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# Mapping A Generation: Oral History Research in Sulphur Springs, FL

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Mapping A Generation: Oral History Research in Sulphur Springs, FL

by

Connie J. Brown

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Dedication

To Violins,  
and  
thanks for reminding me

## Acknowledgements

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(and thank you to my cheering squad and technical department)

## Table of Contents

List of Figures	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER ONE	1
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>A Place in Time</b>	3
Who: The Informants	4
Where: Geography and Statistics	5
When: Then and Now	7
<b>The Population</b>	11
Reunion Attendees	11
Why Women	12
CHAPTER TWO	14
<b>Weaving the Tapestry</b>	14
The Instruments of Research	15
<i>Why This Approach</i>	17
<b>Looking For the Threads</b>	21
The Network Analysis	21
<i>The Survey</i>	22
<i>Responses</i>	24
<i>The 'Picture'</i>	26
The Interviews	33
<i>Common Ground</i>	34
<i>Location</i>	35
<i>Economics</i>	35
Historical Research	36
CHAPTER THREE	38
<b>The Culture of a Generation</b>	38
Manners and Mores	38
<i>Language</i>	39
<i>Subject Matter</i>	40
<i>Age is Subjective</i>	40
<i>With Men and Without</i>	41
<b>The Selective History of the Community</b>	42

CHAPTER FOUR	48
<b>Opportunities, Challenges and Responsibilities</b>	48
Relationships	48
<i>Giving and Receiving</i>	49
<i>On-going and Long-term</i>	51
Information Return	52
<i>Format and Recipient</i>	52
Giving Back	53
<i>The Group</i>	53
<i>The Community</i>	54
<i>The Individual</i>	54
Location	55
<i>Maps and Structures</i>	55
Recruiting Respondents	56
<i>Timing</i>	56
<i>Gender</i>	56
<i>Group and Individual Interviews</i>	57
CHAPTER FIVE	59
<b>Conclusion</b>	59
Who Benefits	59
Where is the Need	60
How Can the Research be Applied	60
Do the Results Outweigh the Challenges	60
REFERENCES CITED	61
OTHER SOURCES	64
APPENDICES	66
Appendix A: Survey Letter	67
Appendix B: Survey Format	68
Appendix C: Interview Questions	69

## List of Figures

Figure 1.	Network based on whether the women knew each other at school	27
Figure 2.	Network based on whether the women see or speak to each other than at the reunion	28
Figure 3.	Networks of Interview Participants who knew each other at school	30
Figure 4.	Networks of Interview Participants who see or speak with each other outside of the reunion context	31

# Mapping A Generation: Oral History Research in Sulphur Springs, FL

Connie J. Brown

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis of the pros and cons of doing ethnographic and oral history research with elders. The subjects are women born before 1933 and residing in Sulphur Springs, Florida for most of their adolescence and adult lives. They were selected from attendees of the semiannual reunion of students who attended the Sulphur Springs School during the years it served both elementary and junior high.

This method of research, with an elder population presents specific challenges and rewards. The pros and cons of such research are discussed within the context of doing ethnography of Sulphur Springs from the perspective of a select group of women.

Interviews were conducted with eight (8) women in their homes, yielding approximately fourteen (14) hours of recordings. A list of questions was developed to prompt memories during the interviews. A small tabletop recorder was used to record unstructured interviews regarding their years in Sulphur Springs, with emphasis on the years they consider most memorable. A social network analysis of attendees of the recent reunions was conducted with the responses to a mailed questionnaire.

The study revealed the importance of understanding the culture of a generation through the lens of history and place. Special considerations need to be made in preparation of survey instruments and interview questions for any physical limitations and/or security concerns. Researchers also need to be flexible in the application of their



pre-determined research designs in order to assure maximum quality and quantity of resulting data.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

I first encountered the Sulphur Springs community through a series of class assignments in research methods and qualitative research projects. While attempting to establish my presence and gain acceptance in the community, I was introduced to a large contingent of seniors who meet semi-annually to reminisce and reconnect. The group includes a few children, grandchildren, and neighbors, but the core is the alumni of the Sulphur Springs School from a time when it served students from kindergarten through eighth grade. The more I learned of the community's history, the more I understood the elders' commitment to preserve that history.

Sulphur Springs is a century old community in Tampa, Florida with a rich past. For this resilient generation of Floridians it was a place of good times, fond memories, and home. And like all places, it changed; people moved away, businesses closed and progress rode a swifter horse than tradition. But this past was not merely slipping away—it was being erased through urban development. Without some way of recording it, the heritage of people and place would simply cease to be with the passing of the last of this generation.

The way we interact with our world is changing with increasing speed. What was considered common knowledge a generation ago does not have the same value in this world of computers and international communications. For the Sulphur Springs generation, time has become a persistent adversary. But oral history and related methods

have proven to be effective ways to preserve first-person historical accounts that would not otherwise be included in the formal historical record. (Behar 1993; Behar 1996; Ortner, 1991; Frow and Morris 2000; Lincoln and Denzin 2000). If information from this fading population is not captured soon, it will be forever lost, leaving only bare and partial reconstruction from second-generation informants a remote possibility.

Conducting an ethnography of the community by focusing on oral historical methods with the oldest living generation seemed my best hope to capture the echo of Sulphur Springs' spirit and former glory. I decided to focus on the oral histories of women in order to look inside the personal and family lives in an earlier Sulphur Springs. Specifically, I wanted to interview women who were at least 70 years old and had spent the majority of their childhood in Sulphur Springs or raised children there before 1960.

As I made contact with prospects and referrals, a subtle ripple of curiosity and excitement moved through the group. The history of past projects and endeavors that had ended in failure or abandonment were offered up in countless conversations. Discussion ranged from the personal—children with no interest in their heritage—to the political—broken promises and neglect by city officials. But anticipation and hope remained.

I began the official process for researching and creating the ethnography. And, just as I had been forewarned in several classes, the unexpected and unplanned imposed itself into my carefully devised plans and protocols. In the end, it was not about 'Saving Sulphur Springs'. It was not about the time, the place, or the memories. It was about the people. And it was about how we may come to understand generations.

This thesis is an analysis of the pros and cons of doing qualitative ethnographic research with an oral historical method applied to an elder population. I will discuss

specific methods and preparations as well as the challenges and unexpected rewards I experienced while doing this type of research with this special group of people.

### **A Place in Time**

To capture a memory for documentation requires someone willing and able to reconstruct in her mind a specific time and a specific place and to share her perception of a personal experience. To document those memories with integrity requires a researcher willing to be transported back to that time while closing her mind to judgement and her eyes to the present.

I anticipated a journey of about sixty years. I was amazed and enthralled as I was repeatedly transported to a Sulphur Springs of the 1920's and 30's to eat potato chip sandwiches, catch the trolley, and swim in the cool, unpolluted water of the 'old' swimming pool. Genealogies of the families and community alternately crossed and paralleled, drawing a map that charted conversations into the war years of the 1940's and 50's. The mundane hum of discourse about life in a small community in the 1960's and 70's gave way to discordant chords of chaos and fear as the landscape shifted for an invasion of strangers.

The changes were unkind to both place and people. By the 1980's only those who could claim eyewitness accounts remembered the once bustling little tourist destination as a stable, tight-knit community of working-class people. But they are still there today. They may reside in different zip codes, but twice a year members from the oldest Sulphur Springs generations come together to reconstruct a time and a place that gave structure and meaning to their past and provided memories for their future.

Who: The Informants

I conducted interviews with eight women who regularly attend the Sulphur Springs Reunion. For the purpose of this paper, I have assigned each woman an alias with a brief introduction.

Ms. Green, like most of the women in this study, came to Sulphur Springs with her parents and siblings at a very young age. Her father was well known and admired by the community for many years. Until recently, she lived in the family home of 75 years. She attended Sulphur Springs School from the second grade through Junior High. She was well known in school and remains in touch with many outside of the semi-annual reunions. She is in her 80's.

Ms. Black and Ms. Grey also attended Sulphur Springs School throughout their elementary and junior high years. Ms. Grey is married to Ms. Black's brother and all three socialize and perform volunteer work together. Both women are in their 70's and remain well connected to many of the individuals they knew at school.

Ms. Brown, in her 70's, is the younger sister of Ms. White, who is in her early 90's. When their parents brought them to Sulphur Springs, Ms. White had already completed her education, therefore, she was never a student at Sulphur Springs School. However, she worked and volunteered at the school for many years and maintains an active schedule of volunteer work even today. Although both women still reside within the Sulphur Springs boundaries, Ms. Brown maintains fewer contacts with classmates outside of the reunion than her sister.

Ms. Rose came to Sulphur Springs as a child, but her family moved to another community before she completed her education. As a young wife and mother, she returned to Sulphur Springs and her children attended Sulphur Springs School.

Ms. Gold attended both elementary grades and Junior High at Sulphur Springs School. She married, had a large family, and from Sulphur Springs over concern for their safety due to high traffic in their immediate area. She is in her early 80's and communicates regularly with many 'old classmates' and friends in the community.

Ms. Sand, in her 80's, still works part-time as a caretaker. She was from a family of twelve children and also attended Sulphur Springs School through the elementary and junior high grades. Although marriage and employment have taken her from the area in the past, she presently makes her home in Plant City and maintains contact with many friends, family and classmates.

Where: Geography and Statistics

Sulphur Springs is a small western Florida community approximately one square mile in area. Bounded by the Hillsborough River on the south, the railroad track on the east, Busch Boulevard on the north and Nebraska Avenue on the west, the community was formed in the early 1900's around the natural springs of sulphur water found in the area. The community never incorporated as a township and was eventually swallowed up by the greater Tampa government.

Sulphur Springs was, in effect, a planned community, in that first Dr. John Mills and then Josiah Richardson, purchased the land for the express purpose of developing the community of Sulphur Springs as a tourist/recreation area for profit. Through a series of

misfortunes, poor timing, wars, floods, and a national depression, success was limited to the seasonal invasions of middle class Northerners escaping the high heating bills of harsh Northeastern winters.

At the height of its popularity in the 20's and 30's, Sulphur Springs' major claim to fame was the swimming pool and the hotel-arcade complex, a forerunner of our shopping malls of today. Even after its destruction in 1976, the "Arcade" as the elders refer to it, still defines Sulphur Springs for many people, who cite its recognition in *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* as "The Nation's Only City under one roof." The arcade and the pool were major attractions for Tampa citizens looking for entertainment or seeking 'cures' from a drink or dip in the healing waters of the community's natural springs at the last stop on the north spur of the trolley line.

The Sulphur Springs Tower was and is today the most visible landmark of the community. Like the pool, the tower is not actually within the boundaries of Sulphur Springs. But they are both recognized as intrinsic landmarks of the community (Hope 2002). And for many in the older generation they are symbols of a time when Sulphur Springs was also a different place.

The plat for the Sulphur Springs subdivision was filed in Hillsborough County in 1903 (City of Tampa 1989; Tampa Bay History Center 2004). While we have no census statistics broken out by communities available for that time, the United States Census of 1900 shows a population for Hillsborough County of 36,013, of which over 20,000 were residents of the city of Tampa. This leaves 16,000 residents spread throughout the remainder of Hillsborough County, which included what would become Pinellas County in 1912 (Tampa Bay History Center 2004). By comparison the U.S. Census of 2000

registered 998,948 individuals in Hillsborough County, with 6,308 within the boundaries of Sulphur Springs (Florida Center for Community Design and Research 2002).

