On more than one occasion people told me that businesses do not take advantage of the business opportunities they have. Referring to Saturday nights when the Bollinger Family Theater hits its stride, Wayne Edwards makes a point reminiscent of Anthony Bollinger's need to open his own restaurant:

> You know, it's not every town our size that's gonna say, you know, we're gonna have three hundred extra people in town this Saturday night. And you didn't see a lot of...restaurants [*going after their business*]. If I was a restaurant owner I'd be like, you know, I'm gonna try to find some way to get those people to come by and eat. But you didn't see much of that.

Local resident Ed Alexander echoed Wayne's sentiment. "Everybody wants it to grow," he said, "But nobody wants to put nothing in it." This lack of effort on behalf of the town businesses parallels the apathy of the people who travel great distances to shop instead of supporting businesses in Bruce. And though Wayne said he dislikes Wal-Mart—"I think it's what's killing America"—he said he still drives half an hour to shop there. He also said that at one point there was a rumor that Wal-Mart would come to Bruce, and local businessmen rallied together to keep it from coming. After telling me that he wasn't sure if that story was true (there is still no Wal-Mart in Bruce), Wayne pointed out that while he understood why small businesses might not want a Wal-Mart nearby, these small businesses were also the ones that "kind of take for granted that they're gonna get business" and so do not keep their stores clean and organized. In fact, it seemed as though some business owners in town were not only lazy or inactive when it came to making an effort to reach out to customers, but they also sometimes held the community

back, and were counterproductive in certain ways. Ann Ivy King made this point by telling an "only fish in the pond" story:

> I remember a few years back when we had one grocery store and another grocery store was looking for a building and they couldn't find one so they went and built a building and they went out of business, so what did number one grocery store--and I'm not trying to be ugly because these people are good friends of mine--what did number one grocery store's son go out and do but buy that building to keep another grocery store from coming in...That wanting to be one-and-only in a small town and all that is good in some ways and it's bad in some ways.

Jerry Inmon also said that anybody who wants to see the town grow would "be more apt to being energetic about getting out and getting other businesses to come in," which echoes Anthony Bollinger, as well as the enthusiasm of the women at Jeffrey's.

Businesses aren't the only ones responsible for passing the baton. Wayne also credited change in town to greater involvement of a younger generation of businessmen in the community. He cited as an example the too-recent introduction of the only ATM in town, which arrived less than ten years ago. "To me, that says, in our modern age of convenience and that kind of stuff—that says a lot. It just says how, I guess, unattached maybe to the rest of the world's progress we can be." He continued:

> [*People in Bruce*] don't want change. They want everything to stay the same it already is. They don't realize that if you want your town to grow--not even if you want your town to grow. If you want the town to just continue as it is--you constantly have to bring in fresh ideas and fresh people. Because if we don't have somebody looking for another employer, and something happened to this place--where's everybody going to go?

In a similar vein, Mayor Jesse Quillen mentioned Bruce's aging population when he spoke of heading "in the direction of new development and diversity," adding that people in town not accustomed to change had to realize that change happens everywhere, all the time. He spoke in terms of learning to "think differently:"

> We don't want to go there all at once, but we've got to embrace the world around us. The fact is, it's changing. It's different than ever before. We've got to be a part of it. We can—and I think too, I hear often, people say that, "Well, we don't want our community to change." You have no choice. I mean, if you just sit back and do nothing, it changes. I think a lot of folks pretend that it don't, but it really does over time.

Change, however, often needs to be tempered, and walking the fine line between character and the need to sell that character as a product in order to attract growth is tricky. Even Mayor Quillen himself said he wasn't sure when and where to stop the town's growth:

> If you look around at the world—there's really not very many thriving small communities. And there's not many that transition from small into growing into prosperous into really robust. And I don't know where in there I want to stop and say, I don't want to go there, I want to stop right here. So that'll be for the next person to decide maybe. [*laughs*] If I can just get it going, get it moving, get a few folks growing and coming here, it'll be all right. And then somebody else can deal with it.

Jerry Inmon, meanwhile, said he thought that Bruce would always be "basic Bruce," even if it did grow and change a bit:

> I'm gonna say the basic roots of Bruce will always be in Bruce, you know. It's always going to be considered, I think, a small town. But it may grow. I hope it does. But I don't know. It's just, you don't know what the future holds. All you do is predict or guess or hope or whatever.

Perhaps the most basic aspect of the issue of change and growth, however, is simply that of physical appearance. This is an issue that Bruce has not always cared about as much as it seems to now. After all, the building that is now the site of the Forestry Museum, the old E.L. Bruce Company general store, was hidden by a nondescript 1970s-style storefront when I first drove into town over two years ago. Mayor Quillen, however, did say that appearance was becoming a priority for Bruce so that when people visited the town, it would appeal to them on a purely aesthetic level. "It sows that little seed up there that, you know, these folks seem to have their act together here, and you're going to feel good about coming here and spending money and going back home and telling your friends about it," he said. Mayor Quillen added, however, that working on appearance was a hard thing to do, which is where zoning laws come in. This is an issue that reflects the reluctance of a portion of the town's population to go along with any changes the town might want to make. Town leaders in Bruce instituted zoning on January 5, 2007, after more than six years of study and planning, according to the *Monitor-Herald*, Calhoun County's newspaper (http://www.monitorherald.com). The opinions regarding zoning seemed to be split into halves; the pro-zoning half argued that sure, zoning is not fun, but in order for good things (growth, prosperity, tourism) to happen in Bruce, people have to clean up their acts, so to speak. A couple of interviewees pointed out that without zoning laws, nobody would trust the town enough to buy property in it.

The other side of that argument—the anti-zoning half—makes about as much sense as the pro-zoning half, which is what makes the issue a difficult one. After all, Bruce is a tiny place. It is a community that is barely eighty years old, and remains relatively untouched, away from the interstate and out of the way of any major shopping

hubs. What does it matter if there are no zoning laws in town? People in Bruce are unaccustomed to being told what to do, because it seems that in the past, nobody has ever cared about them enough to tell them what to do, hence the uncomfortable situation regarding the unfamiliar laws of property and zoning. Anthony Bollinger mentioned this point; people in Bruce, he said, "have lived any way they want to forever...but you've got to have some rules to go by."

While talking about the lack of any building codes in town, Vonda Keon said there were some people in town who were old and could not take care of their houses, even though they might be "falling down around them." She did, however, credit the absence of building codes as the main cause for the problem of appearance, and was not sure if the seeming apathy regarding looks—what she described as an "I don't care attitude"—was a result of a lack of education, on behalf of both landlords and residents:

> There's still a lack of education in a lot of things. And a lot of people don't get out of the county. They've never lived anywhere else but here. This is all they know. And they just don't have a bigger vision that there is something else--not so much bigger and better, but that change can happen and it will make life better here.

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> But I'll just say this: if you take Ole Miss outta Oxford, what would be there? You'd have a Bruce.
>
> --Stan Evans

In addition to promoting itself as a place worth visiting, Bruce has another option for growth that has more to do with Oxford, Mississippi, 27 miles to the north. Oxford is a town in which the rapid influx of condominiums, classy apartments, and skyrocketing

property values is attracting investors and scaring some residents. Meanwhile, Bruce, with its lower property values, is not only pushing tourism but also advertising itself as a place to live—a place where property is much cheaper at mere 30 miles' distance from Oxford. I sensed that people in Bruce were aware of the possibilities the town's proximity to Oxford afforded them. Mayor Quillen and the town seem to have accepted, if not embraced, the fact that Bruce is not living option 'A' for many people. He literally referred to it as "B,C, or D" for people whose sights are really on the Oxford area, which may be too expensive for many people to live in these days:

> I think in Bruce we would be probably option C for a person who is looking at Oxford. Obviously that would be maybe a retiree with liquid assets and money available to spend. Typically up there, it would take five hundred thousand to buy property and build a house, if not more. And I think our drawing card here would be—n ot only could you get a house here, but you could buy several other acres of land, as opposed to Oxford's situation—you're gonna have neighbors on all sides of you, pretty close. And so we kind of try to tag along with them, if you will, but recognizing that we're not the primary draw. We're an alternate, we're option B or C or D.

