

“Our Town”

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This paper is called “Our Town.” In it you will see Miss V....; Mr. W....; Mr. C.....; and many others. The name of the town is Hopkinsville, Kentucky-just across the Tennessee line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 2, 1996. The time is just before sunset.

The old whistle in the R.C. Owen Lumberyard sounds in the background.

Most of you will recognize this paraphrase as the first paragraph in Thornton Wilder’s play, “Our Town”, for which Wilder won the Pulitzer prize for drama in 1938. In either junior high or high school, most of us had the pleasure of reading or perhaps acting in Wilder’s powerful play. For those of us who had Ms. Vaughn in Team Class, remember the Stage Manager speaking in the dark and the gray paper-mache gravestones? Also as likely, most of us soon forgot the play’s theme of how residents of small towns often fail to fully appreciate life. However, the play recently flash-backed to me when an industrial prospect from Boston asked, “Is your son a member of the high school tractor club”? A quick search of the person’s eyes revealed that the question was asked with the sincere belief that Hopkinsville High School did indeed sponsor a tractor club. Although the question was asked in good faith and not meant to be condescending, the impression was given that life was somehow better if one were a member of the Boston High Shakespeare Club. After answering that I was unaware of any high school tractor club, I again asked myself “Just what type of town is Hopkinsville?” That is, how does life in Hopkinsville uniquely shape one’s values and ability to be human, as contrasted with living in, Boston.

I say again, for I first pondered the question twenty-one years ago when my wife and I first drove into Hopkinsville as newlyweds. As we passed a sign that we had unthinkingly passed many times before, we simultaneously looked at each other with a deeper realization of the sign's significance: "Welcome to Hopkinsville, stay a day or a lifetime". At that time, we were free to live anywhere in the world and we realized that we were consciously making the decision to live in Hopkinsville ". . . for a lifetime". To again paraphrase "Our Town", . . . the sun has come up over 7,665 times since 1975, and am I now in a better position to answer the question "Just what type of town is Hopkinsville"? So that I might better respond to similar questions in the future, I have reviewed Hopkinsville from the following perspectives: philosophical, statistical, quality of life, sources of information, how that information is processed, and the measurement of time.

For various reasons, each of us are asked to describe Hopkinsville to out-of-town friends, relatives, and possibly in-laws. Like citizens of any town, we almost always describe "Hoptown" as "the best town on Earth" or as "a great place to raise a family". For pure definition purposes, Hopkinsville is ". . . an aggregation of houses recognized as a compactly settled area and distinguished from the surrounding rural territory". For Hopkinsville, this geographically means south of Crofton, west of Fairview, north of Oak Grove, and east of Herndon. Similarly, Hopkinsville is a community, ". . . consisting of a unified body of individuals with common interests and living within a particular area". Our groundwork understanding of community is important, for each of us have a pre-conceived image of the "ideal community". Depending upon our background, our vision of the "ideal community" may be perceived as the utopian community described in Plato's Republic, Groves Corner, New Hampshire, Mayberry, North Carolina, Peoria,

Illinois, or Hopkinsville in an earlier time. To others, the “ideal town” may be a composite of the many different towns that we have lived in or driven through, as best described by Mary Chapin Carpenter in her song, *I Am A Town*:

I'm a town in Carolina, I'm a detour on a ride,
For a phone call and a soda, I'm a blur from the driver's side,
I'm the last gas for an hour, if you're going 25,
I am Texaco and tobacco, I am dust you leave behind.

I am peaches in September and corn from a roadside stall,
I'm the language of the natives, I'm a cadence and a drawl,
I'm the pines behind the graveyard and the cool beneath their shade,
Where the boys have left their beer cans, I am weeds between the graves.

My porches sag and lean with old black men and children,
My sleep is filled with dreams,
I never can fulfill them,
I am a town.

For reference purposes, each of us have a pre-conceived vision of the daily routine, lifestyle, and work habits that we imagine exists within any community. For someone from Boston, it is apparently reasonable to assume that a town like Hopkinsville would have a local tractor club. However, as Wilder so vividly portrayed, a town is more than a set of coordinates on a map. A town is actually the culture within the community that allows its residents to become human and to fully experience life. To me, the concept of culture has best been described as “. . . its like doing the Virginia reel, its simply learning when to put one foot in and pull one foot out.”. Fully appreciating a community's culture has nothing to do with intelligence or sophistication, it is simply a process of learning what and when to perform a particular action.