Growth in the Tampa Bay area in the first three decades of the Twentieth Century was explosive. In 1930 the Hillsborough County census reached 153,519 (U.S. Census 1930), more than quadrupling the 1900 figures and spread over less territory. Sulphur Springs School archives indicate similar growth over a short period. A picture of the 1935-36 Junior High graduating class shows only 15 students. Ten years later Parent Teacher Association records for 1945-46 indicate the school served 1010 students. U.S. Census records for 2000 show the total number of children in Sulphur Springs under eighteen years of age as 2,681 (Florida Center for Community Design and Research 2002), approximately two and one-half times the 1945 enrollment.

When: Then and Now

Considering the history of American 'race' relations and distributions in the first half of the Twentieth Century, it was not surprising that all respondents described Sulphur Springs' earlier years with no reference to 'race'. In a white-dominant society, "whites are allowed to forget their race." (Sapiro 1994:113). The conclusion that Sulphur Springs was a 'white' community during those early years was drawn from an absence of comments regarding 'race'. This conclusion was further reinforced by comments about the changes in the ethnic composition of the community over time.

Direct questioning of the informants, about the 'racial' composition of early Sulphur Springs confirmed the presence of "a few" African Americans working and moving about in the community. Further inquiry revealed the presence of the "black"



community of Spring Hill that was part of the geographical area, yet separate from the social Sulphur Springs of a pre-1960's segregated South.

U.S. Census figures for 2000 show just under 30% or 1,885 of Sulphur Springs citizens as white. Black or African American citizens made up almost 60%, or 3,764 of the population. And approximately 10% of the population were classified as a 'race' other than white or African American (Florida Center for Community Design and Research 2002).

The shift in 'racial' composition is only one of several demographic changes that have taken place in Sulphur Springs over the last decades. Although most in the elder generation consistently describe themselves and the community as 'poor back then', poverty wears a different face in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sulphur Springs.

By statistical standards 43.6% of Sulphur Springs residents had income below the poverty level in 1999 (Florida Center for Community Design and Research 2002). But being poor in America in 1999 is a far cry from being poor in America in 1929-39. Poor today may mean living in low-rent or subsidized housing, being eligible for food stamps or subsidized lunch programs for school age children. Ninety-eight percent of students at the Sulphur Springs School were eligible for free or reduced lunch in 2000.

Being poor in the twenty-first century may mean living in a multi-family dwelling or sub-standard housing. Clothing may not be of the current fashions, or it may be acquired from thrift stores or charitable outlets. Educational facilities may be either sub-standard or excellent due to government subsidy that provides additional programming, equipment and staffing.

If one is disabled and poor or elder and poor, basic living expenses may be subsidized. Day to day experiences may be isolating; or require constant interaction with people to fulfill requirements for government or agency aid. The cost of food may consume a higher percentage of household budgets due to limited transportation or proximity to supply. Adequate nutrition and health care may be lacking; or may be provided by government or non-governmental organizations. Hillsborough County Aging Services and Meals on Wheels of Tampa provided home-delivered meals to 130 residents of Sulphur Springs in 2002 (Florida Center for Community Design and Research 2002).

Many of the programs our society has become accustomed to did not exist in 1929. Four states still did not have laws in effect for workmen's compensation in that year. Only Montana had an old-age pension law. Similar laws in other states had been struck down as unconstitutional. The Veteran's Administration would not be established until mid-1930. Social Security, with its limited programs for assistance, did not become law until 1935. It was not until 1936 that 36 of 48 states put public assistance plans into effect. All states would not be participating in the Social Security maternal and child health services program until late in 1936 and it would be 1940 before every state would provide child welfare services. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared "unconditional war on poverty in America," ([www.ssa.gov/history/1900.html](http://www.ssa.gov/history/1900.html)) a war we have yet to win.

Being poor in Sulphur Springs in the late 1920's and 30's meant you lived wherever you could manage to pay the rent. A multi-family dwelling might be a building of four small apartments; or it might be one large house with several generations of the same family living there. Clothing was most often hand-me-downs, refurbished or

reconstructed from outgrown or outworn garments. The location of a WPA sewing room in the area during the 1930's meant a fortunate few, like Ms. Sand, received clothing manufactured by women whose own families qualified for the garments they produced.

Ms. Green remembered that hunger during the depression of the 1930's was abated by back yard gardens and the kindness of housewives, who answered knocks at their backdoor. Ms. Black and Ms. Grey described the school lunch program as a kind teacher who rose early and prepared a dozen jelly sandwiches from her own pantry for students who would otherwise go without a midday meal.

Perhaps the most notable difference in the experience of poverty between these two eras is the issue of employment. Sulphur Springs then was a self-sufficient community with goods and services available within its boundaries. Though money was not plentiful or easily come by, work was available in some form for almost everyone. The women I interviewed remembered fathers who worked in the trades. Some had mothers or fathers who provided services. And one acknowledged that her mother worked "at the WPA." Unlike today, businesses were present in Sulphur Springs, providing a base for employment as well as supplying goods and services.

The Florida Center for Community Design and Research's Sulphur Springs Community Mapping project of 2002 map of existing land use indicates a sparse distribution of light commercial and heavy commercial activity at the outer boundaries of the community. There appears to be minimal heavy industrial activity confined to the northern boundary within the community and outside the western boundary. This same report shows an 88.33% employment rate for residents of Sulphur Springs. While unemployment is double that of Hillsborough County (11.57% vs. 5.94%), a large

number of the 43.6% of Sulphur Springs residents who live in poverty manage to work. With employment opportunities located outside the community transportation costs impose a greater burden on what must be already strained budgets.

### **The Population**

One of the initial decisions in qualitative research is choosing a population from which to draw respondents. The pool of potential candidates can be defined by any number of criteria. But some commonality needs to exist among the participants in order to maintain focus during the research project.

Although Sulphur Springs is only one square mile in area, residency alone would produce too diverse a population to give adequate structure to the study. Age was a logical qualifier for historical information, but just the act of accumulating birthdays would not insure shared experiences beyond a Sulphur Springs address. However, living a good portion of those years in the community, especially younger years, should guarantee overlapping time frames. In order to acquire information pertaining to the 'glory days' of Sulphur Springs, I calculated that informants would need to be at least 70 years old.

#### **Reunion Attendees**

While my community contact person could supply a list of individuals who would fit the criteria, a more efficient manner of contact and selection was available through the twice yearly gatherings of the alumni of what was identified by the participants as the Sulphur Springs Junior High. In fact, the Junior High was only a portion of the Sulphur

Springs School that served students of Sulphur Springs from Kindergarten through the Junior High years until sometime in the latter half of the century, when it was restructured as an elementary school. Reunions are held on the first Thursdays of April and October at the Golden Corral in Temple Terrace, FL. They officially run from four in the afternoon until eight at night. Many people arrive before four and almost as many leave much after eight.

One advantage to choosing participants from attendees of the reunion was self-selection of individuals who were interested in the history of the area simply by their appearance at the reunions. The conditions of the reunions also provided a unique opportunity to attempt a social network analysis of the attendees, which might provide insight into the placement of subjects within the larger network as well as reveal connectivity and clusters in the network itself. Most participants still lived in the greater Tampa area and attended the reunions regularly. By restricting my target population to the reunion attendees, I had inadvertently selected for 'race'. Participants at the reunions were 'white', as were the students who had attended the school in the 30's and 40's. This excluded the existing historical population of African Americans in the community. And there was another exclusion I had decided to make.

### Why Women

Much of history is recorded with a macro view—issues of government, acquisition, expansion and political genealogy. But to understand both the history and personality of a community it is necessary to explore the personal and family lives of its citizens. Historically, American society has considered a man's place to be in the public

domain and woman's place to be in the private domain or the home (Sapiro 1994:247). Therefore, knowledge of one area would not insure knowledge of the other. Beyond the meager and subjective reports from newspapers and official documents, I wanted to look inside the day-to-day functioning of households. I wanted to examine the community's events, and the considered norms. For this, I would need to interview women.

A comprehensive ethnography could reasonably be expected to include interviews from both men and women. However, Florida, and the rest of the United States, had been divided along gender lines for the greater portion of the twentieth century and female experiences have historically been under-reported. Furthermore, shifting norms and changes in family composition and responsibilities are often blamed for perceived social degradations. Mass media as well as research most often focus on those issues that plague our neighborhoods and communities. If form follows thought and we produce that upon which we concentrate our energies, perhaps we need to be looking at what had created the functional families and the strong communities whose loss we bemoan. That realm would fall within the purview of women.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Weaving The Tapestry**

Audiotaped, unstructured oral history interviews about the Sulphur Springs community were conducted with the women described in the previous chapter. In addition, archival research and general ethnographic interviews provided information about the community, both now and during the 1920's and 30's.

A social network analysis of attendees of the recent reunions was intended to provide insight into the placement of subjects within the larger network as well as identify any connectivity or clusters within the network itself. A master G.I.S. (Geographic Information Systems) printout was planned to 'frame' the entire project and give visual reference to the places and routes described in the interviews. The end product was visualized as an audio/text version of Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers depicting life in America during his forty-seven year affiliation with that magazine.

The entire process was estimated to require no more than one semester in the field, including the time required for contacting and qualifying interview subjects, conducting the interviews, performing the archival research, preparing and processing network data, and clarification or confirmation of any questionable information. The actual experience and timing was in part the impetus for the topic of this thesis.

## The Instruments of Research

The research was to be conducted only through the four major pathways outlined, with any unanticipated or peripheral information either classified as a subset or saved for possible future examination.

Interviews of eight pre-qualified participants were scheduled at a time convenient for each participant and conducted in a location most comfortable for the woman. In most cases this would be in her home with a family member present if she preferred. A small tabletop recorder was used for recording her memories of her years in Sulphur Springs, with emphasis on those events and times she considered most memorable or important. The machinery chosen has sufficient range of detection to record group proceedings. This allowed the recorder to be stationed in a central location and left unattended except for changing tapes as they were completed.

While the recorder is equipped with voice activation, that feature was turned off to insure no words or syllables were missed in the process of the machine starting and stopping. The use of the feature could also prove problematic if the subject's voice was of too low a pitch to activate the machine.

Consent forms for the interviews included releases to photograph community or family artifacts, mementos, photos or other images the individual being interviewed might want to include in the documentation. The process was designed to facilitate the flow of information, while minimizing the risk of self-consciousness on the part of the woman, insure the safety of her belongings and limit the need for follow up due to missed or misunderstood datum.



Archival research for information about this unincorporated community would have to rely heavily on the Tampa Public Library, Tampa newspaper archives, local school memorabilia, public records and the Pennysaver, a community publication with an historical presence in the area. As a resource, the Tampa Bay History Center would be limited to background information on the era and historical changes in the county or surrounding cities. Internet research proved to be of limited value due to the obscurity of the community and confusion with locations in Arizona, California, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and West Virginia.