And so Bruce is feeding off of Oxford's growth. That's a fact that several people have admitted point-blank. Bruce is reliant on Oxford through the people whose gaze lies in the direction of that more prosperous town but whose wallets cannot manage a home there. It is a new and exciting option that is a direct result of Oxford's growth—one that Water Valley, roughly 20 miles to the northwest of Bruce, has already taken advantage of. Many Oxford workers seem to be embracing the out-of-town lifestyle, and the people in Bruce are not only well aware of that, but they plan on catering toward the people who are acting on it. It's intriguing to me that Bruce's future prosperity lies in its ability to

'do the best it can' in order to present itself as a viable and attractive second, third, or fourth option for people who would, in many cases, rather live somewhere else.

The gradual, predictable erosion of industry in Bruce has been slow enough to allow the community to put some thought into the increasingly attractive option of tourism. As a result, new ideas concerning business, appearance, and town character are becoming realities. Bruce, as a town searching for its niche, is putting forth a conscious effort to attract outsiders—something it hasn't ever done to any great extent. It's an attitude toward growth and change that could ultimately save the town from obscurity. Perhaps more significantly, however, it is an effort championed not only by the town's leaders but also by its people.

Chapter 2:
Why live in Bruce? Why not?

I think it's safe to say that I would never live in Bruce. It is too small for me; it has no bookstore, no coffee shop; no music store, little entertainment. I do like certain things about it, however, from a safe distance of 27 miles. I like it because the people who live there like living there and in my interviews I have been trying to figure out why they do. I have never been satisfied with living in a single place the way some of Bruce's residents are happy with living in a tiny town with a gazebo in the middle of its downtown square, a lumber mill on one end and the scent of pine throughout. It is intriguing to hear people describe how they feel about the place, and I'm sometimes envious of how attached some of my interviewees are to the town. Attachment to place is a fascinating topic, and so is the manner in which people go about defining the word "home" for themselves. It is something I have always had difficulty doing.

Many people leave Bruce in their youth and then come back to raise their children there, work there, or finish their lives there. A number of people referred to something about Bruce that drew them back. No one defined it very specifically; I have come to think of it as a kind of magnetism. What defines "home" for some people? What is it about a place that makes it both a good place to live and a place worth loving? Why choose to live in Bruce? I gathered that many people felt strongly and deeply about their ties to the town, and I was impressed by the attachments that these people had formed to

a place that others would find too small, too stifling, too conservative, too boring. Those descriptions weren't nonexistent, though. Many people mentioned "the need to get out" that young people in town often feel, yet just as many people mentioned eventually getting over that feeling. Another part of life in Bruce is the comfort level that comes from knowing so many people in town. For example, Wayne Edwards pointed out that, for him, the comfort of knowing so many people outweighed "the risk of the unknown"—a point of view that several interviewees seemed to share.

Not everybody I interviewed was equally pleased with living in Bruce. Some said it was boring. Some expressed a notion that maybe they could not afford to live anywhere else. Some felt obligated to remain there. Others pointed out that at some point in their lives people make a decision, based primarily on their job and economic situation, to live someplace, and they have to stick with it. Others expressed outright hostility to the town without explaining it much. Euphus Ruth, who grew up in Bruce but has lived most of his adult life in Greenville, swore to me that he would never move back to Bruce. Everybody had something to say on the matter.

One thing that consistently came up in the interviews was the desire of young people to leave town. It is a problem that is not unique to Bruce, but it struck me as a half-hearted complaint sometimes, as so many people seem to stay in Bruce even though they possess the resources to leave. The youngest person I interviewed was Autumn Franklin, age 22 at the time of our interview. I first met Autumn in the fall of 2004 on a photo-making trip to Bruce, and was surprised to learn that she had already been married for a couple of years. When I met her, she was working at a café and didn't seem very happy. She was literally flipping burgers, she pointed out to me. She wanted to go to

Ole Miss but didn't think she was smart enough—and couldn't afford it. I wondered if she represented a large portion of the young people in Bruce.

Talking to Autumn made me question my own motives for wanting to leave Mississippi. I grew up saying I wanted to get out of the state, but nearly twelve years after moving here, I still haven't left. When I talked to Ann Ivy King, a couple of weeks after interviewing Autumn, she mentioned several things I could relate to, but one comment she made seemed to ring especially true:

> I can remember saying that I just couldn't wait to get out of Bruce. You know, I just could not wait to get out of here. And it was okay growing up here but I always felt like everybody knew too much about you, and you couldn't be your own person and that kind of thing because everybody was always into your business and all of that. But then I ended up here. And I remember thinking that I'd wished I'd never said that. You have to eat your words sometimes.

Ann wasn't the only one who touched on the subject. In fact, many interviewees mentioned it in some form. I got the impression that everybody had dealt with a feeling of being trapped, even though they seem to have come to terms with it. Autumn seemed slightly more dissatisfied than most, but she still seemed content with settling in Bruce. She grew up there, and recently bought a new house in town with her husband of two years. She expressed a slight confidence in her ability to pick up and leave should she want to, but at the same time she sounded slightly hesitant:

> I just think now that I've got so many ties, like I'm buying the house and I've got these bills that I'm stuck here, but I'm not. Yeah, I would like to live—I've always wanted to do interior design but of course you can't do that in a small town like this.

Shortly before I'd talked with Ann, I had met up with Wayne Edwards, an employee at the Weyerhaeuser mill since 1986, when he was in his early twenties. He mentioned the so-called "bill cycle" as well:

> Well, you start working, and then you get bills and then you just have to keep—it's a cycle. And then after a while you just say, well, this is what I'm going to be. So you just start making the best of what you've got.

Something about the idea of having to "make the best of what you've got" has never been a way I want to approach life, but Wayne wasn't the only one who seemed to express that sort of attitude. Gwen Embry, a safety coordinator at Weyerhaeuser for nearly thirty years, echoed the same sort of sentiment as Wayne—a decision to settle for something:

> Weyerhaeuser is nationwide, actually worldwide, and there are opportunities to move on and upward at different locations. But at some point in time you have to kind of make your decision whether you want to be the upward mobile person pursuing a career or if you're content being a home person and staying at the same job.

Connie Collins is a Bruce native who runs the Waller Telephone Company, an independent phone company her parents took over when she was little. She viewed her life spent in Bruce as having more to do with destiny than with a career. She moved back to town with her husband shortly after graduating from Ole Miss, when her father got sick. Although she openly acknowledged that she'd rather live further out in the country, and that her husband didn't want to live in Bruce at all, she saw living in her hometown as the "right" thing to do:

> Well, you asked me earlier if this is where I've always wanted to be. This is where I've always thought my responsibilities and destinies lied. Not because it was a choice, but because that was what was supposed to be. You know, some people are given a lot of

choices in life, and some people just try to follow the right people. And I'm one of those people that I'm just trying to follow the right path.

Despite what Wayne, Gwen, and Connie said, I still questioned how much of that career decision was choice, how much was fate, and how much was a mere lack of options. When I asked Wayne if he thought people ever felt stuck in Bruce, he told me that he did think so, and that he could feel that way himself at that very moment, but he didn't allow himself to anymore. I asked him why, and he replied:

> Well, economics. You have a job and you live paycheck to paycheck and you can't—it's hard to pick up and move and go somewhere and start fresh. Whereas if you had money in the bank and something like that, but Bruce has not ever been a wealthy town and so I'm sure a lot of people have always felt that way. They can't get out of the system. They don't have the money to get out of the system.