Perhaps the next time that someone asks, “What type of town is Hopkinsville?”, a different perspective should be used to answer the question. That is, rather than evaluate Hopkinsville based upon the expectations of others, perhaps Hopkinsville should be evaluated from the perspective of a satisfied resident. Through the use of the Internet, cable television, inter-state-highways, and international flights, perhaps the real question is “Does it really make any difference where one lives”? Based upon the French philosopher Baudrillard’s concept of the Hyperreal, a strong argument can be made that it does not make any difference where one lives. Baudrillard describes life as simply the interpretation of data, real or simulated, processed by the mind and senses. In a society like America in which the free-flow of data exists, the conditions for a utopian community exist in every town. As man can now mechanically reproduce sensations that are more real than unreal, the question becomes “What is real”? As Baudrillard points out, how are the mechanically reproduced sensations produced through Epcot Center, Nintendo games, or vacations on The Travel Channel clearly distinguished? From this perspective, Baudrillard told a French newspaper that he could better report the Gulf War from his living room in France while watching CNN than from the Saudi desert. Although abstract, Baudrillard’s point was that the war was more real on CNN.

In responding to the next inquirer from out-of-town, one can continue that life in Hopkinsville will lead a thinking-person to also ask: How does one define himself, his projects, his place in society, and his place in the world? Basically, how does one make himself and his life special? From this perspective, the German philosopher Heidegger’s concept of “being there” is applicable, in the sense that no matter where one lives, one inherits a culture by default. Whether we live in

Hopkinsville or Boston, life is simply a series of attempts to simplify life so that life means something. Following Heidegger's logic, each person begins with a structure of prejudices and then it is up to each individual to filter those prejudices for meaning. In this sense Sartre is helpful, for regardless of which community one lives in, each individual is free to define himself within his collective environment. In a metaphysical kind of way, perhaps life in Hopkinsville can best be described by the bumper sticker that I recently read, "Wherever you go, there you are". Rephrased, as a person with free-will, each person is free to decide for himself such issues as whether to join or not to join the tractor club. Eventually, although the out-of-town inquirer may appear perplexed upon hearing such a philosophical response, his next question will probably be about the weather.

However, using the method used by most outsiders to evaluate Hopkinsville, statistical analysis, the numbers are encouraging. Information provided by the Economic Development Council indicates that Hopkinsville is the "19th hottest market", one of the 25 "best" cities to own a business, is 19th in "projected income growth over the next decade", and is 18th in "projected income growth" to the year 2015. From a business standpoint, Hopkinsville has had 28 new industries since 1973, the average manufacturing wage is \$11.03, the county's bank assets are \$817,000,000, and there are 4,928 job seekers on file. From a demographics standpoint, the city population is 32,283, the average household contains 2.73 persons, and the median family income is \$26,083. From a geographical standpoint, the average temperature is 59.2 degrees, Hopkinsville is 540 feet above sea level, and the highest point in Christian County is 950 feet. Hopkinsville's diversity is further proven by consistently ranking as one of the top five Kentucky counties for production of corn, soybeans, wheat, tobacco, and barley. Other unique

characteristics about Hopkinsville are that we are near Fort Campbell, the Land Between the Lakes, and have T.V.A. electricity. And, as long-term residents can attest, Hopkinsville is indeed the home of Western State Mental Hospital. Using traditional guidelines, depending upon whether one wants to retire or establish a new business, the decision to reside in Hopkinsville can be made with relative ease.

From a related standpoint, will our ability to be human be affected by the quality of life found in Hopkinsville? As defined by national advertising, 98% of life's basic pleasures can be experienced in Hopkinsville. One can eat Dave Thomas' Cordon Blue hamburger at Wendy's, buy an American-made shirt at Wal-Mart, watch Dennis Rodman on cable T.V., and watch the latest movie at the Cinemax movie theater. Although there are certain disadvantages to living in Hopkinsville, they are certainly not life-threatening. For example, one cannot eat the shrimp special at Red Lobster, buy a Saturn automobile, or drink espresso at a cafe-bookshop.

However, having reviewed Hopkinsville's version of the Virginia reel from a statistical and quality of life standpoint, a further question is whether one's Constitutional rights are alive and well in Hopkinsville? From a freedom of free speech perspective, Hopkinsville's right to free speech is well exercised, having no banned books in our public library. Typical bumper stickers proclaim: "Support the NRA", "I AM 4 UK", "Follow me to Church at Second Baptist", "Support Desert Storm", "Don't Blame Me I Voted for Bush", "My Child is an Honor Student at Indian Hills Elementary", "The World's Greatest Grandmother", and "I believe in the Big-Bang theory--- God said let there be a Big Bang". Also indicative of our local culture is an inordinate amount of rebel license plates. As articulately described in a recent **New Yorker** article about neighboring Todd County, whether