Network analysis was to be confined to individuals who had provided names and addresses at the prior reunion. A survey instrument was created and mailed. Two copies of the consent form, a letter of instruction with explanation of the project and a pre-addressed, stamped envelope were included in the mailing. Participants were asked to sign and return one copy of the consent form and the completed questionnaire in the envelope provided.

The surveys were coded to document receipt of a corresponding consent form and allow for anonymity in data compilation and analysis. All data were pooled for analysis, insuring that individuals would not be identifiable to the public, themselves or each other. Ucinet™ for Windows®, version 6, by Analytic Technologies, was chosen for data manipulation. Netdraw™, network visualization software, was chosen for rendering a visual representation of the analysis.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping was planned for identifying the location of residences, businesses and other points of interest in Sulphur Springs as they were revealed in the interviews. The original concept called for a master plan of the

community, detailed to street address and digitized for current and future annotations. With help and advice from University of South Florida Librarians and GIS specialists, this element was scaled back to a printout of presently identifiable addresses.

### *Why This Approach*

My primary reason for choosing a qualitative research approach over the compilation of facts, figures, dates and comparisons of quantitative measures to examine Sulphur Springs was an apparent lack of adequate documentation of any meaningful numbers or measurements prior to research projects implemented by the University of South Florida. Secondly, qualitative research was also the best option for applying anthropology for the benefit of a previously thriving independent cultural community that has been absorbed by the greater metropolis.

As social scientists, we tend to look for answers to questions and solutions to problems in units of measure or containment. Neighborhoods and communities have long been targets of research (Woldoff 2002). But Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley have identified “the mid-1990s to 2001 [as] the take-off point for an increasing level of interest in neighborhood effects.” (2002:443). The renewed interest in neighborhoods and small communities is an opportunity to look beyond loss to the elements of good foundations. Whether looking at the effects of the neighborhood on the health of individuals (Ellen, Mijanovich and Dillman 2001), long-term consequences of poverty (Oreopoulos 2003) or a decline in social capital (Costa and Kahn 2003), data and information gained from qualitative studies such as the one discussed in this paper provides a greater understanding of the issues, and can give direction to future research.

My belief is that we must study success to reproduce success. But my reason for utilizing this specific combination of methods was based on the strength and flexibility of the individual methods involved.

“The oral collection of historical materials goes back to ancient times...”(Fontana and Frey 2000:656). From explorations of race (Faulkner, et al 1982), ethnicity (Krause 1991), and the experiences of nontraditional women students (Ward 2000) to documenting the survival of women of the Holocaust (Gurewitsch 1998), oral histories are often used to examine issues and communities. Among anthropologists at the University of South Florida variations of the method have been employed to study the Afro-Cuban culture in Tampa (Greenbaum 2002), to augment urban archaeology (Tampa Tribune 1996), to explore the world of mental retardation (Angrosino 1998) and to create a community history archive (Sokolovsky 1996). Furthermore, it seems logical that stories were probably humankind’s first attempt to make sense of the world—measurements would come later.

“[T]he goal of unstructured interviewing is understanding” (Fontana and Frey 2000: 656). The goal of my research was to understand a world that I believed would feel different from my own, and to capture that world in a way that allowed others to experience it. The decision to tape unstructured interviews with women as the primary method of this study was predicated on basic issues in social science research: observation, interpretation and gender bias. It was driven by a desire to capture the *essence* of, or *feel* the experience of, life in Sulphur Springs, years before my own birth.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greek Philosopher Heraclitus said, “Men who wish to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details”

(<http://www.bartleby.com/66/7/27907.html>). Observation harvests the details. And observation is not restricted to visual cues. A sudden intake of breath, a sigh, a voice ‘trailing off’ in the middle of a story, all add layers of meaning to what is being said. All can be captured in a taped recording.

“Relevant to the study of oral history...is the study of memory and its relation to recall”(Fontana and Frey 2000:656). When we interpret, we translate meanings, washing them through the filters of our own experience and prejudice and reproducing them in language *we* understand. If the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct, “The structures of languages influence the structures of cultures, and vice versa” (Erickson and Murphy 1998:114), could using the language of a different generation misrepresent the culture of earlier times? Just as reading a classical work in its native tongue puts the reader closer to the author’s intent, taping the interviews could eliminate at least one layer of interpretation. There will still be a bias imposed by the researcher’s choice of questions, but the answers will be allowed to stand on their own.

My decision to interview only women could be challenged as biased or discriminatory. It satisfies two problems. The first is the previously discussed need for more research on women’s experiences. The second is gender bias interview results.

Fontana and Frey note that:

“The traditional interview paradigm does not account for gendered differences...the sex of the interviewer and that of the respondent do make a difference, as the interview takes place within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones”(2000: 657-658).

Pairing a female interviewer with a female respondent reduces the innate hierarchical relationships in a gendered society, increasing opportunity “to understand the meaning of participants’ lives in the participants’ own terms.” (Janesick 2000:382).

Ikkink and Tilburg, discuss the importance of personal networks of older adults to the individual’s well being (1999:131-146). In *Nexus:Small Worlds and the Groundbreaking Science of Networks*, author Mark Buchanan states, “In a clustered network, most of the links between people are strong links, endowed with history and cemented with frequent interaction...shared experience and proximity through time build ethical feeling and shared norms” (2002:202).

Given the shared history of the reunion attendees and the consistency of interaction between members of the group, I wondered whether this group of individuals would qualify as a network. And if analysis did show the characteristics of a clustered network, whether that fact would have any correlation to the apparent health and well being of so many of the alumni. The first step in examining these questions was to collect and analyze preliminary data. Although the group was not static, there seemed to be a core of regulars who attended every meeting. A simple graph of reciprocal relationships should be enough to detect a pattern if one existed.

Communities do not function in a vacuum. “They exist in particular environments...daily activity patterns of individuals are often constrained by the...geography of the community” (Cromley 1999:51). The new field of Geographic Information Systems had potential for providing a geographical map of historical interaction, much like the science of networks could show the geography of relationships.

GIS mapping had the added advantage of visual record keeping through annotation of which histories had been archived and which areas held potential for future projects.

Each method was chosen to support and enhance another. The manner in which they would be applied was intentionally kept simple and easy to translate into laymen's terms and concepts. With the tools assembled, it was time to begin weaving the tapestry.

### **Looking For the Threads**

Timing dictated the order in which the individual elements of research would be done. GIS Mapping could not efficiently be undertaken until all interviews and historical research was completed. The network survey needed to be distributed well in advance of the October reunion to provide time for follow up in the event of low return. The interviews needed to be scheduled as soon after the reunion as possible to maintain the momentum of excitement and participation.

#### The Network Analysis

For this portion of the research project I made notes regarding what I believed would be major challenges and what areas I thought might need special attention. My expectations were correct—but insufficient. Even after a variety of well designed classroom assignments and several planning sessions, I did not anticipate all of the situations that arose in this stage of my project. While it would be easy to attribute my stumbles to my specific research population, it would be inaccurate. As explained in the introduction of this paper, there were pros and cons of doing this type of research with this kind of population, and they surfaced early in the project.

### *The Survey*

At each reunion, an informal sign-in sheet is left on a side table with pens and nametags. There is rarely anyone attending the table and individuals are free to sign-in or not, with whatever information they choose to share. Head counts from previous events show a consistency with the number of names on the list.

The survey instrument was created from the list of attendees at the April 2003 reunion. The total number of people on that list was 182. Of these, 103 had addresses listed. In order to respect the privacy and security of the elders, I restricted the survey to those 103 names with their accompanying addresses.

I wrote a cover letter (Appendix A) introducing myself and reminding the recipient that I had met many of them at previous reunions and been impressed with their longstanding friendships. I explained the purpose of my study as an attempt to discover how the community had survived so long and offered my hypothesis that it might be in part due to the strong network they had established more than fifty years ago as students at the Sulphur Springs School.

The letter contained my assurance that no other information about them was available to me; their name and address would not be shared, given or sold to anyone; and the answers they supplied would be combined with others from the group. To further insure anonymity, each person on the list would be represented as a single point for the purpose of determining how many contacts were linked to another. The letter concluded with an invitation to participate, instructions to read and sign one copy of the consent form and return it along with the questionnaire in the postage paid envelope, instructions for completing the questionnaire and my cellular phone number. The Institutional Review

Board (IRB) does consider elders a sensitive population for research, but my sense of responsibility for their safety and confidence was personal.

The instrument was meant to be easy to use, simple to understand and comfortable for the eyes. These issues, I believed were the areas that could create the biggest deterrent to response.

The instructions were repeated on the first page of the survey:

“I am studying how your maintaining contact with friends from the School strengthens the community. Please read the name on the left and put a check mark in column A if you remember the person from your school days. Put a check mark in column B if you still see or speak to that person other than at the Reunions held at the Golden Corral. The names on the list are people who signed in at the reunion held in Spring 2003 (Appendix B).

At the suggestion of Dr. Wolfe, the names were printed in 14 point Ariel (a sans serif typeface) for ease of reading. This meant the survey would require four pages to include all 103 names, instructions, a closing statement of appreciation and invitation for contact; but it would also be easier to read and the spaces for marking would be larger and more apparent to older eyes. There was already some concern that four pages might be too daunting and that people would not make the effort.

What I had not anticipated was the time and effort it would take to interpret and track down the correct spelling of each of those 103 names. Penmanship seems to be more of a individual trait than a generational one. Though many people had very good handwriting, for some I resorted to a magnifying glass and other people's eyes. When nothing else worked, I scanned the signature into the computer in order to manipulate it in a draw program. The names were verified with my community contacts and anything



in question was cross-referenced with address. It took four revisions before the form was ready to be reproduced for mailing.

Choosing envelopes for sending the survey and returning it were also issues that had to be addressed. The outgoing package consisted of eleven standard letter-sized sheets of paper and a return envelope. A five by nine catalogue envelope would be large enough to accommodate all the pages and a return envelope of the same size folded in half. I discarded this option. Even the potential for saving money was not as important as the possibility of an adverse impact on response rate due to any difficulty or discomfort for people with arthritic fingers. I left everything flat and chose a nine by twelve, catalogue envelope for the mailing and included a folded pre-stamped envelope of the same size for the return. I created the mailing labels and return address labels by computer on white self-stick stock with twelve-point type and mailed the surveys out the first week of September. There were 103 surveys mailed; 37 responses came back.

### *Responses*

Of 38 envelopes received, only one was returned as undeliverable. One response had every entry in both columns checked, which proved invalid because five surveys were returned with notes explaining the recipients were spouses who had not lived or gone to school in the area, had attended only the one reunion and therefore not participating in the survey. One person returned the completed survey but did not sign the consent form. One survey came back with responses only in column B, an unsigned consent form and a note stating they had not attended school in Sulphur Springs. This reduced the number of responses to 29 valid returns.

In quantitative studies the minimum number of responses required for statistically significant calculation is thirty. This study was not designed for mathematical manipulation, but rather to produce a visual representation of the past and the current networks of these ‘old friends.’