After Wayne mentioned it, I thought of Autumn. Was she simply the making the best of what she had? Was she really tied down by the bills? I actually questioned her confidence. If she was that desperate to leave Bruce, would she tell me, a stranger? I suspected her of denying me a little bit of the truth—not so much lying as simply placing a veil over her situation. But there is no way I can know. Ann Ivy King, however, also said something to me on the matter that again made me wonder about Autumn's statement. While Ann admitted to thinking, as a teenager, that all she wanted was "out, just out, just away," she acknowledged that it was a common feeling:

> I mean, I know—honestly, I'm not trapped. If I want to leave, I can leave. But I'm sure the younger people feel exactly like I did when I was a teenager—that they feel extremely trapped, 'Oh my god, I'll never get out of here, if I do, I'll never come back.' I'm sure they do.

The fact that Ann said that impressed me because, unlike Wayne, she had given me the impression of somebody who was indeed making the best of what she had but at the same time managed to express a genuine happiness with her life in Bruce. In other words, she didn't seem as dissatisfied as Wayne. Paula Jeffrey's feelings mirrored Ann's. She lived in Bruce; she ran a successful business in Bruce; she liked living in Bruce. But when I asked her if, while growing up, she planned on remaining in Bruce for the rest of her life, she said no. I asked her what she had planned on doing instead, and she gave a laugh and replied, "Oh, I thought I wanted to live in a big city and have my own vehicle and buy all the shoes and clothes I wanted." Apparently, for her, the trade-off of shopping and the thrills of big-city life for life in Bruce was worth it. On a similar note, Ann told me a story about a rotary exchange student from New Zealand who, since spending a semester at Ole Miss (as well as spending time in Calhoun County), has visited Bruce several times in the past thirty years:

> He has been back to Bruce probably six or seven times and is coming back this Christmas. And he's really torn because he feels like he has two homes now, you know, and I think really he made me feel like more of--there's really something here to appreciate. Because seeing him see it seemed like really it had an impact for me, because for him to have felt that hometown feeling and that something to come back to, I thought okay, maybe there is something there. Maybe that makes sense.

On the whole, there seemed to be an attitude that prevailed among some of the middle-aged interviewees (Wayne, Ann, Vonda, Gwen, Connie) that sure, young people might want to leave Bruce but one day they were going to realize that they would want to return. Gwen, who raised two sons in Bruce, explained it well:

> There's a time in there when children are up to ten years old, they're perfectly happy. And then from ten to twenty or twenty-two, whatever that time period is in there, you--you're seeking. You don't even know what you're seeking, but there's that drive in you, that I'm looking for something else, and hometown, you know, I want bigger, better, faster, more. And I guess those kids get to be in high school and they go to college--sometimes when those go to college and they leave college they go on. Wherever that is. But sometimes some of those once they get to college and they realize oh, how nice and calm and peaceful it was back home--and they come back.

Ann said she felt restless as a teenager as well—that all she wanted out, "just out, just away, somewhere else." Wayne, who is slightly younger than Ann, seemed as though he was stuck somewhere in between; in some respects he liked Bruce enough to remain there, yet at the same time he expressed a sort of desire to get out every now and then:

> After a while, you just--this is where I want to be, and whether it's through my choice or just the way it worked out, and I like it here, so I'm not unhappy. Now sometimes when you go off on a trip somewhere and you, as I'm driving back to town, that last thirty miles, from Oxford or Tupelo or wherever, you just kind of feel the life draining out of you or whatever. Because you came from some place where there was more activity, and McDonald's, and Taco Bell, and you know, it's stuff like that. But you get over it.

Vonda Keon, who moved back to Bruce to raise her children, was born in California. Her parents, originally from Bruce, decided to move away from "the land of fruit and nuts," as she put it, and back to town when Vonda was five. Having lived out of town for much of her life (she lived in Tupelo for more than 20 years), she expressed quite strongly a sort of 'queen bee' attitude regarding wanting to escape:

> I know I hear a lot of the younger kids, you know, 'I can't wait to get out of this town, I can't wait to get out of this town, there's nothing to do, I can't wait to get out, da da da da

da.' And like I said, I did--I thought the same thing when I left... I think it's almost like there's that transition time where you do have to leave and go find out.

On the flip side, why would somebody want to leave the town in the first place? It was interesting to note the different reasons why people stayed in Bruce. One common thread in many interviews was family. Vonda's family was tied into the town, her father having been the previous owner of the old Bruce general store. Ann grew up in town and now lives across the street from her parents. Joe Massey, a local businessman, grew up in Bruce and moved as far away as Seattle before moving back to in order to raise his child in the town where he grew up. Wayne, who gave me a very mixed impression of his feelings towards Bruce, was still living in town for a number of different reasons. One reason was his job at the lumber mill; he had been working there since the 1980s, and was in a high-level position at the time of our interview. His other reason for living in Bruce, however, was family—he became his grandparents' primary care-giver after his father died six years ago. And though Wayne sometimes sounded a little bit dissatisfied with life in Bruce, he concluded our interview with this statement, in which he again mentioned family:

> Well, despite all my negative feelings or things I felt in the past, this is where I still live, so—and that's probably where I will always live. And that's because I live on the land that my great-grandparents first bought when they moved here in the twenties. So I feel a kind of connection through the soil, I guess, more or less.

This "connection through the soil" was something that many people in Bruce seemed to be able to relate to. Paula Jeffrey alluded to it as well, saying that "the older you get, the more you appreciate your heritage"—especially, she noted, if your parents had passed away. Reverend Hathorne also mentioned ancestry in Bruce, explaining that

strong ties in town have a lot to do with the fact that there are families in town in which "the grandparents are still here, the children are here, the grandchildren are here, the great-grandchildren are here." And so whether the "soil" Wayne mentioned had a stronger pull on people because of the size of the town or the age of the town was another question.

For those who left Bruce (not counting years spent at college or university), many found reasons to return home for good, despite the possible lack of jobs in town. Some returned to raise families; others to open businesses; yet others to retire. Sister Mary Norris explained this as something that had to do with people always considering Bruce home:

> I think the people from Bruce will always feel that this is home. And they'll probably use terms like, 'I'm going home this weekend,' and it'll be Bruce. So I think the heart will always be here. And I wouldn't be surprised if many of these people move away during their earning years and come back here to retire. But you know, [*they*] don't know that yet.

Stan Evans, Bruce's police chief, listed a few reasons why he thought people moved back to Bruce—for example, cost of living, feeling comfortable around people—he even gave better jobs as a reason for returning. He also said that tradition had a strong pull on people, especially those who went "up north" when they were young and came back to Bruce to retire. And while his love for Bruce was almost unmatched among interviewees, and he said he never wanted to leave ("No other town don't incite me"), he did acknowledge that the qualities his hometown possessed were ones shared by many small communities. "I guarantee in Pontotoc, they'll say the same things," he said.

When I asked Connie Collins if she had ever considered moving away from Bruce, she said she had. One factor in consideration was her husband, a Bruce native who, having joined the Navy, has never lived in a small town for any length of time other than Bruce, and would rather live someplace else. When I asked her what he thought about Bruce, she laughed and replied, "That it's a funny little town with nothing to do and you can't even buy a beer." Nevertheless, Connie and her husband remain in Bruce, and she is happy there. Euphus Ruth, however, told me that he did not plan on returning to Bruce—unless, he said, he had to take care of his parents. I sensed almost a measure of bitterness from Euphus, and when I asked him if he resented Bruce at all, he replied, "I don't resent it...I just could never live there again." Jerry Inmon, whose profession as a racecar driver has taken him travelling a fair bit, also admitted to wanting to "see different parts of the country" when he was younger. But, he added, he had gotten his fill, and now acknowledged: "I like it when I get back to Calhoun County."

