HOMETOWN ECONOMICS:
The Edgerton Rephotography Project

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Parade on Fulton Street, Edgerton, WI facing east.
The first block showcases a café, Gardner’s (jukeboxes and records),
the IGA Market, drugstore/soda fountain, National Bank, the Edgerton
Store, Anderson and Farmen Men’s Store, and The Tobacco
Exchange Bank.
Note the ‘everyday’ functions of Fulton Street—two banks, a grocery
drugstore—that today are all located on Hwy 51.
Photo from Tobacco City Museum, c.a. 1950s

Weekday on Fulton Street, Edgerton, WI facing east.
The first block today contains an empty lot, the Oat’s Bin Tavern,
Sister’s Act Consignments, DNA Bar and Grill, Jan’s Stained
Glass Studio, The Dragon Chinese Restaurant, The Hobby Farm
Fulton Street now acts as Edgerton’s home for tourism with its crafts stores,
art galleries, and antique shops.
Photo taken by Caroline Towns, November 6, 2002
something they perhaps never can. This is an attempt from an insider explaining to others a certain place, as well as that insider looking deeper to discern the unknown events and actions that created such a familiar landscape.

This ‘insider,’ who is trying to paint a picture for others, is of course doing so through his or her own ideas and interpretations. These preconceived notions are sure to be altered as the study goes on and more information is gathered. Part of the problem with such an examination is due to the nature of this research. Looking at a specific community of relatively small importance to most of the world, like Edgerton, is going to involve little conventional data in the standard forms of previous research and the like. This problem has to be solved by that insider taking the initiative to become an ‘authority’ on that particular topic.

In order to understand the economic landscape of Edgerton, Wisconsin, it is essential to understand the manner of investigation. Although there is information about the city, questions of landscape still look for many interpretations and answers. Other landscape studies that focus on a variety of small towns and concentrate on a certain place over a certain time were available to assist in setting up this research. When Edgerton is viewed in the context of a ‘typical’ small town, these studies are helpful for both their research methods and project patterns.

The questions of landscape perhaps begin with the general question: “what is a landscape?” Groth and others assert that a ‘landscape’ is a place that has an ‘interaction between people and place.’ (Groth 1997, 1) To derive a better understanding of what landscape studies investigate, certain assumptions are made about the studies that allow for them to be useful no matter what specific landscape they are examining. First and foremost is the assumption
that the ideas could be applicable to many places in a similar situation. Kunstler points to the general image and preconceived notions of the small town as an ideal that all Americans can relate to and feel comfortable with—whether they live in one or not. (Kunstler 1993)

Kunstler uses a mixture of history and images to paint a picture of Saratoga Springs. The work looks at the town both in a chronological narrative of the last century of changes, but also includes a ‘drive through’ of the town, where things are explained as they would appear if one were actually driving through the town. In this manner, when Kunstler mentions a building or a public space as it comes up in town, the reader is able to visualize the street, to get at least a feel for the neighborhood by looking at the use of space around the individual buildings. Tying this in with the history allows for Kunstler to talk about when and why buildings were built, and in turn what that meant to the city.

(Kunstler 1993)

Borchert’s analysis of Lakewood, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, (1997) also considers the physical landscapes of a certain municipality. The work cautions about using visual analysis of maps or pictures (or even the current landscape) to stand on alone, because it can be so misleading without any substantial information to support it. However, this work also cautions about solely using informational data like newspapers or census records. Borchert’s ideal research would involve combining the visual analysis of past and present with the information for it to stand upon. (Borchert 1997) This is the basis—and the bias—for this project.

Borchert’s study examines Lakewood thoroughly. The work makes a point to both compare and contrast Lakewood with Cleveland’s other suburbs. Distinct neighborhoods and streets developed in the town. The higher income areas have notably larger plots than the lower, especially those along Lake
living thing that develops with the people that it supports. Rephotography thus shows a certain “continuity of life” that acts upon the interrelated human and physical landscape. (Bromberg 2001, 4)

This continuity is interesting because nothing seems more like discrete data than a photo. A picture covers what that one part of the world looked like just for a brief moment in time. Another picture taken years later still only represents a brief moment in time. (Bromberg 2001) Looking at the two photos together and comparing and contrasting them shows more than two specific moments in history, they can show all the changes that have taken place by allowing the viewer to ‘connect the dots’ and getting a feeling for the entire spectrum of change over time.