the plates are designed to send a message or simply to “look good” is open to question. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that such views stop at the County line, and why one local bumper sticker read “If I had known it was going to be this much trouble, I would have picked my own cotton”. One’s right to bear arms is also well practiced within the community, as indicated in the ease in purchasing a gun at Young Hardware or in the increasing number of deer and turkey hunters. From a freedom of religion standpoint, Hopkinsville has approximately 117 churches of several denominations. Overall, Hopkinsville’s religious cultural diversity is greater if one differentiates between the First and Second Baptists, the First and St. John Methodists, and the Cumberland and Highland Presbyterian Churches. Again, each provides a different version of the culture that Hopkinsville has to offer. From a long-term resident’s perspective, it is generally agreed that First Methodist offers the town’s best nursery school, First Christian has the best outdoor Nativity scene, and that First Baptist has the best softball team.

A related question is whether the community is “enlightened” concerning its use of information and power. Using the four conditions developed by the French philosopher Habermas, “undistorted communication” must exist if a community is to exist in which the only force a free person must recognize is the “. . . unforced force of the better argument”. Habermas defines “undistorted communication” as satisfying four conditions

1. Does everyone have an equal chance to talk and listen?
2. Does everyone mean what they say?
3. Does everyone disclose what they believe to be true?, and,
4. Does everyone attempt to say what is right morally?

As aptly demonstrated by Tom Westerfield during a recent Leadership Hopkinstville session, there are no ‘powers that be’ or people in ‘smoke filled rooms’ that control the sources of information and power in Hopkinstville. After listing all of the perceived leaders in Hopkinstville on a chalk board (approximately 75), the point was obvious. Hopkinstville’s leadership consists of certain fixed positions, such as Mayor, County Judge, or newspaper editor, but with such individuals not acting in concert or as part of any master-plan. Like most communities, Hopkinstville’s leaders and residents follow the dictums of Adam Smith, that of self-interest. In this respect, Hopkinstville is a “tweener”, a community small enough to know the major players but not so large that they remain faceless and unaccountable. Whether at Roundie’s or over a good game of bunko, any issue of significance, no matter how small, will be discussed in thorough detail. Using Habermas’ conditions, it would appear that Hopkinstville is a town in which everyone is a participant and in which public life is governed by the reasoned consensus of the community. As indicated by our new school buildings, football stadium, and jail, our leadership structure is open to the changing priorities of the community.

A review of Hopkinstville’s sources of information further indicates that Hoptown is open to the “force of the better argument”. Like most communities, Hopkinstville relies upon the local media for its daily update on the world’s events. Despite expanded cable channels and access to the Internet, Hopkinstville’s most popular sources of data are the morning Early Bird Show, the noon farm report, the evening front page of the **Kentucky New Era**, and the 10:00 p.m. sports on TV-43. Familiarity with these sources of information allows one to participate in 99% of the community’s conversations and establishes one as well-versed in community affairs. Traditionally conservative, we prefer to keep it simple and to the point: who died,

what is the weather, what are the farm prices, which stores are having a sale, and which team won? Unique to Hopkinsville, perhaps in no other community in America is the most recognized person a radio personality, Hopkinsville's own Col. Dink Embry. Similarly, for any newcomer to Hopkinsville, only after one has learned to appreciate what Jim Love is and is not saying can the previous night's School Board or City Council meetings be fully understood. Similarly, Hopkinsville's locally owned newspaper and television station provide a local perspective that would disappear if either were owned or controlled out of town.

As indicated above, the exercise of information and power are open in Hopkinsville, but an additional question must be asked: On what level of sophistication is this data processed? National tests would indicate that Hopkinsville processes information at a slower rate than other communities. Impacted by what Dr. Pitzer once described as "the community's unique gene pool", Hopkinsville's A.C.T. scores are somewhat below the national average. The average A.C.T. score is 20.3, which exceeds the state average of 20.1, but is below the national average of 20.7. Nonetheless, 80% of our job applicants have a high school degree, 7% of our high school students take the S.A.T., and an average of 412 high school graduates enter the work force each year. This is relevant, for any child reared in Hopkinsville is more likely to have role models such as Migel Merritt than Ray Burse, Mark Pope than Bill Gates, and Dollie Parton than Sandra Day O'Conner. Although we point with pride concerning the accomplishments of Ted Poston, Ned Breathitt, or Gloria Watkins, the world best knows Hopkinsville as the home of Edgar Cayce, famous psychic. Much like the other 99% of America, the general thought processes in Hopkinsville are bright but not overly sophisticated,. Although several residents have graduated from Harvard or Princeton, given the level of

basketball played within the Ivy League, most local residents remain unimpressed. Nonetheless, it would be unfair for outsiders to immediately stereotype local residents as automatic members of the local tractor club. Viewed over time, a collection of area residents would provide an impressive faculty for any institution of higher learning. The department chairs would be occupied by Robert Penn Warren (English), Jefferson Davis (Military History), Benjamin Bradshaw (Physics), Russ Cansler (Economics), Andy Young (Math), William Turner (History), Brooks Major (Philosophy), and Andy Blane (Humanities).