It seems, then, that there is some sort of pull that Bruce has on people—a pull that Ann tried to explain, but couldn't quite pin down:

> It's like the other day, my husband and I were watching a football game, and I was strangely noticing the colors of the uniforms, and I said, I just don't think there's any color anywhere any prettier than blue and gold. And he said, you think that might have anything to do with Bruce's colors being blue and gold? [*laughs*] ...I said you know, it's just--you don't realize the impact that little things like that have on you. It really sticks in your consciousness somehow that--that's just--I imagine if I lived in Michigan or somewhere that when I saw a football team that had blue and gold colors then I would just get that little heart thump, feeling like oh, home. And I don't know what it is that pulls people back. [*pause*] Just keeps sucking us back in.

Reverend Hathorne, originally from Jones County, described his time living outside of Calhoun County with his family as a helpful learning experience that made him appreciate life in Bruce more because he realized that his travels were something not everybody in Bruce could experience:

> I think you go through--or I did, at least, you go through this phase where, "I just need to get away from this to see what it's like on the other side"--and we were able to do that... If that had never happened to me I would have a completely different perspective. And so to be where I am now, knowing where I've been, it does help me. It helps me to relate to these people and understand that some of them don't know that.

I also noticed in my interviews that those who had not left, or saw no reason for leaving, seemed reluctant to do so because of what Wayne Edwards called "the risk of the unknown"—that seemingly dangerous territory that lay beyond certain perimeters. And while I have always relished that so-called "risk," some people in Bruce seemed to prefer the constant familiarity of life in a place where they could rely on little change. Jerry Inmon said he liked to be around the people that he had known his whole life:

> People that you know, you get away from people that you always growed up with, it's not like meeting somebody every day, you know, you meet somebody on the street, you have no idea who they are, where they're from, what they do, you know. I just like to know a little bit more about the people I associate with all the time.

And so it seems that through a combination of circumstance, desire, obligation to family members, heritage, or, as Ann put it, "that hometown feeling," the people I talked to in Bruce often had very slight feelings of resignation mixed in with their more overpowering, though genuine, feelings of satisfaction with living in Bruce. On the other hand, there were people who accepted a single lifestyle as the one they wanted to live,

and as far as the lifestyles in Bruce go, they generally do not deviate from a classic small-town standard of strong community, safety, and a relatively hum-drum existence. "A lot of people like to be where they don't know, and nobody knows them," Jerry Inmon said. "They just like to be in a place like that. But that's just not what my lifestyle is."

Chapter 3:
The Downsides

"It's a whole 'nother world outside Calhoun County."
--Euphus Ruth

Bruce's problems make sense. It is a small town full of friends and neighbors and family in very close proximity, so gossip abounds and privacy is hard to come by. It is a dry county (a problem for some, not for others) without much entertainment, which can sometimes lead to as many problems as in counties that sell alcohol. It has a public school known more for its football team than its academics, and the lack of vocational training in Calhoun County doesn't help attract more "advanced" jobs to the area. Students who graduate from high school and move on to college and get degrees are hard-pressed to find jobs suited to their higher education in Bruce, giving them little reason to return to the town. It seems a flat, dead-end cycle that several interviewees mentioned, and that some expressed a desire to address. I was often impressed with the fervor with which some interviewees spoke regarding these matters, and this will be the focus of this chapter: how much people care.

The most obvious problem in Bruce is that of education. There is no vocational school in Calhoun County (the highest level of education in the county is a high school diploma), and this ultimately costs the area jobs. In the long run this could have increasingly serious consequences for Bruce. A few people mentioned that the lack of jobs for more educated people in the county leads to people either moving away or not

returning to town after graduating from college. Also of note are the mixed reviews I heard of the public school in town. Another issue is that of school consolidation: there are three school systems in the county (in Vardaman, Calhoun City, and Bruce) that could possibly be consolidated, but each time the issue arises it is voted down in a county-wide referendum. This was explained to me as a matter of town pride and an effort to cling to some sort of community identity. After all, high school football is an obsession in the area, and the rivalry between Bruce and Calhoun City, a mere ten miles to the south, is a serious one. The two towns are divided by the Skuna River, with the tiny town of Pittsboro between of the two serving as the county seat. And though both towns, Reverend Hathorne said, were similar, they are still competitive. "This county is divided over that issue of 'we don't want you to have it if we can't have it, we want it and we don't want you to get it,'" he said. "And that's not just a recent development. That's been that way a long time." So the rivalry is one that seems to center around a desire for one town to eclipse the other, and while this provides great entertainment in the way of high school football, it can also be harmful to Bruce.

Many people see the quality of public education in town as hurting Bruce. As James Wright put it, Bruce "sacrifices a little bit with what's available in education." Ann Ivy King, whose son Brett attended Calhoun Academy, a private school, directly criticized the Bruce public school system. She was especially critical of an incident involving the high school's choice as to who would fill the position of Spanish teacher:

> At the Academy, we hired a Spanish teacher who was one of the best teachers Brett ever had. She also taught him English...She had a five-year Spanish masters degree and she had worked in Mexico. She was an excellent, excellent teacher. And the high school hired one of the doctor's wives to teach Spanish instead of her. And so the Academy got

> to hire her. She wasn't from here, so they hired a local doctor's wife to teach Spanish. And she had--she had what, I guess whatever the basic requirements of a college degree in a foreign language are to teach Spanish. And they hired her to teach Spanish. So no, you're not going to improve the education when you're doing that.

Ann also spoke of her own experience at the public school. A self-described good student who loved to learn, she graduated from Bruce High School the class valedictorian. When she went to Ole Miss, however, she claimed it was an academic slap in the face. "It was horrible," she said. "I was so unprepared." Granted, Ann's experience was over thirty years ago, but it was enough for her to keep her son from attending Bruce High School. Vonda, who home schools her children, also criticized the Bruce public school system, saying that it had to change. Her complaint also centered around language instruction, or lack thereof, in the Bruce schools. She explained that many Hispanic children entering the school system do not speak English, but there are no teachers in the school, she said, who speak Spanish. The result is many elementary-age students with a language barrier to cross have to repeat grades.

School consolidation, however, seemed to be the most important education-related issue. Some interviewees saw it as a problem that reflected the community's desire to use its school as a way of retaining its identity rather than a means for supplying adequate preparation for further schooling. And while school consolidation has been voted down in Bruce several times, I never spoke to anybody who opposed consolidation. In fact, anybody who mentioned it actually supported the idea and seemed to regret the resulting loss in quality in Bruce's high school system. Reverend Hathorne was one such person, pointing out that not only would consolidation save money, it would also enable the community to have a larger school with better academic programs. He continued:

> But the people who are on the other side of that issue would argue that they wanted to keep their school and their community because it was the backbone and focal point of their community. And I can see that too, I mean I can see their point. I can see that. That they wanted to keep that unique character of their town because it was, you know, their school.

Reverend Hathorne did acknowledge, however, that he went to a large high school and was speaking from the point of view of someone who had a good high school education, and also a college degree, something that many people in Bruce lack and perhaps do not realize the importance of. "People who have lived here all their lives...don't see the need of having advanced curriculum to prepare you for school down the road," he said, adding that the school system was not a priority in Bruce. When I asked Sister Mary Norris about the consolidation vote, she too explained that she thought the issue had to do with the school being a crucial part of the town's identity. She also mentioned that identity also had to do with family tradition:

> I think football has a lot to do with it, and they want to create—but part of it—it's not just the football, it's the whole city image of what a football team stands for. And so it would be the Calhoun system, instead of Vardaman or Calhoun City and others. And it's—if the families are here a long time, this is also the school that the parents went to. I mean, nobody schedules anything for Friday nights in the fall, because that's football night. And it's just—you can try it if you want, but it's not going to work. People are going to be on the field. But that's how loyal—how loyal these folks are to their hometown.

