



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud)

# “We made the choice to stick it out”: Negotiating a stable *home* in the rural, American Rust Belt



Amanda McMillan Lequieu

Departments of Sociology and Community and Environmental Sociology, University of Madison-Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 October 2016

Received in revised form

11 April 2017

Accepted 12 April 2017

Available online 12 June 2017

## 1. Introduction

“The mines kept everything so beautiful.” Jill<sup>1</sup> laughed and shook her head. She leaned towards me, clutching her coffee mug, and traced a little map on the massive green table where we sat. “The engine house was not far from where I lived and I’d go roller skating down there—the floors in there were marble, and the big turbines were just clean, and they had big potted fern plants sitting on pedestals in different places. It’s hard to imagine that a mine could be that way.” She paused and looked at her husband significantly, who nodded grimly, and then continued. “There was a little police building for the policemen who worked for the mine, and then in town we also had our own doctor’s office, and we had a beautiful school. The mine contributed to our school, our public library, and our public showers.” Jill withdrew from her memories and leaned back. “They were nice communities—had just about everything. You didn’t have to leave your community, you had everything right there ... The mines were so good with the people.”

Jill’s voice faltered as we look out the window on this Friday afternoon. Down the hill from the old Courthouse, the main street of Hurley, Wisconsin is quiet. Jill’s vivid memories of the past stand in stark contradiction to her contemporary experience in Iron County. Today, only 1,500 people live in Hurley, and 800 live in Montreal, Wisconsin ([Wisconsin settlement data, 2016](#)). These are the only two incorporated towns in Wisconsin’s Iron County. The county’s population peaked in 1920, at 10,261 residents. By 2010, the county had 5,900 residents, four schools, and two grocery

stores scattered across 758 square miles ([United States Census Bureau, 2015](#)). Fourteen percent live below the poverty rate, 30% are over age 65, 45% are of working age and 12% of those are unemployed ([Smeeding et al., 2014](#)).

Since the closure of its last iron mine, the Montreal Mine, in 1962, Iron County has experienced symptoms of boom–bust cycles familiar to scholars of resource extraction: an accelerated pace of population change, economic depression, and unemployment. The top third of this long and narrow county felt the impact of this closure most immediately. The largest community settlements remain clustered around the eighty-mile iron deposit stretching from Wisconsin’s Lake Namakagon to Michigan’s Lake Gogebic (see map in [Appendix A](#)). The county seat of Hurley straddles this ore deposit and once served as the hub for rail transportation which linked the Gogebic’s regional mines to urban manufacturing districts via Great Lakes shipping. Since mine closure, high-employment industries have failed to thrive in the iron deposit region of the county. Although tourism is steady work for locals of the lake region south of the iron range, Iron Countians based in Hurley, or iron company communities such as Montreal, have pieced together income through part-time tourism gigs, government jobs, social security, self-employment, or teaching. So, in a county whose advertising scheme still emphasizes the chemical abbreviation for iron—“Live Life”—a recent possible revitalization of the industry drew an immediate response.

In 2010, a large company proposed to open a \$1.5 billion, 4-mile strip mine to extract taconite iron in this region (see map in [Appendix B](#)). This proposal was quickly followed by a volatile, regional conflict, centering on the familiar “jobs versus environment” debate. On one side, leaders of nearby Ashland County and the Bad River Ojibwe Tribe voiced concerns about likely water pollution from any new mining, arguing that it was time northern Wisconsin “moved on” from its obsession with this derelict and environmentally damaging industry. A leader in the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa pointed out that although his tribe had a 60 percent unemployment rate, “we would rather have clean water than jobs” ([Wenzel, 2011](#)).

In contrast, most Iron County residents explicitly resented the job-detering activism of their neighbors. According to one of the many newspaper articles published in the wake of this mining proposal, certain Iron County residents were hopeful that a new

E-mail address: [ammcmillan@wisc.edu](mailto:ammcmillan@wisc.edu).

<sup>1</sup> All interviewee names changed.

mine might enable workers to once more earn a “decent living” within the borders of their county (Seely, 2011). Since this would be the first major mine—and largest employer—in the county since 1962, one county organization optimistically predicted that if the new mine proposal passed in the state legislature, the region might well “see the same economic benefits and revitalization of northern Wisconsin jobs and industry as it was in 1885, thanks to new and more advanced mining technologies” (“Mining,” 2015). Incumbent Iron County leadership passed resolutions to lower bureaucratic barriers for new mining industry. And, in 2013, sympathetic Wisconsin state legislators passed a law to relax mining regulations and enable the proposed mine “to create badly needed jobs” in the county with one of the highest unemployment rate in the state (Verburg, 2014).

