Fall 2009

Book Review: *Survival or Gradual Extinction: The Small Town in the Great Plains of Eastern Montana* By Marvin Gloege

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Marvin Gloege has assembled an impressive array of information about demographic trends affecting the small communities of eastern Montana. *Survival or Gradual Extinction* examines the state of 22 communities and poses a question of deep importance both to their residents and to those who believe there is value in preserving America’s small communities and the way of life they afford: will they be able to retain populations of sufficient size to survive? Though the title of the book indicates that Gloege’s primary concern is about the future of these communities, he does a better job of documenting the historical conditions that have shaped them than of providing analysis that might offer hints about their futures, or the futures of towns like them.

The book begins with historical background on the rising and falling populations (and fortunes) of the rural communities of the Great Plains. The author then profiles 22 communities in Eastern Montana, including brief histories and assessments of their current status. Because he selects only towns whose populations have declined, the current state of many seems bleak. As populations shrink, many of the communities face the challenges shared by rural towns across the country: population loss feeds vicious cycles of loss of important infrastructure such as schools and businesses, which in turn fuels subsequent losses of population. These profiles might serve as a useful blueprint for students or researchers interested in studying small communities. The urban planning perspective Gloege brings to this work leads him to acquaint the reader with the key features of infrastructure any student of community life must take into account. He might have done better to select fewer case communities, however, or to profile all 22 but offer more detailed examinations of a small subset; the short profiles make it difficult to provide the depth that would help him answer the question posed by the book’s title.

Though *Survival or Gradual Extinction* asks what can be done to stabilize these and other rural communities, it gives relatively little insight into the answer. In the profiles of communities in which there are some concerted local revitalization efforts, the reader gets scant information about those efforts. For example, Gloege describes some types of “creative entrepreneurship” in two communities, but the reader gets few details about the kinds
of enterprises that would certainly be key to the revival of a small community’s economy. Bainville, Montana’s “modern, clean, attractive and very busy roadside restaurant” which attracts both local and traveling customers is the kind of business that would be worth discussing at some length, but the author simply says that he “does not know the history of the place. Did it replace a comparable business? Has it been built with local financial support?” The answers to such questions are of great importance to readers looking for information about what kinds of entrepreneurial efforts might survive in small communities, and probably could have been answered with telephone calls to the establishment’s owners. It is moments like this when the book misses significant opportunities to illuminate the potential that might still exist in small communities. Lyn C. Macgregor, Department of Sociology, University of Montana.