To eliminate any bias that could be introduced through my arbitrary assumptions about specific relationships, I considered all relationships reciprocal. If A said they knew B, I would assume B knew A, even if B had not marked A as a response (Wolfe 2003). This still left the issue of names that had not been checked on any of the responses. With approximately one-third of the mailers returned, I anticipated a minimum of one-third, or 35 names would be dropped from the list. My estimates were close for column A (knew at school), the final network consisted of 74 individuals. The surprise was the size of the network for column B (see/speak to other than at Reunion), after eliminating the names that had not been checked, 93 names still remained (Wolfe 2003).

Processing the data on the forms was like panning for gold; I never knew what ‘nuggets’ of information were waiting for me when I opened an envelope. It had not occurred to me that anything other than checkmarks would appear on the forms. An occasional “I’m not sure about this one” scribbled in the margin might not have surprised me; the wealth of unsolicited information did. Nor did it occur to me that anyone would check his or her own name. Fortunately, the format for entering data for processing had zeros on the diagonal. This layout alerted me to the problem.

Several respondents did not read the explanation carefully; or I had not explained adequately; or perhaps they just did not like my list, because they added names to the list along with the check marks to identify whether to consider them in the group from school

or the reunion. The most common occurrence was notations that an individual was deceased. Sometimes additional information was included, such as date of death, cause of death or kinship affiliation. I found notes attached to the consent forms and one or two individuals even circled an overlooked typographical error in my cover letter. I never perceived even a hint of malice, anger or condemnation from these missives, only the feeling that the details were considered important enough to note.

*The 'Picture'*

A Krackplot for ego network was run for the compilation of data for 'knew at school' and separately for 'see/speak to other than reunion'. Results were analyzed to produce a visual representation of the density and breadth of each network. Subsequent conversations with more than one survey respondent convinced me to change the labels on the graph from the codes on the surveys in order to alleviate a growing competition to identify individual status in the network.

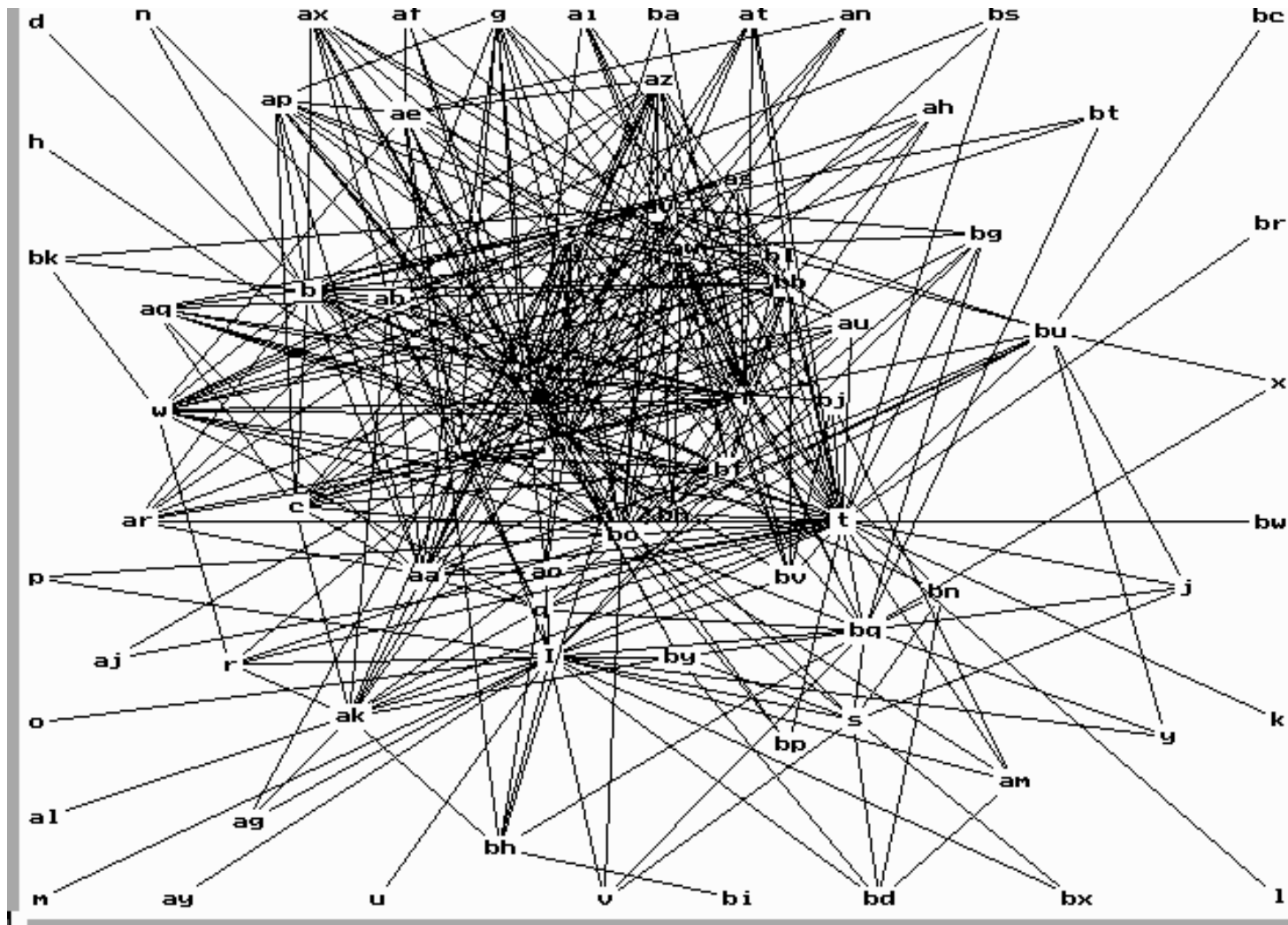


Figure 1. Network based on whether the women knew each other at school.

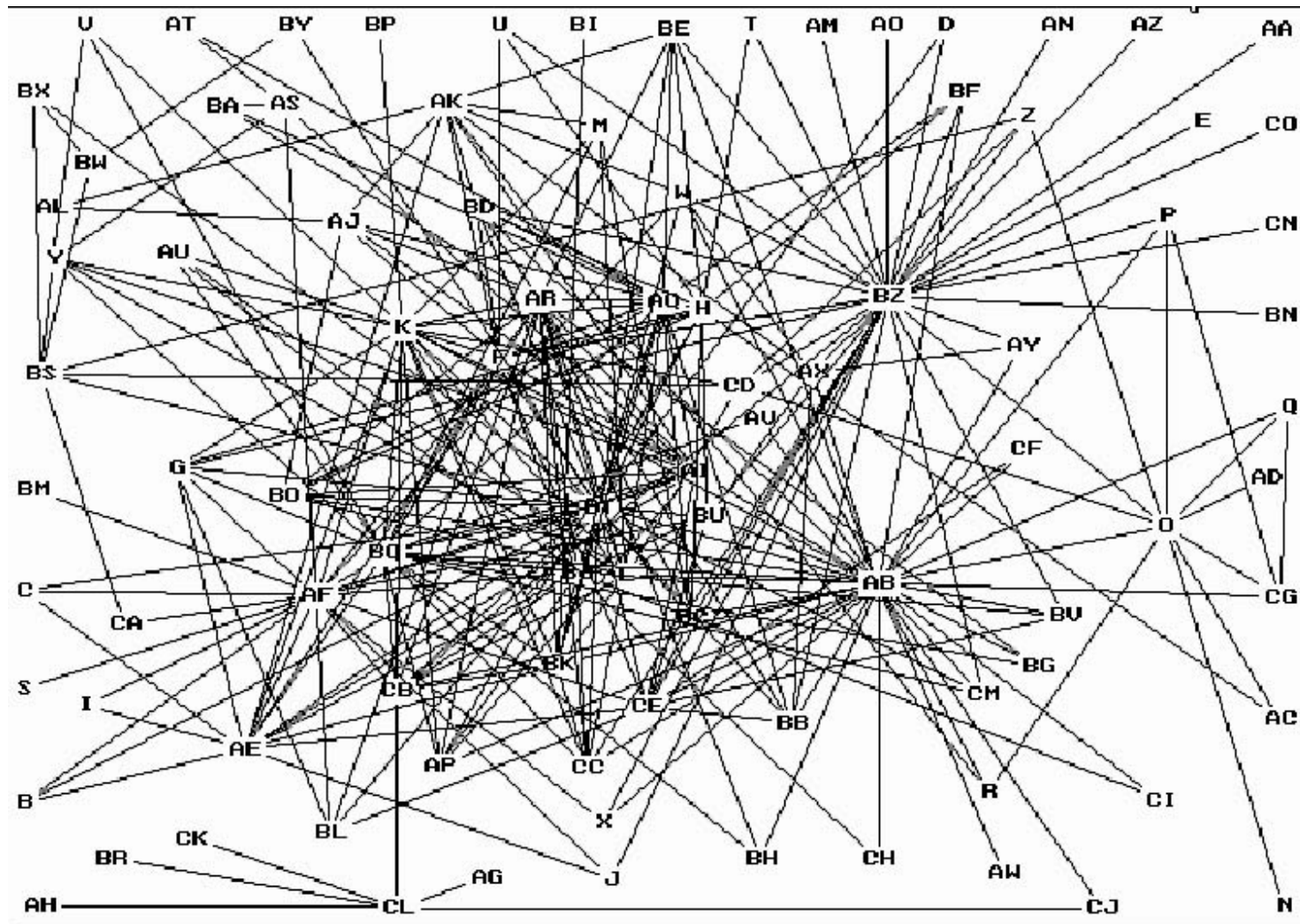


Figure 2. Network based on whether the women see or speak to each other than at the reunion.

People are tied together by their social relationships. A network consists of the people one person (“ego”) is directly connected to and any connections between those people. Each individual has several networks based upon different social relations. One network may be composed of kinship relations; one may be work or school related; another based upon friendship, or, as in this study, cognitive. A cognitive network is composed of the people we know ([www.analytictech.com/networks/egonet.htm](http://www.analytictech.com/networks/egonet.htm)).

Networks may function in a variety of ways. They may provide social support, emotional, material or simply companionship or information. They may also exert social control through pressure to conform. They may provide access to opportunities or resources, like the ‘old boys network’ so often attributed as the reason for another person’s success (Wolfe 2003).

The purpose of graphing the network of reunion attendees was to see how dense or interconnected this group of people was during their school years and how interconnected they are today. No statistical comparisons are being made. But from the graphs on pages 27 and 28 we can see there are still many connections (lines) between individuals in this group.

The graphs on pages 30 and 31 show the networks created by the individuals interviewed. As in the primary study population, the network created from their school days was substantial. The network represented by connections that remain in tact today is also substantial. By the very density of these networks, one could track an individual’s accessibility to most everyone in the network, through the connection of friend to friend.