In any community, it is interesting to determine how residents measure time. Perhaps because there are not as many distractions, life in a small-town affects one's relationship concerning time and space. Although seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years are recognized, time and space assume new relationships. Not only is time thought of differently, such as from the planting seasons of corn to tobacco, but from football to basketball seasons as well. An era in time will be more quickly recognized if described as "during the Rupp era" rather than the era of Alexander the Great. For long-term residents, phrases such as "when Cotton Nash played" will have greater significance than when Sputnik was sent into space. For reference purposes, no matter what happened in 1948, 1949, 1951, 1958, 1978, and 1996, such years will always be remembered as great years to the majority of Hopkinsville residents. In a like vein, 1966 will always be a bad year. Even now, I confuse my son and daughter when I attempt to explain time within the paradigm that Cameron Mills is the son of Terry Mills, former University of Kentucky basketball player. Similarly, small-town time can be confusing when parents tell their children that they also had a particular teacher in high school. And, no doubt, many teachers find it less than amusing to be dated in such a way. As in any culture, locations are

described as to “what used to be”: South Kentucky College versus Belmont School, Latham Hotel versus Kleen-Rite Cleaners, or Skyline Country Club versus Ashley’s. Similarly, people are often described by their lineage or kinship, such as Wynn L. Radford III, great-grandson Ward & Carrie Claggett and Walker and Mamie Garrott, or grandson of Al & Dorris Wettstein or Wynn & Polly Radford, or son of Billy & Carolyn. Momentarily, the Hopkinsville version of the Virginia reel missed a step when Linda and I married, as Linda was from Elizabethtown. Only now am I becoming known as Linda’s husband, or Wynn & Tricia’s father.

Perhaps, when it is all said and done, there are no deeper insights into life whether one is a member of the tractor club in Hopkinsville or the Shakespeare Club in Boston. As noted by the French philosopher Derrida, one cannot unequivocally state that “Being is -----”. However, to the next out-of-town inquirer asking the question “Just what type of town is Hopkinsville?”, I would respond with the following. Objectively speaking, is Hopkinsville “the greatest town on Earth”, maybe so, maybe not. But speaking strictly for myself, I would respond that life in Hopkinsville allows me to experience the past, to live with my prior actions, to show love toward my family, and to approach each day with an optimistic attitude. For example, on any given day I drive past the house on Cox Mill Road where my maternal great-grandparents lived, past the creek on Country Club Lane where I cut down Mike Baker’s young pine trees as an eight-year old, past the Harton Place subdivision developed by my brother-in-law, past the house where little Ken Cayce played football, past my maternal grandparent’s and paternal great-grandparent’s houses on Virginia Street, over the same road traveled by Nathan Bedford Forrest during the Civil War, over the same roads used by the Night-Riders, past an ordinary house that served as the basis for a Robert Penn Warren short-story, and

finally, to begin work across the street from Edgar Cayce's old office. Perhaps such facts are unimportant to anyone else, but they are important to me, and hopefully to my family.

More important, life in Hopkinsville allows me the opportunity to associate with people whom I admire but that the rest of the world is unaware. Such people lead their life in an unassuming manner and who view each day as an opportunity to place their particular values into action. These are the many good people who make "our town" work. These are the individuals that one learns, only at their death, that they graduated number one in their class at Duke, the University of Kentucky law school, or the John Hopkins' medical school. These are the same people that happily prefer to coach the local swim team than to have an N.F.L. skybox or who prefer to participate in the Great Books Club than to have season tickets at the opera. These are the type of individuals that prefer to work at the Rotary auction every night rather than to just give \$100.00. These are the type of people who would rather be a member of the Lake Tandy Fishing and Hunting Club than to snow-ski at Aspen.

In a word, it is individuals such as these that distinguishes "our town" from other communities and what makes people want ". . . to stay a lifetime". To again paraphrase "Our Town":

" . . . Babylon once had 2,000,000 people in it, and all we know about em' is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts. . . Yet every night all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney, same as here.

So --- people a thousand years from now --- this is the way we were in the counties of Western Kentucky at the end of the twentieth century. This is the way we were: in our growing up, in our living, and in our dying’.