Welcome to Edgerton
The last 150 years demonstrate a relationship between human economic activity and the physical, built environment of Edgerton, Wisconsin. What has taken place in Edgerton could be true of a lot of small towns that have survived the urbanization—and sub-urbanization—of America. Edgerton provided a variety of distinct goods and services not only for residents, but also for consumers on a larger scale. Today, it’s true that many of those businesses are gone and the town is a different place. What has remained the same is the overall atmosphere of the ‘small town’ and its population. The economy shifted, but it did not die away and it lives on in a new form. The history of the rise and fall of industries, the on-going activities of the small town and its residents, and the resulting economic shift within the town are all interrelated in Edgerton. This study’s research examines this shift by using first-hand accounts of residents, textual records, and graphics to evaluate this specific landscape.
Fulton would board the train. In 1859, the growing town changed its name to Edgerton, after one of the railroad engineers who influenced the altered route. As waterpower and travel became less and less important, the village of Fulton remained a village, and today remains unincorporated. *(The Edgerton Story 1953)*

In 1853, the first tobacco crop was harvested in the area, sparking long standing economic growth in Edgerton. The large leaf tobacco was sold to cigar makers located in Janesville and Milwaukee. In 1869, the first tobacco warehouse was built along the railroad tracks that run parallel to West Fulton Street. It was made out of wood, but as of 1885 the rest would be constructed out of brick. This was due to the excellent resource of high quality yellow clay that can be found around the Edgerton area. Many consider the brickyards to be first among Edgerton's industries because they began making the distinctive cream colored bricks...
The old grade school building is today used as an apartment building with the former schoolyard used as a parking lot. Photo taken by Caroline Towns, November 6, 2002

grown, three hotels were built in the small community: The United States House (1854), The Exchange House (1854), The American House (1855). (The Edgerton Story 1953) In addition to providing goods and services for its residents, Edgerton was focused on getting new people into Edgerton.

Edgerton had grown large enough by 1883 to become incorporated. The lure of the already-successful tobacco industry was enough to bring people to Edgerton, and the railroad was just the way to get them there. The railroad provided both personal and professional gains for Edgerton. Many settlers could travel much faster by rail than by horse and carriage over roads that most of the time nonexistent or difficult to find. The Wisconsin weather left even the best of dirt roads all but impassible in the snow of the winter and the mud of the spring. The railroad also was a faster, more cost-efficient way to transport tobacco as well
who were used to the grandeur and extravagance of the East. The Carlton was built in 1896 and could accommodate even 500 people for Sunday dinners and large banquets. The hotel was equipped with steam heat, electric lights, and running water. The Rock County Historical Sites and Buildings Book referred to the Carlton as a “robust Jacobean-Queen Anne cream brick structure.” (Strasburg, “History of the Edgerton Area,” The Edgerton Reporter)*

This time of great wealth and high-class elegance in Edgerton’s history proves how exceptional Edgerton was for the small, agricultural towns in the area. One institution that helped to understand the society of the time was the pottery industry in Edgerton. Pauline and Oscar Jacobus moved to the area from Chicago, bringing their ‘Pauline Pottery’ business (that made vases, pots, tiles, jars, etc.) with them. Pauline Pottery had been sold at Tiffany’s in New York, Marshall Field’s in Chicago, and Kimball’s in Boston. After Oscar
the industry. Edgerton was well known throughout the area for having a "number of residences which in architecture and general beauty are far above the average to be found in towns of this size."

(Strasburg, "History of the Edgerton Area," The Edgerton Reporter)* Washington Street was dubbed "Tobacco Row" because it was the location for Victorian conspicuous consumption. Washington Street includes the impressive home at 708 Washington built by tobacco tycoon C.L. Culton for $30,000 in 1903 and once called "the finest home in the city." (Strasburg, "History of the Edgerton Area," The Edgerton Reporter)*

Another home located at 211 Albion Street but firmly planted facing west down Washington was the home of Florence Child. She was the daughter of William Wallace Child, one of the first and largest tobacco dealers in the county. The date on the chimney reads '1907.' (Strasburg, "History of the Edgerton Area," The Edgerton Reporter)* The tobacco barons that lived in those
workers in season began to close and lay-off employees, leaving only 30 jobs by the 1980’s and only a handful of the warehouses still standing. (Treasure Guide to the Edgerton Area Rock County Historical Society, 1981)

Since the 1950s Edgerton continued to change, mostly in relation to the change in the tobacco industry. The railroad industry obviously declined on its own as other forms of transportation developed. This change in Edgerton reflects the larger American landscape in the 20th Century in the way that the railroad gradually became less important and the new ways of travel—air, bus, and most notably here, car—came into being. Edgerton became less of an industrial/agricultural town using the rail system for its goods, and more of a town that could capitalize on being a crossroads of two state highways. (See maps, p. 30)

Today the most of the older factories have all been closed. Many, like the Dana plant that manufactured axles for light trucks, left a significant economic problem in Edgerton; When Dana left the city of 4,335 in 1980, they closed their plant as their market declined and 1,600 were left without jobs. (Michael 2003) Along with transportation changes and economic losses, Edgerton lost two of their historical treasures when The Carlton Hotel burned and the Rialto movie theatre fell into disrepair and was torn down.