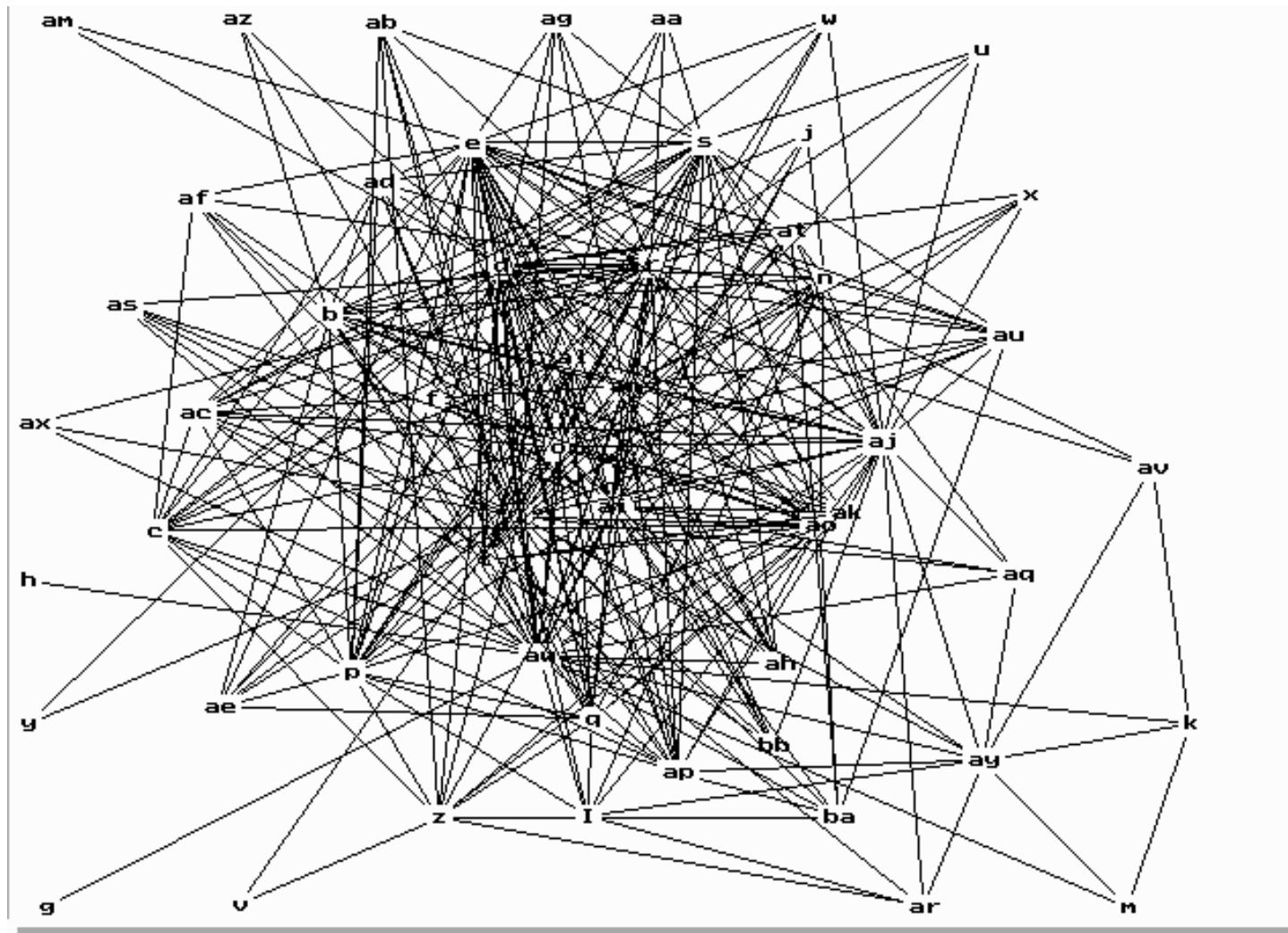


Figure 3. Network of Interview Participants who knew each other in school.

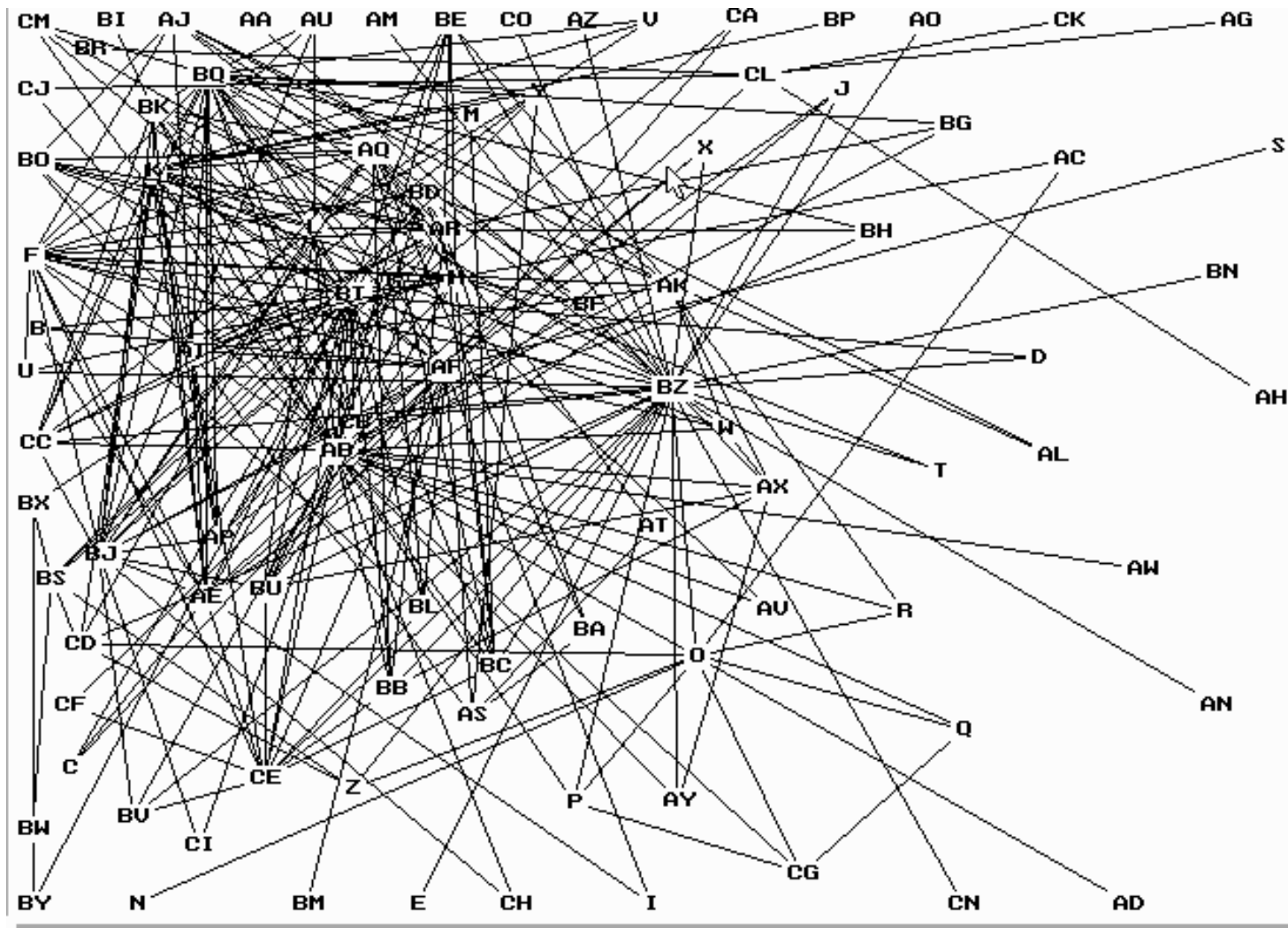


Figure 4. Network of Interview Participants who see or speak with each other outside of the reunion context.



The graphs are only ‘snapshots’ of a small portion of the larger picture, like focusing the lens of a camera on only one face in a crowd. While no specific information can be drawn from them, they do prompt us to ask more and perhaps larger questions. If all surviving alumni over the age of 70 were surveyed, would the network remain dense? Considering the zip codes listed in this small sample, how far geographically would the larger network reach? Are there any connections between the children—the next generation—or does the network dissolve with the passing of the elders? And does the density of the network bestow benefits or impress obligations upon the individual?

My interaction with and observation of members of this population for the past two years have led me to hypothesize about those questions. I believe the network of individuals who knew each other at school would appear as dense if not denser than the one represented in this study. All indications from formal as well as unrecorded interviews are that the school was a magnetic force in the community. Enduring friendships were created and often maintained through shifts in residence, employment, military obligations, marriages, and divorces. The network composed of those individuals who still communicate with classmates would likely lose some measure of density due to distance and financial resources. But, I believe it would reflect an unexpected strength and resilience. Some alumni live in surrounding states and a few, I suspect, have ventured even farther. However, comments and addresses from previous sign-ins suggest regular treks back for these reunions.

Although the network consisting of current contacts may collapse with the demise of the original population, there is already evidence of connections among members of the second generation. Individuals in the primary generation are well acquainted with

each other's children and extended families. The second generation has at least a general knowledge of their cohorts and in some cases have formed social relationships.

Logic might lead one to think that a denser network would automatically lead to individual benefits. Likewise, one might believe that mere acquaintanceship does not incur emotional responsibility. On a case by case basis, either hypothesis could be true. Studies in network theories of social capital, however, indicate membership in a network can have a profound effect on ability to access resources (Wolfe 2003) which in turn may have an effect on health and well-being (Pearce and Smith 2003). Ethnographic evidence suggests the dense network promotes stronger ties between and among individuals in the group. Conversations often include inquiries or reports on individuals known only through association with primary contacts. Phone calls made and/or greeting cards sent as a result of those conversations, I believe indicate some sense of emotional responsibility.

Questions still remain to be explored. Have these contacts influenced the health, well being and longevity of this population? If there is some correlation between membership in the network and the elders' quality of life, is it relevant to a burgeoning population of baby-boomers, or only for their grandchildren?

### The Interviews

The interviews were designed to elicit the individual's perceptions of her experiences with less emphasis on the veracity of actual dates or sequences of events (Appendix C). Questions were open-ended and participants were encouraged to wander down the side streets of their memories.

Texts and instructions in interviewing techniques caution the researcher to give adequate time for response while staying alert to the prolonged silence that might signal hesitance or discomfort with a topic. The concept *seems* straightforward and easy to implement. But prolonged is a relative term. What might appear to a young student or a businessperson as an excessive measure of time, to many elders only represents the time necessary to construct a thoughtful response.

In most interviews, the person conducting the interview controls the flow and direction of information. I often found myself reassigned from the position of conductor to that of audience. Sometimes, this was a result of the fascinating tale being told. Sometimes it was due to revisiting topics I had assumed were finished or closed. I learned after the first interviews that I would need to practice patience and to ‘empty’ the room of my presence. If there was ever a time to “heed the words of my elders”, this would be it.

### *Common Ground*

During these women’s childhood, the major institutions of Sulphur Springs were all located within the same square mile of real estate. Whether going to school, attending church, ‘headed to’ the swimming pool or off to catch the trolley, most people who lived there would encounter every member of the community at some time, and many weekly or even daily. Families banked locally, used the same post office, and with few exceptions suffered the same economic status—poor. If proximity was not enough to make comrades out of neighbors, scarcity of resources did.

For the most part, commerce has vacated that mile. A growing Tampa with an expanded web of highways and faster transportation has forced residents to confront a diversity of shopping and service options. Churches have moved, splintered or closed.

