AN ETHNOGRAPHIC LOOK AT RABBIT HASH, KENTUCKY

Callie Clare

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2007

Committee:
Marilyn F. Motz, Advisor
Lucy Long
Montana Miller
ABSTRACT

Marilyn F. Motz, Advisor

The small town of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky has drawn and continues to draw many different types of people, both as visitors and as residents. The town seems to offer nothing in particular, but its popularity has grown nonetheless. Using participant observation, analysis of historical documents, and interviews of Rabbit Hash residents, this project set out to determine what it is about the town that has spoken to so many people over the years. The residents stressed a sense of community and traditional values as being important and expressed a desire to be tied to the history of the area through their chosen lifestyles, which favor simplicity and an antique aesthetic. The town means much the same to visitors; however, rather than sustaining a lifestyle, it serves them as a temporary connection to a past that seems to be slipping further and further away. For both residents and visitors, Rabbit Hash serves as a bridge to an idealized past in America’s history, and the media attention that the town has received for its historic preservation and unique rural character continues to draw people to Rabbit Hash.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee, Lucy Long, Marilyn Motz, and Montana Miller, for all of their help and encouragement throughout this entire process. They provided me with both the tools as well as the guidance to do this. I would also like to thank Bowling Green State University and the Department of Popular Culture for the academic and financial support over the past two years. Thank you Matt Diebler, Michael Lecker, and Jenn Brandt for always being around to answer any of my questions. Thank you, also, to everyone that agreed to be interviewed for this project and to everyone in Rabbit Hash. A special thanks to Dad for his interest and for sharing all of his research with me. And finally, thank you Mom, Dad, Jared, Maggie, Marlo, Chris, and Tommy for all the encouragement and the push I needed to finish.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. FROM CARLTON TO RABBIT HASH</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. A SMALL-TOWN COMMUNITY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. OLD TIMERS DAY</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Wherever I go, I am always the girl from Rabbit Hash, Kentucky. This is not a problem for me at all. I’m actually quite proud of my hometown and enjoy talking about it. Rabbit Hash is a tiny three and a half acre plot of land along the Ohio River, just across from Rising Sun, Indiana and thirty miles downriver from Cincinnati, Ohio. There is one road that passes through Rabbit Hash called Lower River Road, a one-lane road that requires one car to pull over when two cars meet. There is only one stop sign in the actual town but two more if you drive around the loop, which has Rabbit Hash at its center. Going upriver from Rabbit Hash to the end of Lower River Road, you take a left up a large hill. Following that road, you will come to a stop sign and continue straight. At the end of that road, there is another stop sign at which you turn right onto Lower River Road. This loop is approximately ten miles and some of the locals refer to a trip around it as “driving around the Muddy,” Muddy being the brown Ohio River.

Rabbit Hash is in a rural location surrounded by the Ohio River, hills, woods, and farmland. The nearest grocery store, high school, hospital, office, shopping district, or stop light is twenty miles away which somewhat secludes the population. While the actual town population of Rabbit Hash is only three, the two hundred or so living along the loop are often considered the Rabbit Hash locals. However, being part of Rabbit Hash is a choice that one makes. Some individuals in the area choose not to participate in the Rabbit Hash community activities and simply live their quiet existence away from traffic and congestion. Others, however, are quite involved in the community and are visible in Rabbit Hash at any given time. Some of these locals may not even live within the confines of the loop. Today Rabbit Hash is owned by the Rabbit Hash Historical Society and consists of a barn, two residential cabins, the “Ironworks” which now has two craft shops and an apartment, an old blacksmith shop with
antiques, a wood shed, a small museum, and the General Store, the treasure of the town and the
heart and soul of the surrounding community. It is a picturesque tiny American town with the
community to match, but Rabbit Hash and I have a history.

My relationship with Rabbit Hash, Kentucky, has been a tumultuous one with high highs
and low lows. As a child living in a small apartment with my parents, my favorite thing to do
was to go to Rabbit Hash. I would “help” Dad work on the log cabin he was building for our
family high atop a hill overlooking the Ohio River and Rising Sun, Indiana. I would play in the
sand which was meant to be a main ingredient of the chinking between the logs of the cabin he
was rebuilding. Before the walls were completed, we would camp in the house. During the
evening, we would head down to the store and see who was around. I would get to pick out
penny candies to put in my small brown paper bag and then sit on the front porch to eat it all,
chewing the gum until it lost its flavor so I could put another piece in immediately. Mom and
Dad would chat with others while I was more interested in the other kids or the dogs running
around the town. It was a wonderful place to grow up.

Once in middle school, I wanted to go to the mall more and would rather spend time in
the subdivisions where my friends lived than in the old General Store. At that time, Dad wanted
me to participate in a county-wide children’s history project: my sister and I were to write the
history of Rabbit Hash for a local book. Our disinterest in the project led to Dad writing a
history based on his own research of the town. He excluded all of the big words he would use
otherwise and my sister and I were then given credit for “The History of Rabbit Hash” in
*Ancestry: Our Ohio River Heritage.* These credits read, “By Caitlyn Clare and Callie Clare with
assistance from Donald E. Clare, Jr.” I still feel pangs of guilt when I see this particular book on
the shelf at the General Store or my grandparents’ house because I was a fraud and a cheater for
letting Dad do all of the work. He attempts to convince me that I assisted in the project but I only remember providing my own bio.