Beneath the noise of this familiar discourse of jobs versus environment lies a peculiar tension. Although, this company promised to hire 700 employees to operate the mine, most jobs would require technical skill or training exceeding that of working-age Iron Countians. Supporting industries would bring an estimated 1,500 new jobs disappointingly “dispersed across a 12-county region,” according to one report (Wenzel, 2011). And yet, even if those businesses were located in Iron County, few laborers would be prepared to take advantage of new employment opportunities. Only 45 percent of the 5,900 residents are between the ages of 18 and 65. In fact, only 50 percent of the population is currently employed in some form, likely due to the advanced average age of the county (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Quite simply, the actual numbers of potential jobs and possible workers leaves the economy-centered, pro-mine discourse lacking explanatory power.

In this article, I aim to shed light on what it means, materially and symbolically, for the rural post-industrial to be *at home*, with or without jobs. I define home as a center of significance, a source of negotiated stability in the face of change. Home is where material embeddedness, socially constructed identities, and familiar, embodied experiences coalesce in a meaningful manner. To understand community-wide responses to second-generation extraction projects in a place created in the image of a specific industry, we must see enthusiasm for new mining jobs within the broader, historical context of what it means for residents of certain, formerly resource-dependent regions to be at home.

Drawing on both micro and macro-scale analyses of qualitative data, I trace the ebb and flow of what is commonly glossed as resource dependence: natural resource commodification, labor immigration and external capital investment, and subsequent outsourcing of capital and labor in response to global shifts towards more efficient technologies and less costly modes of labor, production, and transportation. This analysis, however, takes a more historical view than many contemporary studies of lived experiences of post-industrial globalization. The Lake Superior mining region was one of the first in the American Midwestern industrial corridor to experience the disentanglement of capital investment in the mid-20th century, as iron distributors and steel manufacturers turned their attention to less expensive, higher quality, foreign ores. Extractive industries suffered an earlier contraction than the more familiar decrease in American manufacturing, declining 42.2 percent in employment opportunities between 1950 and 1980, even as productivity increased by 171 percent (Metzgar, 2002). This dramatic shift in global economics transformed the material and ideological contexts of the resource-dependent, company communities in Iron County, Wisconsin that miners and their families called home.

This article considers the tension inherent in the social construction of a home so reliant on and vulnerable to the mobility of capital. I centered this research on the county's only company town,

Montreal, and its mine, which employed the largest proportion of labor in the iron range region in northern Iron County until its closure in the 1960s. Interview, archival, and ethnographic data point to the way in which the material movement of capital and labor shaped persistent and common narratives of home and stability in a post-industrial, rural community in northern Wisconsin. Across this data, residents past and present share a common language of home as a center of rootedness and a site of constant negotiation. I develop a theory of home in a post-industrial community that relies less on economic explanations and more on the legacies of charismatic, industrial landscapes and social networks. Drawing place attachment, community attachment, and economic mobilities literatures into conversation with the case of Iron County, I define home as a source of negotiated stability drawing from creativity, common social constructions, and shared, embodied experiences.

In fact, such stability at home relies on non-economic narratives, since resource extraction is notoriously unstable. Within this case study, the concept of home has a narrative arc. In a community originally constructed through a resource-extractive, company community past, residents' conceptions of their home were threatened by the closure of those central mining industries. Nonetheless, home is perpetuated today via resilient social networks which are reiterated in familiar, industrial landscapes. In Iron County, narrating what it means to be at home today requires a sensitivity to what home meant in the past and what it might look like in the future. Perhaps, support for a new generation of mining was motivated more by residents' desire for a common and familiar sense of home than by direct employment opportunities. Considering social and physical connections to home through a historical lens sheds light on the ideological negotiation and material creativity that is required for people to remain *at home*. For Iron County, extractive industry was not just economics of the past; it is a way to be at home in a world on the move.

## 2. At home in a world on the move

Although the social construction of landscapes, identities, and economies have been well-theorized (e.g. Greider and Garkovich, 1994; Stedman, 2003), scholars have rarely made the move to probe specific mechanisms that make a place home, over time and in the face of external changes. The challenge in operationalizing a place so multiscalar, conflicted in meaning, and laden with political connotation is indeed daunting. Few other social constructions involve such a confluence of intimate expectations and interpersonal social structures.

Most fundamentally, home is a physical *place*: a particular constellation “of material things that occupy a particular segment of space and have sets of meanings attached to them” (Cresswell, 2008, 135). Such constellations of meanings are established through the presence, activities, and relationships of members. To be at home is, according to Heidegger (1971), a place in which one *dwells*: that in-situ action that renders meaningful and interpretable, broader human experience. Young (1997) gestures towards Bourdieu's habitus in defining home as “attached to a particular locale as an extension and expression of bodily routines” (p. 161). Indeed, the very phrase, to *be at home*, gestures towards the necessity of embodiment, a physical arrival to a place of “familiarity, order, permanency, comfort and place-bound culture” (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 28). This personal, intimate, and physical place derives and embodies meaning from embodied people. The physicality of home serves as a dialectic, orienting one to the very values upon which it was created (Bachelard, 1958).

At the same time, home is a center of significance that makes mobility possible and meaningful, a place “to which one withdraws

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6459995>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6459995>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)