One bank sits entombed inside a vacant building, the other is a private residence. The beloved Arcade has been torn down to create parking for the seasonal needs of the dog track. It would seem there was no more common ground. But phone calls, informal gatherings, extended family celebrations, grandchildren's school events, weddings, funerals and those twice yearly reunions at the Golden Corral seem to have replaced footpaths worn between neighbor's backdoors.

### *Location*

Most of the women I spoke with preferred to be interviewed in the familiarity of their own homes. Perhaps because they had all met me in person prior to our appointment, no one seemed ill at ease or suggested the need for a chaperone present during the interview. However, working with existing routines, personal obligations and convenience provided opportunities to meet grandchildren, children, siblings, and one canine companion. Appointments took me to Plant City, the University district and Brandon, as well Sulphur Springs. And more than one thoughtful subject arranged to be interviewed at a local residence.

### *Economics*

The one comment recorded in almost every interview was, "We were all poor back then, but we didn't know it." According to 1983 thesis, "The large elderly population retirement figure" was charged with adding to the already "low-income status of the area" (Snelling 1983:39). The current population of elders is likewise composed of people of modest means. Some, in their eighties, are still employed, while others, though years younger have been retired for many years.

While none of the women I interviewed lived in new or even large homes, conditions of cleanliness and good repair did not suggest poverty. Furnishings were well cared for and persons well groomed. Resources appear to be allocated more to doing than to owning. Many of the women cited church and/or charitable activity as a major component of their lives. I detected no embarrassment, nor was offered any explanations or regrets for their financial circumstances. If they are all still poor, only a subjective statistical marker attests to it.

### Historical Research

Communities not incorporated as cities or towns and with little or no claim to fame or notoriety, often suffer from a dearth of information. Two major sources for historical research have been libraries and the Internet. When public libraries are unable to meet requests, the vacancy may be filled by special collections, private and corporate libraries or libraries of local government agencies. If documentation is not readily available on the Internet, peripheral information may point the way to more fruitful sources. When none of these avenues offer recourse, more obscure possibilities have to be explored. Newspaper archives, church and school records become the second levels of inquiry. And it is at this point that any political or regional bias may become evident.

Sulphur Springs was not incorporated as a city or town. Its chief claim to fame was the Arcade. And notoriety was more or less limited to Josiah Richardson's engineering fiasco with the Sulphur Springs Water Tower. When the tower was filled with water to service the dog track, tourist camps along Florida Avenue, the Arcade facility and upstairs hotel, Richardson miscalculated the power and speed with which the

water would make its way from the top of the tower to the facets below. Legend has it that when the first facet was opened the rushing water blew the fixtures off the walls.

No books of even modest acclaim rest on shelves somewhere as a quiet testimony to this community. Few church records from that era survived and school archives are in crumbling disarray. The major metropolitan newspaper, repository for articles written about Sulphur Springs, has earned the disdain of residents, who prefer to put their trust in the local weekly, The Pennysaver.

The Pennysaver's publisher, long-time resident Linda Hope, serves as area historian and local communities advocate in cases of adverse publicity. Overlapping the roles of publisher and historian, she produces the yearly "Sulphur Springs Memories" Calendar, thereby becoming not only a major source for historical research, but the depository of legend and myth as well.

The standard history book is usually a chronological description of economic and political activities, with a few human-interest elements thrown in. To its residents, the history of a small community is the stories of people with an occasional reference to politics and the economy. Interfacing local history within the context of larger events is like skipping stones across water. Both require an eye for angle and heft.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Culture of A Generation**

One of the basic elements of anthropological research is cross-cultural comparison. Students receive extensive instruction and training in observing activities in the context of the culture they are investigating. But in my opinion, too little emphasis has been placed on how the culture is expressed across generations. Manners and taboos in American society have shifted drastically with the growth of mass media and improved transportation. Words migrate through meanings, and new inventions and activities arise with a regularity that justifies the yearly revision of dictionaries. Things once considered scandalous become acceptable. The commonplace of yesteryear becomes a novelty. To truly understand the impact and importance of events, the researcher must look through the lens of history and place.

#### Manners and Mores

The expression of manners in a polite society goes beyond whether gentlemen walk on the street side with their female companions or open doors for their elders. Agreement on what is considered an appropriate use of language and proper subject matter between speakers of unequal status can be as important crossing a generation as it is crossing cultures.

Individuals who are members of the oldest Sulphur Springs generations negotiate relationships and interactions of today inscribed with the morals and conduct of the past.

### *Language*

When my informants were school children, every adult was addressed with a title of Mr., Mrs. or Miss. As a result of admonishments from teachers and parents, “yeah”, “huh uh”, “huh?” and “ain’t” were replaced with “Yes Mam”, “No Sir”, “I beg your pardon?” and “isn’t” in both the written and spoken word. Adherence did more than reflect the element of respect for the person being spoken to, it marked the speaker or writer as ‘civilized’ and educated in the manners of the dominant class of her society.

Respect for proper grammar and spelling was tantamount to a ‘good’ education. I received vivid reminders to that effect when more than one of my survey letters was returned with corrections and notations in the margins. Fortunately, my indiscretions were forgiven with the tolerance reserved for children and juniors.

I have witnessed no use of obscenities and only minor profanities in my encounters with members of this generation over the course of the study. Subject matter that is openly discussed on campuses and in offices today still triggers in these elders a reflex to drop the voice or turn the head when introduced into conversation.

These observations are not meant to paint this generation with a ‘noble’ brush. They are important for understanding how this population has coped with and been buffeted by changing demographics and the economic abandonment and defamation of their community. Today’s common vernacular, with its casual construct and lack of courtesy titles, can signal disrespect for both the people and the community in someone who was raised with verbal cues to mark their place and status in society.



### *Subject Matter*

Gossip, though openly reviled by those with ‘delicate sensibilities’ is the lifeblood of a community. Strict adherence to what should and should not be told is mediated by who is doing the telling, whom it is being told to and who is being talked about. And in that order. Behavior in this regard may not have changed much over the last fifty years, but subject matter certainly has.

I cautioned each woman before we began the interview to be mindful of the public dissemination of the information she shared on the tapes. We sat up a signal to indicate when the recorder should be shut down for private explanations. And another to alert me to questions that would receive no public response. More than one woman contacted me after receiving her copy of the interview to request that some form of ‘sensitive’ information be removed. Most requests pertained to health issues of long deceased family members.

On issues of chemical dependencies and promiscuity of other members of the community, I urged them to be discreet. A community often tolerates the frailties and failings of its own. Though fiercely loyal to and protective of its mores, community knowledge of individual character is often bantered about in unguarded conversation.

### *Age is Subjective*

The social sciences struggle with inter- and intra- disciplinary terms for mutually recognized life stages. And with advertisers constantly in search of new markets, the over 50 population has been diced, sliced and filleted into ever smaller and meaningless segments. Although being “almost a teenager” and old enough to drive are ageless and universal markers, health, wealth and retirement are no longer, if ever, age specific.

The phrase, “you are as young as you feel” describes the actions of some and the speech of most of the men and women I encountered during this research. Sitting unobserved, but observing, from the far most corners at the reunions, it was easy to identify who had been the class lothario, the flirt, the queen bee and the clown. Attendees still referred to others as the ‘girls’ or ‘boys’ they went to school with, who went to war, or came home to. Among cohorts, the use of courtesy titles was restricted to talking about teachers, principles and the parents of friends.

Retirement activities are another indicator of how elders perceive their chronological age. While some ‘just barely get around’ and others ‘stick close to home’, those engaged in volunteer work routinely portrayed the people they served as being much older than themselves. Many explained their pastime as ‘helping the old people’ at the church or recreation hall.

#### *With Men and Without*

Gender specific behavior, attire, speech and activity was a given in small town America during the first half of the twentieth century. Only rare or extreme circumstances would prompt the average person to cross the gender barrier and enter the ‘other’ domain by topic of discussion or assumption of responsibility. In cases of death or abandonment, sometimes fathers had to become mothers and mothers had to stand in for fathers. Poor health or economic distress could prompt wives to take up the role of provider or husbands to oversee households. But in most homes, men and women, girls and boys knew what space they were expected to inhabit.

When I decided to restrict my interviews to women, I knew I would to some degree also restrict the flow of information. After interviewing both men and women for

a previous class assignment, I was aware of a partitioning of knowledge contingent on gender.

In the interviews with women, I also detected subtle shifts in portrayals of self and female others coinciding with changes in marital status. Early feminist studies would have led me to expect a perception of increase in status based upon the presence of a man in the home. While the classification of ‘married woman’ did appear to engender an attitude of pride or accomplishment, extended conversation revealed the cause to be based in assuming responsibility for the welfare and maintenance of a home and family, with or without the presence of a man.

### **A Selective History of the Community**

“Five miles north of Tampa, at the end of the street car line” was the typical answer whenever I asked members of the Sulphur Springs generation to identify the community’s location. As I spoke to first one elder and then another at the reunions, I would marvel at my good fortune for choosing someone with such an amazing memory for detail. After completing a number of both planned and unscheduled interviews, I began to suspect it was more a trait of the generation than the individuals.

As I was mentally led down the roads of their memories, a community emerged that was unlike the shabby little pocket of poverty often discussed in classes at the University of South Florida. Now existing only in the memories of an older generation, tales of the once tight-knit working class community painted word pictures of a different time, a different place and a different way of life than researchers, politicians and students of the social sciences usually see. It would be difficult to romanticize the

destruction left in the wake of floods, or the devastation of economic loss and poverty. But greater insight into the perceptions of the residents of what was their home and their time could, it is hoped, increase sensitivities in dealing with the people, and perhaps reveal one or more of the overlooked ingredients that contribute to stable healthy communities.

Imagine passing through fields of grazing cattle and fruit trees where the University of South Florida and the town of Temple Terrace now stand. You have come from somewhere “north” in a model T with your parents and your sisters and brothers. As you bump along in ruts of sand, your automobile begins to stall and slide back-wards on an incline that will one day be Waters Avenue. Your parents have transplanted their dreams and family to a little community that hosts crowds of tourists who come to swim in the pool, take the waters, or spend the night in the hotel on the second floor of the big Richardson Building (Arcade).

You live in a series of small wood houses, but never beyond walking distance to the little white school. Many of the children are new to the area also and you quickly make friends. You don't yet know that the girl or boy at the desk next to you is going to become your life partner; or that you will attend the weddings or funerals for almost half of the students in that room sometime during the next sixty years.

Your classmates are all ‘white’ like the rest of the town. You see ‘colored people’ sometimes, but they live in a place called Spring Hill, at the north end of Sulphur Springs. Most people go to one of the churches in town. Your daddy helped build the new Northside Baptist Church your family attends. But one of your friends got to carry wood when the Most Holy Redeemer Catholic Church was built over on 11<sup>th</sup> street. You heard

your mama say that one of the ladies that works at the Arcade is Jewish, but you don't know where she goes to church. You wonder if she'll be buried in the Catholic or the Protestant cemetery when she dies.