James Wright agreed: "We can't seem to join together," he said, speaking of Bruce, Vardaman, and Calhoun City. "They each have strong feelings about retaining their school, their identity."

The quality of high school education in Bruce has its effect on the jobs that Bruce is able to offer its citizens. When I asked James Wright about whether college graduates moved to Bruce after finishing their studies, he replied that they did not. Though he thought the system was gradually improving, it was still a problem that the town needed to address. Wayne Edwards also expressed what seemed like regret at Bruce being unable to escape its reputation as a working-class town, telling me that he was slightly envious after reading about research jobs opening up at Ole Miss. "We're never going to have those kind of jobs here," he said. "Research jobs or computer jobs, you know. It's always going to be labor jobs, more or less." On the same note, there is no form of vocational training in Calhoun County. This has concerned Reverend Hathorne ever since he moved to Bruce:

> You go through the school system here, and for the most part if you're not college material then you get a degree and you're sent out in the world to hope for the best...And as a result of that we're jeopardizing, I think, our future. Because those who are college material go to college and you know, maybe there's a job here for them to come back to, but for the most part there's not. And those who are not college material...when they get out of school here, if there is an area that they can work, they're pretty—honestly they're kind of strapped to a lower level of job because they don't have any skills to get to the next level prior to entering the work force.

Jerry Inmon, who makes his living as a race car driver, also recognized the fact that Bruce had a lack of suitable job opportunities for college graduates. Reverend Hathorne also pointed out that the lack of so many businesses and job opportunities could—and perhaps should—result in college graduates from Bruce opening up businesses in town. One example he gave was that of a veterinary; there is none in Bruce. The closest is in

Calhoun City, and the only one in the county. According to him, this provided a "huge opportunity" for a graduate with a degree in veterinary medicine to return home and open up a clinic. He did acknowledge, however, that such an example could in fact be the exception to the rule as applied to college graduates. "You get a degree, for instance, in accounting or business or marketing or whatever," he said. "You're limited to find a job if you want to live here." This observation raises another point. Many people in Bruce commute away from Bruce to work elsewhere, a fact that puts Bruce in danger of becoming a "bedroom community" much like Coffeeville, where the town economy suffers due to the lack of commerce. But if there are indeed people leaving Bruce in order to work their jobs, why can't the town have those jobs within its city limits? After all, the number of people leaving Bruce everyday is fairly large, according to Mayor Quillen:

> I know here, we export about seventeen hundred jobs a day in Calhoun County. And a lot of those are well-educated people. Those are, in some cases, the cream of the crop leaving the county every day to go to higher paying jobs outside the county.

In addition to the difficulties with the town's work force, there are other issues that are perceived as problems in town. One is the lack of entertainment in Bruce, where driving around the square on Saturday nights is a simple, but common, source of amusement. While perhaps not as serious an issue as that of education, lack of something to do is a problem that was frequently mentioned in my interviews. Calhoun County is dry (meaning no alcohol can be bought or sold there), a place where the lack of entertainment strangely parallels the lack of alcohol, and where teenagers—and adults—will drive as far as Grenada or Oxford to stock up on beer and liquor. Police Chief Stan Evans, who acknowledged that Bruce being in a dry county made his job easier, said that

the lack of entertainment is directly related to a lack of resources in town. He said he was "about ready," for the town to "put up a nice skating rink." While he said boredom was a problem, it was easier for young people in present-day Bruce to seek entertainment out of town than it was in his day, when only the privileged few had cars. "Most of your kids now got vehicles," he said. "They're not standing around up here. They're going to the mall. Going to Oxford."

Autumn Franklin, however, said there were many teenagers in Bruce who "just walk the street and get in so much trouble" because there was nothing for them to do other than ride around the square. Yet others pointed in the direction of church activities, sports, and other towns for entertainment, saying that there were plenty of ways to keep busy in Bruce. Gwen Embry, who raised two sons in Bruce, said they both kept busy with sports:

> Your football starts in the fall and it lasts nearly to Christmas, and basketball lasts 'til the next spring, and baseball starts, and you do high school baseball and then you do summer ball...Now if you want more intellectual pastimes such as plays or an opera or something, we're only 23, 30 miles from Oxford, and the campus has different things that you can attend. Also we're only, say, 50 miles from Tupelo, that has a lot of plays and stuff. So if you want there are other things you can do. Now far as if you want to run to town on a Wednesday night, see what you might do, no, there might not be much that night. But kids don't need to stay out that late during the week anyway.

But there are, as Reverend Hathorne pointed out, advantages to a town lacking some elements of entertainment. While he admitted to missing some of the amenities of his former home of Fort Worth, Texas, he said he was thankful that he did not have to raise his children there:

> I know the same temptations and things are available here but it just seems to be a little more prevalent and on a larger scale obviously in a bit city like that. I don't know. It's a trade-off I guess. And we're close enough, if you have to go somewhere to get something that you can't get, you can do that. And it's—I'd rather, I suppose I'd rather live in this environment and be able to go beyond that to get entertainment or whatever—I'd rather be able to do that as opposed to living in that environment and have to leave it to go and get a community of friends, because you can't do it that way. It's not—it doesn't work in reverse. And so I say this probably has greater advantages.

Entertainment aside, there is the negative issue of Bruce being a place where anything that doesn't fit the town's definition of normal is sometimes perceived as negative. Vonda Keon mentioned this, as did Euphus Ruth, who seemed to claim that the closed-mindedness of Bruce drove him away from a life there. Wayne Edwards also hinted at it, saying that he sometimes thought "a lot different from other people," the other people, he went on to say, perhaps being a bit "backwards." And though Sister Mary Norris had nothing but good things to say about being an out-of-town Catholic in a predominantly Baptist and Methodist town, Euphus Ruth said that when the Catholic church came to town, people "didn't want them there." He gave me an example involving his own father:

> We had our family reunion in the Bruce community center. And until they got their own building to have church, the Catholics had church on Sunday evenings out at the community building. Well, some of them showed up early from out of town, visiting, and we weren't quite through, still had food out. Showed up rather early, actually. And they were there. So I just invited them in, said, "You can stay here, you know, eat. You're welcome here." My dad got up and told them to leave.

In addition to being an environment in which there is little diversity, Bruce does not nurture those with a creative streak. When I asked Euphus, who spends all his free time making photographs, what outlet he channeled his creative energy through when he was a teenager growing up in Bruce and how he dealt with the lack of an adequate way of expressing himself, he replied, "I just kept it in my head. My life, my life growing up in Bruce was in my head, my dream world." And when I asked him how he grew to adopt the open-minded, liberal attitudes he possesses as an adult, he replied:

> I never accepted the fact that I was always told—not only from my parents, but everybody—and I guess you get it in every conservative town, but—"this is the way it is, this is the way it should be, this is the way God intended." And you ask all these questions. I remember, First Baptist church, Sunday school, eight years old, asking Brother Brown some questions about God. And he looked me dead in the eye and said, "Son, you don't ask those questions—you just accept them because that's the way it is. Now pay attention." And I've never forgot that.