Many small towns would not be able to recover from such a shock to its most important industries, but Edgerton seems resilient. Despite the events of the past few decades, it seems clear that Edgerton is again showing its potential. The ‘Facade’ program was put into action in early 2001 and is focused on providing grants or low-interest loans to assist downtown business owners in giving their storefronts “facelifts” and helping to overall beautify Fulton Street. (Facade Program 2003) This program is set on revitalizing the small, downtown businesses that are no longer the staple hardware stores, pharmacies, or groceries—but, rather have become Sister’s Act Consignments, The Red Baron Tavern, and
Nature of the Small Town and Its Residents

It is that small town life that so many prefer over other places. Many people, some who live there and many who do not, have an image of the American ‘small town.’ It seems moral and wholesome. Everything appears so clean, quaint, and unique compared to large cities. People are friendly and say hello to their neighbors when they run into them on the sidewalks. What makes small towns so special is that they are a ‘real’ place with a ‘real’ purpose—to be a livable community.

After the Second World War, there was a noticeable change in the American landscape. The widespread use of automobiles coupled with the ‘baby boom’ led to the development of suburbs all across the country. Buildings were built as quickly, cheaply, and as close together as possible—that idea still holds true in many places today. Kunstler asserts that the decided majority of everything constructed in post-war America is “depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading.” (Kunstler 1993, 10)
which although changed in its nature, still exists. Even with less foot traffic today than years ago, these businesses have found their niche. Parking lots add to the downtown area today, so tourists can park and then shop.

Many of the residents do not work in the town, but head off to another city to work at a factory, office, or business. Those who do work within the city of Edgerton take the short drive to the local bank, salons, or lumberyard and, on the whole, deal with the same customers that they have for years, all from the Edgerton area. People from neighboring areas do not regularly use Edgerton’s goods and services, because they could either patronize their own small-town businesses or go to the larger towns. This keeps the money turning over within Edgerton and provides a certain degree of sustainability in its internal community.

A shift of this nature points to the difference between ‘city-forming’ industries (bringing money into community) and...
neighboring communities. Near the railroad tracks and across the street, one can see where tobacco warehouses used to literally line the street and the tracks, and today there are just a few remaining.

The lone stoplight that directs traffic is at more than just a physical intersection of two streets, but also an intersection of past and present. Looking down the street to the west is West Fulton Street, the ‘main street’ of years ago, with the north side of the street lined with brick buildings for several blocks that used to house grocery, hardware, and clothing stores. Today they are filled with quaint craft and antique stores. This street used to be the life-blood of the town, but Edgerton residents today find Hwy 51 to be the new ‘Main Street.’

Continuing straight ahead at the stoplight means moving ahead a few years on the main street of the future. All six gas stations, (4 local, 2 national chains) in Edgerton are passed on this street. All three Edgerton banks can also be found on this
Although Edgerton has experienced small but steady growth with change over the recent years, the community again finds itself poised for a positive upswing. With more new people moving in every year, small subdivisions have been created on the outskirts of town. Although these people will mostly work and shop outside the community, Edgerton will probably keep developing quaint, small-town businesses on the main street to cater to this generation. This generation in turn has a responsibility to understand its present surroundings as a manifestation of its past.

Analysis

Edgerton, Wisconsin may be unique for a town of its size. Its prominent tobacco industry and remnants of that industry are distinguishing features. More than just the historical events of Edgerton’s past are the meaning behind Edgerton’s changes.
proud. Edgerton as a place means much more than the stories or the pictures from its past, it means adaptability. The changes that have occurred are not all negative but rather a necessary part of the development of a small town.

Edgerton is located between Madison and Janesville in South Central Wisconsin.

*This information was obtained through an unpublished scrapbook, “History of the Edgerton Area,” that was put together by Naomi Strasburg. There is no date on the scrapbook, and it is on reserve at the Edgerton Public Library. The scrapbook contains a variety of Edgerton Reporter articles, yet many of them do not include the date of publication or the author’s name.
EDGERTON MAPS

This city map is from the Combination Atlas Map of Rock County, Wisconsin. It was published by Everts, Baskin, and Stewart, of Chicago, IL, in 1873. Notice the railroad running the middle of town, and the streets running parallel and perpendicular to the tracks.

This city map is from the Edgerton Visitor's Guide. It was published by the Edgerton Chamber of Commerce in 2000. The city has continued to expand, but not around the railroad. The city grows closer to the interstate I-90 to the north, and the railroad has lost its importance as the streets now straighten out.


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