Some of your friends' daddies don't go to their old jobs any more. They meet down at the W.P.A. Some of them go on construction jobs as far away as Tampa. Your mama says she is going to have to start working at the W.P.A. sewing room so you and your sisters will have clothes for school. Sometimes strangers come to the backdoor of your house and knock around suppertime. Your mama always gives them something to eat. She says she "doesn't have much, but there is a 'depression' on and folks have to help one another."

When your Grandma comes from 'up north' for a visit, you hear her tell your daddy he's 'as poor as a church mouse.' When she leaves, you ask him how poor is a church mouse. He says not to worry, you have a roof over your head and food to eat and that's more than some of your neighbors have.

People still come and stay in the campground that will one day be the parking lot of a Wal-Mart Store. The neighbor who works for the grocer calls them "tin-can tourists" because they won't even spend money on food; they just bring tin cans of it with them. He says they only come because they can't afford to pay the heating bills at home.

You and your classmates move up to the brick building when you begin Junior High. It is all Sulphur Springs School, they just keep the 'little kids' in the other building. Everyone likes the teachers. Some of the girls even go visit the English teacher at her house. The principal, Mr. Bates, only has one arm, but no one asks how he lost the other one. He can still play baseball with the kids out on the playground. Your sister is on the

girl's softball team, they won a tournament and got a trophy. This is Florida before air-conditioning and you beg your mama to give you the money for the swimming pool. You're going to ask for a job at the dry goods store in the Arcade next year when you turn 13. But you won't have that job for long, because America 'has' to go to war. Someone attacked her.

A lot of soldiers from 'the MacDill Base' come into town. They hang out at the skating rink and go to the dances at the Tourist Club to meet girls. A lot of the boys that went to Sulphur Springs School 'joined up.' Some of them only went to Georgia. Some of them went overseas and several never came back. No one had to decide whether they should be buried in the Protestant or the Catholic cemetery.

Your mama gets all dressed up to take the trolley into Tampa to pay the bills. Most all of the women in Sulphur Springs wear their dressy clothes when they go on the trolley. Some of the 'girls' are taking it all the way to Ballast Point on Saturday, just for the all day trip. If they have enough money, they'll buy a hot dog and a cold drink at the W.T. Grant's store downtown. But they'll have to stand up to eat. Only people who pay for a full dinner are allowed to sit down. Your sister says she hopes one day she gets to sit down.

Your mama and daddy are getting older. They have to find a new doctor; theirs died last year. The city says they have to have the city water piped into their house. You buy the house next door, so your kids will have someone close after school, since you don't get home from work until late. The community is changing. You see a lot of unfamiliar faces. Some of the old stores are bars and one is 'an old porno place.' You think, maybe Sulphur Springs should have become a city way back, then Tampa could

not have annexed it. Some people are sad when the Arcade is torn down to make a parking lot for folks who want to go gamble at the dog track. You're mad. If it had lasted just a couple more years 'they' could have never torn it down. It could have been declared a historical building. It already had a lot of history and the parking lot just sits there empty.

Some people don't want to say they live in Sulphur Springs any more. They just say they live in North Tampa. The streets are dirty, like some of the people. You worry that kids on their way to school will have to walk past the drug dealers. They put a big fence around the school and lock it during classes. There are a lot more unfamiliar faces.

Old houses are being torn down; even some as old as you are. The buildings that are going up will have two families where one used to live. Some will have four. Kids from the University have started showing up, asking questions and taking down names. The politicians are doing the same. The 'city' newspaper has found the community again. But they only call it by name when they report a crime. Half the time, the crime isn't even done in Sulphur Springs.

Your cousin comes to visit. His arthritis is bad, and he wants to soak his feet in the sulphur water. You take him to the Gazebo because the spring at the Tourist Club has been capped for a long time. The 'city' paid caretaker unlocks the gate so your cousin can soak his feet. You go in and fill the plastic milk bottles you brought along. Your cousin talks about the old pools and how the river was damned to make a 'swimming beach.' You remember the bathhouses and the Toboggan slide.

The caretaker lets you climb to the top of the Gazebo. You talk about how badly it needs repair. He says that different historical societies come out from time to time to

inspect the building. They claim they want to ‘do preservation.’ But they never come back. He guesses it costs too much. And a few years later the same cycle starts all over.

More groups are showing up to make Sulphur Springs their ‘cause.’ But none of them know what Nebraska Avenue looked like with all those soap box racers lined up in 1961. No one remembers the waters that flooded all the way to the second floor of the arcade. None of these people ever had to run to the doctor’s office down the street when their mama fell because they didn’t have a phone.

You look out at the large field taken over by oaks and scrub. It’s all fenced up and posted with no-trespassing signs. About 200 yards inside a government-controlled border, the Water Tower still stands. You think, “At least something is left of Sulphur Springs.” You remember what your mama said, “There’s no shame in being poor; just in how you spend money.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Opportunities, Challenges and Responsibilities**

At the end of this internship, I realized the lessons I had been given were not about ‘Saving Sulphur Springs’. They were not about the era, the location or the memories. They were about the opportunities, the challenges and the responsibilities I would face just by choosing to do research with this population. Whether the project was deemed a success, a failure or a disappointment, the lessons were in the discovery.

Elsewhere in this paper, I have addressed collateral issues that had to be satisfied in the early stages of the internship. In the pages to follow, I will discuss those issues that had potential for the greatest impact on the participants, the community, and me.

#### Relationships

Qualitative research is not performed in emotionally sterile environments. It requires the discovery and development of a relationship with one or more individuals. Forming a relationship with members of an elder population is rarely an instantaneous or equitable exercise.

Sometimes, equally as important as the researcher’s relationship with her study population is her relationships or perceived relationships with organizations, people or even one person of interest to individuals in the study. Numerous previous encounters with researchers and officials who residents felt had exploited the hopes and frailties of

the community and its individual members put this researcher in the position of recovering trust loss prior to any personal involvement.

At times I felt like all future research opportunities in this community hung on the thin threads of my acceptance by its members. In the beginning my sense of personal responsibility could quickly overrun the physical limitations of a given situation. Not only did I believe I was required to fulfill anything asked of me in order to produce data; this was the generation of my parents. I was as much a product of my conditioning and beliefs as the population I was about to study. This problem, however, soon transformed into one of my greatest advantages.

### *Giving and Receiving*

I chose the heading 'Giving and Receiving' for this section of the paper over the more succinct term, reciprocity, because in all of its variations it still seems to imply mutuality or equality at every stage. It leaves no room for the freely given or the graciously received, both of which are important elements in cross-generational relationships. Where financial consideration can quickly turn from favoring to flaunting if one is on the giving end of the relationship. And from generous to insulting if on the receiving end. Equity is usually measured across the life of the relationship through some intrinsic and illusive calculations of breadth, scope and value.

Gifts are bestowed in three basic forms, the physical, the emotional and kindnesses, with a great deal of overlap between classifications. I was the constant recipient of all three.

Gifts of things and time are the most accepted forms of exchange between individuals at the beginning of relationships. The elders were generous with both. I

received plants and food, greeting cards and phone calls and returned in like form. Gifts of time were bestowed through tours of the area, arranged introductions and information or ideas obtained through personal networks. For my part, I tried to remain alert to small needs I might be able to fill, from transportation to taking photographs of artifacts and locations and internet research for topics not easily accessed by limited availability.

Physical things may likewise bestow a kindness. After a particularly rich interview, one gentleman offered to show me the Sulphur Springs he and his wife knew and loved. On the appointed day, I arrived on their doorstep. As I left the porch, he paused and pointed down to a planter filled with large clusters of rose-shaped succulents. He asked if I knew what they were. I told him that I was unsure what they were called in Florida, but where my grandmother grew them on her porch and around the sides of her home in Oklahoma, they were called 'hens and chickens.' He smiled and nodded. Then he picked up a small pot containing one he had carefully transplanted and presented it to me. While I had the trunk open, attempting to stabilize a safe transport for my gift, he came around the end of the car with a bag of fresh picked tangerines from their trees.

In the simple asking for their stories, the elders often responded with smiles reminiscent of a generous Christmas morning. I soon discovered one of the greatest gifts I had to give was the gift of listening. It was always graciously and gracefully received.

I had been interviewing and visiting the community for about eighteen months, when the true measure of these recently formed relationships was offered to me. My mother died two weeks before the October reunion.

I made appointments for interviews, without making the event an issue for discussion. As I went from one interview to another, the ease I felt in sharing details of

my experience; the speed with which they informed one another and the compassion in which they enfolded me amazed me. It was both healing and humbling. In a matter of days, I went from losing my mother to gaining three or four more. I was counseled about sleep and exercise. I was cautioned about driving and beseeched to report my safe arrivals.

*On-going and Long-term*

Whether it is due to the emotional response of sharing a traumatic experience, or a symbiotic meshing of lives, it would be hard for me to voluntarily curtail the relationships I have with many of these elders. I have their birthdays entered into my palm pilot, along with contact numbers for siblings, and dates for meetings weeks after graduation. They have my cellular phone number and the test of confidence that I will answer all calls.

When I began this study, I was most concerned about the ethics of 'taking someone's stories.' It seemed to me that only friends share the stories of their lives. And friends do not discard you because they want to move on. The study would be more than an investment in my education, it would be an investment in my life.

As we are forming relationships over the course of our lifetimes, we rarely think of loss. You don't make a dinner date with new acquaintances and anticipate attending their funerals. Few people make relationships based upon the health and mobility of the other person. Cross-generational relationships put these issues to the front of consciousness. Just as fostering a relationship with younger individuals leads the mind to examine the passages of adulthood, rites of passage on the other end of the continuum likewise impose upon relationships. It seems only natural that if you have traveled the

journey of another's memories, revisiting births, weddings and funerals you have also chosen ride with them to the end of the Trolley line.

### Information Return

One of the tenets of applied anthropology is the return of information to the individual and community from which you acquire it, in a form usable by them and for their benefit. This meant I would need to give careful consideration to the format I chose as well as the population that would be utilizing it.

#### *Format and Recipient*

The expanding numbers of genealogies and local histories that are posted on the Internet prompted me to consider this as an option for placing the oral histories of Sulphur Springs in a larger venue. Compact discs, would likewise insure longevity and integrity over the medium of audiotape.

While this might be the medium of choice for the local history association, the elders who had provided the information were less likely to be able to access it. Few owned computers and fewer had the expertise, even with public computers available at local libraries.

Copies of the tapes equally were problematic. Tape recorders for playback are not standard technology in the homes of people who grew up listening to the radio. Making changes or commentary after completing the interviews would be difficult. It did, however, provide the best and least expensive option for sharing with family members and bequeathing the information to younger generations.

A typed document, while the method of choice for the individuals who had been interviewed, would require additional hours for transcription.

I decided to make audio tape copies of the interview for a timely return to participants, with the added advantage of fast and inexpensive reproduction for family and friends. The presentation of memories offered at the next Reunion will be produced on CD with copies provided free to attendees, thus providing some durability of record, without inflicting the burden of technology.

### Giving back

Giving back to the community entails more than preparing a brief overview of the information collected. Participants already know the information they have shared with the researcher. Other than issues of courtesy and preservation, the benefit has been for the sake of the research and researcher. Identifying a meaningful compensation for the group, the community and the individual was not as challenging as I anticipated.