There were others, however, who took the issue more lightly. I even got the impression that some actually appreciated how easy it was to stand out, and almost enjoyed the attention they received as being classified as anomalies in Bruce. Vonda Keon gave an example:

> The other day I was wearing one of these afghans—I love afghans, I'm so seventies. I had this afghan on, and because we were going to a showing at an art festival and I thought well, there's going to be people from out of town, and you've got to do something to make yourself stand out, so I took my weaving—had the afghan, had a hair wrap on. And sold stuff, because I was artsy. Well, I enjoyed wearing it so much that I thought, well I'm just going to wear it down here [*at her store*]. Well, I want you to know, somebody asked me if that had something to do with my religion. [*laughs*]

In conclusion, the same things that make Bruce an attractive, appealing place for some people are the exact same things that repel or turn others off. Community, it seems, can be detrimental for some people when it is so heavily concentrated; yet at the same time, it is that very sense of community that Bruce, as a town, realizes it can use to its economic advantage—especially when it comes to attracting outsiders.

Chapter Four:
The Upsides

Part of the image Bruce wants to sell to outsiders is the community charm and the benefits that come with living in a small town. The Sawmill Festival, the largest annual event in town, focuses on Bruce's heritage to put on a town festival similar to Vardaman's Sweet Potato Festival, Water Valley's Watermelon Carnival, and the myriad of other town festivals in Missisppi. People in town seem to take tremendous pride in the Sawmill Festival—nearly as much pride as they take in the Trojans, Bruce High School's football team. High school football rules fall Friday nights in town, and the nearly the whole town boasts of their team as if they all have a relative on the field (and there's a good chance that is indeed the case). Perhaps most notable of the "community perks" could be the strong personal ties that have formed in Bruce as a result of its small size and a population that has, in large part, grown up together. These ties seem to have produced not only a tendency to charitable giving but also a widely-acknowledged feeling of comfort and safety in town. Many interviewees also stressed the advantage Bruce has over some towns, in that it is a place with the happy glow of a small-town feel to it, but also within reasonable driving distances of towns offering big-city amenities: Oxford with the University, Tupelo with the shopping, Memphis with the entertainment and Grenada with the alcohol.

Bruce's size is, for so many people, its most important asset. They mentioned the strong sense of community that the town has formed (one example of how this happened that interviewees kept mentioning was the building of a new playground in town). It seems that some people view the town as "one big family," in which you are—literally—either related to a large portion of the people there, or you know most of the people there. This amounts to an unofficial "neighborhood watch" program that has advantages and disadvantages. I heard many remarks about the lack of privacy in town, but on the flip side I heard perhaps even more remarks about how nice it was to live in a community where everybody is so close. One very impressive quality of Bruce is the ability of its people to gather together and excel in acts of charity. Relay for Life, a nationwide cancer fundraising program, is huge in the town, and the amount of money that Bruce, a relatively poor town, has raised in the past is staggering. Several people credited the abundance of churches in Bruce; others credited the people of Bruce as being the generous type.

One consistent complaint about Bruce that rang clear in all of my interviews was the size of the town, and how its tiny population lent itself to a community so tightly-knit that it was hard to escape. That said, there was one consistent compliment paid to Bruce: the size of the town, and how its tiny population lent itself to a community so tightly-knit that life in Bruce was more enjoyable. The irony of this didn't escape many interviewees. Autumn, the youngest, seemed to feel a strong resentment towards the curious nature of the town's citizens:

> I did [*like growing up in Bruce*], 'til I got a teenager, then everybody's so nosy around here. It's—you know, I don't think it's a good place for teenagers to grow up at because

there's nothing to do and when there's nothing to do you could find something to do and it could be trouble.

Ann seemed to be able to relate. Though she admitted to wanting to escape from Bruce as a teenager, she said that while the size of the town used to repel her, it was an attractive quality to her now:

> I feel like that's the nicest part about it, is kind of everybody knows your business, everybody knows you, if you need anything you can call on them. I've always said, if anybody needs to come in the library and it's ten o'clock at night and their kid forgot to tell them they had a class project due, all they've gotta do is call me. And I feel the same way, if I need some hardware I know the folks at the hardware store or the grocery store, whatever you just call them and they're just people you can count on. They know you and they'll be there for you, so that's the nice thing about living in a small town.

This was an aspect of life in Bruce that had been apparent to me ever since my first visit to town. It was community like I'd never seen it before. Everybody seemed to know each other—literally. It was something I was pleased to see with my own eyes, because it played into the positive aspects of the small-town stereotype that existed in my head. The pros and cons were something that everybody mentioned in their interviews. Sister Mary Norris, who is originally from a suburb of Chicago, and had never lived in a town as small as Bruce prior to arriving there in 2001, said she appreciated how easy it was to "make connections" in town. "Most of the people have lived here all their lives," she said, "And so when a new person comes everybody knows the new person."

Sister Norris also said she was surprised that people in town were so receptive to her, and related an anecdote that made me think the attitude toward her when she arrived was one of curiosity rather than prejudice:

> It's not even negative, but a lot of the comments I got when I first got here were, 'Well, I've never talked to a Catholic nun before.' And then they said, 'Aren't you supposed to wear some special clothes?' And I said well, you know, we did until about nineteen sixty eight, but we discontinued that practice. [*laughs*]

Reverend Hathorne viewed the closeness of the community as something that was inevitable, explaining it through the analogy of a group of people being stranded on an island together. If you spend enough time together (in Bruce this translates into spending time together at church, school, and work), you become tight-knit, or as he put it, "a network of people":

> I don't know if this place would be any more uniquely tight than any other small town with those same things. I think we're pretty typical. I think every small little town in Mississippi that has those factors would be tight knit... So I don't know if there's something that would set us apart as Bruce, as, 'We're tight because of this.' I think it's just those common denominators that are found in other places.

When I asked Reverend Hathorne what he thought the best part about living in Bruce was, he immediately mentioned the advantages, and the disadvantages, of what he laughingly described as "the neighborhood watch" program:

> It has its disadvantages in that everybody knows your business. That's a disadvantage. But at the same time I think it's advantageous to have people that you can trust and have friends who will help you if you need them. And really I guess that's, in the end of things, if you look back on your life, that's really an important part of life on this earth, to have people that impact us and hopefully impact others and share in life together.

Granted, Reverend Hathorne is the face of the largest church in town and is consequently a high-profile figure in town, but he was not the only one who mentioned the pros and cons of the virtually unbreakable community ties. Vonda Keon had a similar outlook,

saying that while she enjoyed the fact that "everybody knows your name," she didn't appreciate the way everybody "knows your business." "And if they don't know your business," she said, "They're going to make something of it."

Connie Collins, who is also fairly high-profile in town because she runs the local telephone company, humorously pointed out that people in Bruce were "all a big family anyway," saying, "We've all gone to school together and like I was telling you, I don't know their kids, but I know most of the adults. You can pretty much look at a kid and figure out who the parents are." Paula Jeffrey also mentioned enjoying knowing everybody in town, pointing out that seeing these people on a regular basis was one of the best parts about having a store like Jeffrey's:

> The people that come here every day, there's a lady, Mrs. Beckett, that comes every day. And she's part of our family. She's here at a certain time, she stays. And even her family calls here if they can't find her and want to know where she's at. [*laughs*] And it's wonderful, I think.

In addition to the strong community ties, there were other reasons for wanting to stay in town. Rex Jarrett, owner of the Cavalier Shoppe, which is well-known in Oxford as well as Bruce as a place for buying dressy clothes suitable for a day in Ole Miss's Grove and also for its room full of southern pride regalia, said that he thought Bruce was a good place to open a business. And Wayne Edwards pointed out another positive aspect of living in a small town like Bruce--safety:

> I actually lived in town, right up off the square, two blocks, for twelve years. And I never locked my door. Wasn't ever worried about it. Never concerned, never took my keys out of my car at night...Now that may just be naïve on my part. Because people told me it was. But we didn't have crime in town. You may have somebody steal a lawnmower out

> of somebody's garage, or something like that, but in the town proper itself, you just--there was no—there was no need for me to worry about anything like that.

It was interesting to me that Wayne mentioned naïveté, because I had, and still have, a tendency to assume that citizens of small towns such as Bruce are naïve. And so when Gwen Embry mentioned naiveté as well, I took note:

> We're not so naïve that it's still a community where everybody leaves their door open. You know, you've heard older people say, well, used to I could leave my door open all the time—well I'm not that naïve. But I'm not as fearful about crime. You know, where in a larger city, everyday in the paper, this person was killed and this one was murdered and this happened here, and you know. We don't have it like that. So along with being small, you have smaller crime.

Stan Evans, whose wife is originally from Washington, D.C., said that when they got married and moved back to Bruce, she adapted well from the "rat race" of the city to the leisurely pace of small-town life. He also mentioned, however, the fact that she felt safer in Bruce; she didn't have to "worry about looking over her shoulder," locking her door all the time, and, as he put it, "living in a prison" in her own house:

> She couldn't believe that people leave their front door open. Sitting in the house. When my in-laws came down here last year, they couldn't believe that we--people come up to our door, just knock on our door, and we say, 'Come in.' They couldn't believe that. Because they've got everything locked, four or five locks. They couldn't believe it.

The interviewees who were also parents often mentioned safety in relation to their children, and how Bruce was in many respects an ideal place for a child for grow up. Chief Evans, for example, was thankful his daughter was able to walk to school every day without him having to worry about her. This was something he felt people in town

sometimes took for granted. Connie Collins also said Bruce was an ideal place for a child to grow up, telling me that she never worried for the safety of her son, when from ages six to ten he spent his days out and around town:

> He would take off on Saturday morning as soon as he woke up. And get on his bike and make a complete tour of the square. He had regular stops. He would stop at Jeffrey's and get some ice cream. He would stop at Hometown [the cafe] and get lunch. He would stop at the movie store and stand there and talk to them.

Vonda said that she moved back to Bruce because she knew from growing up in town herself that it was a good, safe place to live—safer than Tupelo, where she couldn't let her children outside without worrying about them:

> I wanted to live in a place where I didn't hear sirens all night long and see blue lights flashing, going down the streets. Reading about whatever was happening in the paper that I didn't want to be happening on my street, and it was. And I just--decided to come back to a small town...I just came back to my roots.

Sister Mary Norris observed other differences between big cities and small towns like Bruce. One was that bigger cities suffered a breakdown of the family that small towns seemed to nurture. Another was the fact that everybody in a small town has "a name, and a face, and a history":

> I think that's why they're a little hesitant with outsiders because they don't' know your history. But it's when they get to know you that you're accepted. And they can say, you know, 'You used to live in Chicago, what's the difference?' Those kinds of things. But it's—I think they're welcoming to the stranger, but I guess I found Bruce becoming much more inclusive to the stranger than I had anticipated.

And so it happened that I was given a more complex picture of life in Bruce: it had, of course, its pros as well as its cons. I learned that its size contributed to positive

aspects of community—safety, comfort, a greater level of intimacy between locals. At the same time, the negative aspects—lack of privacy and a lack of opportunity—struck me as very important qualities of life, things that I would not be willing to sacrifice. All are factors that are hard to juggle, and so it was interesting to learn where the locals that I spoke with drew the line in regard to their own lives.

On a more basic level, there are other facets of life in Bruce that fall under the "positive" category, and one of those is the town's annual festival. Unearth all the small-town festivals in Mississippi, and you get some intriguing results: Crystal Springs' Tomato Festival, Belzoni's World Catfish Festival, and Macon's Dancing Rabbit Festival, to name a few. Bruce's own festival, every second weekend in July, is called the Sawmill Festival. While it's something I have yet to experience, I made a point of asking people to describe it for me, and it became clear that the festival is a source of pride in town. Each town's festival is a chance for it to declare what is special about it. Vardaman's Sweet Potato festival every November, for example, plays on the town's reputation as "the Sweet Potato Capital of the World," while Water Valley's Watermelon Carnival includes a Watermelon Queen, a watermelon eating contest, a watermelon seed-spitting contest, and a largest watermelon contest. Clearly, Bruce's Sawmill festival fits the trend. Reverend Hathorne described the festival as "a slice of American life:"

> I mean, it really is something. And it's kind of a step back in time in some ways. And I think that's one of the things--we talked about community and the attraction of Bruce--I think that's one of high points... But it's kind of--I guess people that live beyond this would look at it as kind of corny. But to go down there on a Friday night and spend the night on the square and just to visit with your friends. And there's a completely equal mix of people, for the most part--it's just a representation of our town.

Stan Evans said that I just had to be at the festival. "People come from miles around," he said. "People look forward to it." Jerry Inmon went on to explain that the day of the festival was what vendors called a "trade day," in which they congregate on the square and sell their specialties—"woodwork and stuff, birdhouses and mailboxes and stuff that people build and make to sell," he said. "For a small town," James Wright concluded, "Folks get excited over a thing like that."

As mentioned earlier, high school football is a major part of life in Bruce, serving not only as a form of Friday night entertainment, but also as away for Bruce to distinguish itself from other towns—namely Calhoun City, its number one rival, and Vardaman. Reverend Hathorne said that it was a surprise to him that people throughout Mississippi recognized the Bruce Trojans as a good football team, adding that football was easily the biggest sport in town:

> They're big events. They're really are. A lot of pressure on the coach to win. A lot of former football players in the stands, a lot of reminiscing about 'when I played, the glory days'—a lot of that mentality...you see people who haven't gone on very far in their life from high school football who are back reliving it kind of. And you have many who are very knowledgeable about the game. Who could be a better coach than any coach in the world, and they're giving advice, screaming it, about we need to run this and we need to do that. It's amazing to me.

Stan Evans, who played football for Bruce in high school, said the sport was even bigger when he played in the seventies and eighties:

> Man, I'm gonna tell you. Everybody came to Bruce football games. And everybody loves a winner, too. But football is something that's still real close to people out here. Friday night football is Friday night football... It's a great deal. Still a great deal.

There are other, arguably more constructive, examples of how close the community in Bruce is, and one of them is nothing more than a playground. Dubbed "Kids Korner," it is an attractive arrangement of slides, swings, and shapes that the people of Bruce built entirely through volunteer effort. Many people mentioned this playground. Strangely enough, I have yet to hear about how it has benefitted any children; instead, people talk about the sheer amount of volunteer work and time that went into the project and how it seemed to benefit the volunteers most of all. Sister Mary Norris spoke of it as an experience that served as an "eye-opener" for the community:

> One of the big surprises was—when we were moving the dirt and doing all this stuff—that we have a number of Mexican men that are here on their own—they earn money and send it back to their families in Mexico. So they asked them if they'd come and help. And some of the people in town were like, 'Well, what are they going to do?' And they were just amazed to find out they knew how to operate the machinery. They certainly knew how to work. And they just worked so much. We got so much done that whole day. And I think that was an eye-opener for a lot of people to see the quality of work that these men are able to do, and their investment in the town, and all that.

In fact, according to Bruce's Web site, www.cityofbruce.com, Bruce earned the Municipal Excellence Award, sponsored by Jackson's *Clarion-Ledger*, for the construction of the playground. According to the Web site, "the project took over 400 community volunteers and in excess of 7000 man-hours to complete." Echoing Sister Norris's observations of the attitude toward Mexican workers, Mayor Quillen remarked on the unity the playground seemed to foster:

> But the effort to build the playground took four hundred volunteers within the community. And a week later—I think we started on a Monday morning and quit on a

> Saturday evening—and we were out there putting up a playground with people we'd never worked with. We knew them, but you know, our neighbors, and different races, people like that who worked side by side that only in name knew each other prior to.