### *The Group*

A loose organization has been forming at the reunions, with more interest and participation in sharing of contact information. I have been given the opportunity to put that contact information in a usable format for the benefit of the group. This seems like an equitable solution. However, my concern over the dispersal of any personal information would require a well-conceived plan of distribution. A solution came when I asked two group members to look at the list for corrections and omissions. After producing the roster, copies for distribution would be consigned to these same group members, thereby putting the power of the flow of information back into the hands of the

individuals who had provided it. There should be less possibility of unscrupulous persons using the information for personal financial gain.

### *The Community*

Compensating the greater community in some manner was solved by what I observed as an immediate and pressing need of Sulphur Springs School. As noted in the Statistics session of this paper, the school is located in one of the poorer areas of the Hillsborough School District. While many government and state programs are available for welfare and education; funds are all but non-existent for historical record preservation. I have been scanning pictures and historical documents (i.e. newsletters, PTA records, class pictures) into digital format, with the goal of organizing the scans by year and presenting them on Compact Discs to the school for their convenience as well as the convenience of any future researchers. The records are quickly disintegrating and within the next few years would be indecipherable. This project should be completed by mid summer.

### *The Individual*

While the greatest means of giving back is also the greatest gift, that of listening—listening attentively, patiently and respectfully. But beyond the gift of listening, other possibilities have presented themselves for options of ‘giving back’ through service to the individual.

Many have voiced concerns that their heirs have little or no interest in the artifacts and memoirs of this oldest living generation. Interest by local government in an area museum waxes and wanes with changes of political inhabitants. Arrangements have been made to archive tapes at the Florida Studies Center, University of South Florida, with

copies also provided to the historian of the Sulphur Springs Community Action League. This should ensure survival of materials for a future museum in the area.

Discussions are underway to encourage an elder and previous participant of interviews to have instruction and training in conducting interviews in order to collect the oral histories of cohorts, specifically men of the group, to add to the archives. The individual in question owns the same model of recorder that was used in the creation of tapes for this study. He is well thought of and connected in the community and has a friendly and approachable demeanor.

#### Location

The identification of specific locations after a long period of time can be particularly challenging. Many participants would qualify their answers with disclaimers that their memory might be faulty. While no one has challenged any respondent on the details of location, there does appear to be agreement on the 'experience' of location.

#### *Maps and Structures*

After 50 years of change, the most reliable source for previously existing structures and locations in this unincorporated area, are the individuals who have lived in the area the longest and exhibit the best recall.

G.I.S. mapping resulted in little usable visual data. Without proper identification of current street names, orientation to locales discussed is lost. A better use of G.I.S. would be the ability to overlay files to indicate street name changes and dates. To my knowledge, that technology is not yet in use, especially in context of this limited study.



## Recruiting Respondents

The recruiting phase for the interview portion of this study provided a wealth of information for future research with this population. I believe the information obtained could apply to similar circumstances involving elders.

### *Timing*

Initial enthusiasm for this project was high. Concern was expressed within the research community that age, fragile health, unexpected illness or untimely demise placed this research on a status of some urgency.

Fortunately, none of these concerns affected the study. Individuals remained healthy and those who had agreed to be interviewed had no physical or medical reason to cancel. It was observed however, that the farther the scheduled time for an interview was from the last reunion, the greater the likelihood that the participant would cancel the appointment. There appeared to be a six-week window of opportunity, which included recruitment and fulfillment. No information is available on whether a similar window of opportunity exists prior to reunions.

Fortunately, sufficient interviews were scheduled and completed within the window of opportunity. Subsequent attempts to schedule interviews with recommended sources were unsuccessful.

### *Gender*

Initial responses to recruiting attempts based on gender were unenthusiastic. My attempts to engage potential subjects in conversation were met with caution. I had attended previous reunions and engaged in conversation that had been easy and open. When I began to ask about interviewing women, an air of suspicion seemed to pervade

the conversation. If and when I was able to explain the nature of the study and what value it might have to future communities and neighborhoods, enthusiasm and cooperation increased, resulting in three interviews scheduled and conducted within the two weeks immediately following the reunion.

Men who overheard my request for interview participants were more inclined to volunteer than women were. Even after having heard the explanation for gender specific interviews, male desire to participate ran high.

#### *Group and Individual Interviews*

Two separate opportunities were presented to observe dynamics and outcome of questioning multiple participants during an interview. Results varied.

Accepted interview procedure discourages group or multi-participant interviews. However, two of the interviews were contingent on simultaneous interviews with female relatives. There was no indication this request was based on security concerns, but rather the fear that individuals would suffer a lack of recall without another present to prompt memory.

In interview A, the information was enriched by the presence of two respondents. Dates and details were forthcoming. Additional topics were introduced extemporaneously by the participants. A male relative, though present, remained in another part of the house.

In interview B, information flow was halting and sparse. Participants offered no unprompted information. Here too, a male resident was present, but in the same room.

No conclusions are drawn from the presence of men during women's interviews. Sample is too small to determine whether proscribed gender behavior or timidity of personality affected interview quality.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes with answers to four questions about whether ethnographic research among a neighborhood's elderly including aspects of their oral history and analysis of their network is useful: Who benefits from such research? Where is the need for such research? How can the research be applied? Are the results of the research worth its challenges?

#### *Who Benefits*

The question of who benefits from doing this type of research with this kind of population has multiple answers.

Elders who participated in the interview process have voiced appreciation for the opportunity. They cite a variety of experiences, including: entertainment value, renewed interest in personal history, opportunity to exercise memory abilities, and validation of life experiences.

Planning commissions, service agencies and others may benefit from additional historical information and unique to generation, perspective on issues to be addressed. Additionally, research may reveal areas of communication inefficiency and goal conflicts resulting from lack of cross-generational experience.

Communities may benefit from the preservation of audio archives for quality of life marketing, historical accuracy and a more involved citizenry.

### *Where is the Need*

The need is in urban as well as rural populations. As the baby boomer generation systematically replaces the current 'oldest generation' we are losing first hand knowledge of a value system and philosophy of living that could be mined for social elements relevant to measurable success in current quality of life issues.

### *How Can the Research be Applied*

Perhaps the most impacted area of application would be in conflict resolution. In understanding generational (time) and regional (place) differences of the dominant culture, variations in cross-cultural interpretations and assimilation could be addressed.

Additional areas where the research might be applied include nursing homes, other quality of life institutions and organizations, end of life facilities and allopathic medicine's patient compliance problems.

### *Do Results Outweigh the Challenges*

In this study, the results did outweigh the challenges. I believe the question for future research is not whether the results outweigh the challenges; but how can they not? Because, in the end, it is about people. It is about how we must cross time and space to see the world through another's eyes. It is about how we may come to understand and navigate generation. It is about finding and facing our own mortality and existing comfortably in the space and time we are allotted.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

Date

M. First Name, Last Name

Address

City, State, Zip

Dear M.

My name is C. J. Brown. I am a student at the University of South Florida and I have been attending the Sulphur Springs School Reunion at the Golden Corral in Temple Terrace for the past 18 months. During my visits to the reunion, I have met many of you and have been impressed with the long lasting friendships I see there.

As part of my studies, I am looking at how the town of Sulphur Springs has been able to stay so strong for so long. I believe it may be in part due to your maintaining contact with the friends you made in school.

To find out how many people still have contact with their school friends, I have prepared a list of people who attended the April 2003 Reunion and provided their address when they signed in. Your name and address was included. No other personal information is available to me and your name and/or address will not be shared, given or sold to anyone. Your answers to my questions will be combined with others from the group and no information about you or anyone else will remain. Each person on the list will represent a single point of contact to determine how many contacts are linked to another.

If you choose to participate, please read the enclosed consent form, sign one copy to be returned with the questionnaire and keep a copy for yourself. Once the questionnaire is complete, please mail it and the signed copy of the consent form in the postage paid envelope I have included.

On the enclosed list, please place a mark in column A for those individuals that you knew when you attended Sulphur Springs School. Please put a mark in column B if you see or speak to the person other times than at the Reunion. For each name on the list, you may have marks in A or B. You may have marks in A and B, or you may have no marks in column A or column B for that person.

Thank you for your time and help in this study. If you have any questions or would like to talk to me about my study of Sulphur Springs, please feel free to call me on my cell phone (555) 555-5555 or write to me at the above address.

Sincerely,



## APPENDIX: C

### **Interview Questions/Topics for Research Study**

#### Mapping A Generation: An Ethnography of Sulphur Springs, Florida

What year did you first move to Sulphur Springs?  
How old were you when you moved?  
Why did you move to Sulphur Springs?  
From where did your family come?  
How many children in your family?  
What did your parents do for a living?  
Have you lived anywhere else?  
(when did you move back to Sulphur Springs)  
You have lived in Sulphur Springs for \_\_\_years?  
Tell me about your first home in Sulphur Springs.  
How did you come by it?  
Is that the same home we are sitting in today?  
(when did you move to this house?)  
Do you have any special memories about it?  
What was Sulphur Springs like when you first moved here?  
How was Sulphur Springs laid out?  
(the main road, important places, etc.)  
What was the main area of Sulphur Springs when you first moved here?  
What were the major attractions in Sulphur Springs for you when you first arrived?  
What are your memories of the Arcade? Did you go there by yourself? At what age?  
What businesses do you remember in Sulphur Springs?  
Did you (or a family member) work at any of the businesses?  
Who? What? Tell me about those experiences.  
What stores do you remember in Sulphur Springs?  
Which ones did you go to?  
Do you have long-term acquaintances or friends still living in Sulphur Springs?  
Do you see them or speak with them by phone?  
Did you (or your children) go to school in Sulphur Springs/  
What was the school like then?  
Tell me about the school day.  
Was you or your family affiliated with a church in Sulphur Springs?  
If so, which one?  
What activities did you participate in?  
What do you remember the Train Depot?  
What do you remember about the Trolley?  
Did you ride it?  
Where did you go on it, because most people were coming to Sulphur Springs.  
Did you ever ride the boats from downtown to Sulphur Springs?  
How did you get around? (car, walk, carpool)  
What was your favorite food growing up?  
Was there a special food in your family?

APPENDIX C: Continued

Did you have any traditions regarding food?  
Did you work outside the home either as a teenager or after you left your parent's home?  
When?  
Where did you meet your husband (if married)  
and what were the early years of marriage like in Sulphur Springs?  
Were you involved in any clubs or organizations?  
Did you have any hobbies?  
What were they?  
Did you have chores when you were growing up? If so, what were they?  
What was the biggest change you remember as a child or teenager?  
What is the biggest change you've seen as an adult?  
Was your family doctor in Sulphur Springs?  
What adults do you remember most from your childhood?  
Did your family or grandparents get water from the Gazebo? Or the Tourist Club Spring?  
Did you ever go to the Springs at the Tourist Club?  
I know there were tourist rentals in Sulphur Springs, but did the townsfolk all own their  
own homes or did some of them rent? Did people move often within Sulphur Springs?  
Did you know about Jim Walters Homes?  
What health routines did you and/or your family perform?  
Did anyone you know 'take the waters'?  
What would you want people to remember or know about the Sulphur Springs you  
remember?