Another example of unified efforts at charity is the remarkable success Bruce has had with its participation in Relay For Life. Cancer has left its mark in Bruce, but the town has fought back: the 2006 Relay For Life saw Calhoun County pulling together to collect $117,000—the county's largest amount to date. It was an amount greater than that collected by Oxford and Tupelo combined; it ranked the county number one in the state, eighth in the region, and 22nd in the nation. Keep in mind the demographics of Calhoun County: total population, according to www.census.gov, 14,652, and a per capita money income (as of 1999) just above $15,000—slightly lower than the state average of $15,853. Needless to say, the numbers don't seem to match, but somehow, they do. In fact, anybody who mentioned it to me, and there were several who did, could recite the exact numbers to me. When I asked Sister Mary Norris how Bruce was able to participate in such a feat, she explained that Bruce was "a small town...a town that really cares. A town that looks out for one another and enjoys celebrating together." On a more melancholy note, Connie Collins pointed out that perhaps the success of Relay for Life in Bruce had to do with the fact that many people in Bruce have either had cancer, known somebody with cancer, or are related to somebody with cancer. She said the town relished its success, though:

> We were laughing at Lafayette County yesterday...Because last weekend we heard that Lafayette county had set a goal to raise fifty-thousand dollars for Relay For Life. Last year, Bruce raised over a hundred thousand dollars.

Charity in Bruce seems to extend beyond large-scale operations like Relay for Life, however. In fact, I was impressed by how many people mentioned that Bruce excelled in more local acts of charity. It was almost funny how similar these remarks sounded, several people telling me specifically that if my house burned down in Bruce, there would be plenty of people ready to help me rebuild it, as well as supplying me with plenty of food in the meantime. As Vonda said:

> One thing that I see around here--if somebody gets sick and they don't have insurance, there is forever a benefit going on for somebody...Somebody's house burns down, and people pull together and they get out there and help clean the place off and start rebuilding and getting stuff together.

Both Gwen Embry and Chief Evans mentioned that this sort of charity probably had more to do with the size of the town than anything truly remarkable about Bruce itself, though Chief Evans pointed out that as someone who has lived in several places, he did not often see people pulling together for a good cause in bigger cities:

> I think other small towns probably got the same values, the same moral people. But I just see it because I've been in Bruce, I know if something happened today that we needed to pull together, ain't no doubt in my mind the people in Bruce would get it done. You won't have any people pointing fingers. You have people trying to solve a problem. And that's what we need. And that's leadership. Like I said, people put their differences aside. You know. And get done what needed to be done. And that's exactly what people will do.

Unlike Gwen, however, who said "even if you don't have a formal religion—you don't quote attend church, people just care for each other," Stan Evans maintained that the

church, as the "backbone of the community," was to thank for the town's impressive tendency to pull together in times of need:

> Almost always in small communities, the church is the backbone, especially in Bruce. You look around Bruce, there are a lot of churches in Bruce...And I think that's what makes it unique. That's what keeps us—things like this will keep the people in Bruce like we are...And we got some good leaders in Bruce. And I think people got good morals and values in Bruce...We continue to have that foundation, continue to have our morals and values, we'll be ok.

Whether because of the sense of the community, the pleasure derived from high school football or its borderline quirky community festival, or the isolation that seems to serve as a buffer for the town from the negative aspects of the rest of the world, there was a very general sense of satisfaction that seemed to emanate from many of the people I interviewed in Bruce. As Jerry Inmon said:

> I like it here. I like to visit, I travel a lot. Of course racing travels, makes me travel. I've seen a lot of different areas. But like I say, I'm always glad to be back at Calhoun County. I don't know, there's something about it. I just like it. I just like Bruce.

Conclusion

I love to learn about people. Over the past four years, I have grown to realize that most places in the world—in particular, the people who inhabit them—are worth studying, worth appreciating, and worth spending time with. Bruce is one of those places. Perhaps it is the place that, above all the rest, has been the most instrumental in teaching me this lesson. It has been a lesson more than four years in the making, though. It has been a lesson over twenty years in the making, something that I could—and perhaps should—have learned earlier in life, and in some other place. But it happened when it happened and it happened in Bruce and I'm glad of that.

But what more profound things can I say about the place? I do not know what to say that would properly explain why I decided to keep doing my work in Bruce after a year spent taking photographs there. I also don't know what I could say to explain to the people of Bruce what it is about them that makes them so very special to me, and so very significant in my life so far.

There were things my interviewees said that made me second-guess my own feelings about home. As Ann Ivy King said (see p. 51), "you have to eat your words sometimes." As I'm sitting here in Oxford, I realize that I'm eating my very own words as I type. After a decade spent wanting to leave this state, it has taken me about three additional years to realize—and to admit—that I truly love Mississippi. Eating your words is difficult.

There were also things I admired in my interviewees. For instance, there is attitude of "making the best of what you've got" that Wayne Edwards, Gwen Embry, and Connie Collins touched upon (pp. 52-3). While I could not relate to it, I realized that it wasn't a bad attitude; in fact, I admired it in a way. My inability to deal with some of my own circumstances seemed pathetic when I considered my situation in light of Wayne's. Regarding my own feelings as to why I kept thinking of that approach to life as one I didn't want to take, I am not sure if it has to do with my age or my upbringing. Part of me, in fact most of me (I think—I hope) is still young and idealistic and the next few decades look to be full of promise and opportunity and everything that everybody young looks forward to. But I haven't really starting paying my own bills. And student loans haven't hit me yet. And I have yet to get a job that does not center around the food industry, the school newspaper, or the local bookstore. In other words, I'm in for a reality check of sorts, and maybe Wayne, Gwen, and Connie were the ones unintentionally preparing me for it.

Throughout my interviews, I often wondered how I would react to living in a town like Bruce. I could not fathom the idea of growing up among such familiarity for my whole life, but I knew that my perception of an ideal lifestyle, and everybody else's perception, was the result of my upbringing. And besides, I never grew up in a small town. Oxford, population slightly above 13,600 as of 2005, is the smallest town I have lived in to date. Along with many other people in the world, I grew up with my own ideas of what small-town life was like, and while I pictured it as ideal, I figured it wasn't for me simply because I had never experienced it. However, this sentiment is one that

seems to change every single day, and also one that some residents of Bruce mentioned as something they felt when growing up.

Aside from the personal reasons, however, there are the other things I found valuable in Bruce: high school football, town identity, education, jobs, economics. What makes a place a place and why. And also: who makes a place a place. There were so many people I spoke to, and so much I didn't include. So much! Did I mention that I have spent two years not just photographing, not just writing about, not just visiting Bruce? I have spent two years thinking about the place, talking about it, wondering about it.

I am interested in people but I am also interested in place. And what are people without place, and what is a place without people? And how conscious are people of that bond with place, whether it is weak or strong? It is always there. For everybody, I think. Certainly for me: multiple bonds, multiple places. And that's fine.

I can't conclude what I haven't finished, which in a sense is a conclusion I never thought I could arrive at concerning a town like Bruce. What I mean by that is that my own ability to pick up on life outside of my own personal experiences has grown to include places I never thought I could appreciate; there was once a time when I assumed that there was simply nothing to conclude about Bruce. I can only conclude that here is a ninety-page paper that I have written about a place I find fascinating, and that in itself is significant. I hope that I was simply late in learning a lesson that everybody else is either born knowing or grows up to learn. But you know, it's a good thing to realize at age twenty-one, when the rest of the world sits waiting, and here I am with a degree about to be handed to me, and suddenly just because I realize now I can love places I never

thought I could, so much of the world has suddenly opened up to me. And not only am I thankful to Bruce for that, but I am also thankful for the realization that I can't ever "finish" with such a place, because the people in this working-class Mississippi town have taught me that there's simply too much to their way of life to ever do such a thing.

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