In high school I wanted to be different and to have some depth. My plan was to transcend all preconceived notions and be the only genuine individual in existence. Living out in the Boondocks or the sticks, both negative nicknames given to the areas far from our school and the surrounding subdivisions, was sickening to someone as enlightened as I was. Plus my friends’ parents didn’t want to drive them all the way to my house. Again, the mall, the subdivisions, and punk rock shows were the only place I could be seen.

In college, I moved away from the town. I only lived forty-five minutes away in the dorms but it was far enough for me. After two years in the dorms, I decided living in a building with girls and hairspray was not for me so I commuted from the log cabin in Rabbit Hash. Many times I didn’t make it home and stayed with friends living in town. The major turning point in my relationship with Rabbit Hash happened the summer that I turned twenty when Terrie Markesbery, who runs the General Store, offered me a job. My shift was the busiest one, 2:30 until 7:00 on Saturday afternoons with some Sunday afternoon and 10:00 to 7:00 Friday shifts. I took her up on the offer and began my job. It was through this job that I fell in love with the town once again. All of the reservations I had and ridicule I received in high school disappeared. I began to feel proud that I had grown up in Rabbit Hash and was happy that there were so many people willing to travel to enjoy the town. I also began to recognize that the community of “locals” was one of the strongest I had ever seen. They were always together, always inclusive, and always having fun. Eventually I found that I would rather stay in Rabbit Hash with the locals after my afternoon shift than to drive to Florence, Newport, or Cincinnati to meet up with friends from school. The Rabbit Hash locals became my circle. The more time I spent in the
town, the more and more I began to notice it. While working at the store, I would sit at the register and write in my journal discussing the bikers coming in, the reactions of the tourists and “city people,” and what the locals were doing or did the night before. I always wanted to write a book about it but never knew what angle to take; how to share the stories of the town without making anything up. Why write a piece of fiction when the truth is so much more entertaining? It also became obvious to me that what happens in Rabbit Hash is special and something worth studying. This is my way of sharing the town with others.

I have some selfish reasons for sharing my version of the Rabbit Hash story. Rabbit Hash is famous in the Cincinnati area for its history, its politics, its attraction for motorcycles, and its role as a venue for some of the hippest Cincinnati bands (all of which will be discussed at length later). It therefore also attracts lots of attention in the form of television, radio, film, print, and word of mouth. My pride gets in the way when someone other than me or one of the other locals is doing the talking about the town and I just don’t trust an outsider to tell the story correctly. Plus, I don’t want any outsider getting to this gem of a topic before I do. However, I have reasons other than these selfish ones. There is something important about this town. Otherwise I wouldn’t have to worry about the outsiders. The attraction so many people have to Rabbit Hash says something important about the town and that is what I want to get to with this project. What exactly is it about Rabbit Hash, Kentucky that attracts so many people? What keeps people coming back and paying any attention at all to the place? Why do people want to be so connected to the town? These are the types of questions that I went into the project with and they are the basis of every observation I made and interview I conducted.

Because of the nature of these questions, it seemed that the most logical way for me to collect information would be to go directly to members of the community and rely on their
observations as well as my own. I therefore employed many ethnographic techniques, using the writings of Clifford Geertz, especially “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” and “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” as a guideline to this type of work. Geertz says that according to textbooks, “doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on” (Thick Description 6). Establishing rapport for this particular project was quite easy for me since I was already a member of the community and had relationships with most of the other members. Therefore I had none of the difficulties that Geertz faced in “Deep Play.” Obtaining informants was also quite simple for me since I did have these relationships. I picked informants that I knew would be interested in the project and could provide some interesting insight. Many were chosen because of their roles in the community, such as my father, Don Clare, who is the town historian and President of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, Bob, the oldest member of the community, and Terrie Markesbery, the operator of the General Store. In the end, most of my informants were lifetime residents of Rabbit Hash, members of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, or the most visible of locals since these individuals represent the most active Rabbit Hash residents. Other members that represent different groups within the community, to be discussed at length in the second chapter, were asked to participate but could not due to busy travel and work schedules. I then conducted interviews with my informants asking them a range of questions directed to the role each one serves in the community. Behind all of these questions were the broader questions listed above. After all of these interviews were conducted, I listened to the recordings: I transcribed what I found to be most useful and outlined the rest for easy access. The rest of Geertz’ definition of ethnographic research was put aside to a certain degree,
since I already knew the local genealogies and I had been taking mental and physical notes on the town for twenty-four years.

When analyzing all of my data, I returned to Geertz’ discussion of how thick description goes beyond transcribing and describing events. Thick description entails finding answers. The importance doesn’t always lie in a wink, but in what the wink means (Thick Description 6-7). I apply this to Rabbit Hash by not only describing the community, the events, and the town, but what all of these actually mean to the community and what is so important about them.

When researching the history of the town, I used Don Clare as my main source. He has a wealth of knowledge and obtained much of this through oral communication with members of the community who have since passed away. He is also quite familiar with all that has been written about the town and directed me to many sources, most of which he has in his possession. Therefore, some of my research was archival: looking at old photos, genealogies, local histories, flood information, ferry bonds, and official Rabbit Hash Historical Society documents. This information was an important base for the rest of my research.

I also used textual analysis in the study of the town when looking at the stories written about the town and how the town is presented on the news specials, television programs, and documentaries made about it. This provides an understanding of what outsiders think of the town and shows how media shapes the town to conform to a particular purpose or ideology.

When it came time to pool all of my research, I was unsure how I should put it all together. It became obvious to me that using previous studies as models would be beneficial to structuring my material. I chose to use John Dorst’s The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma. In this work, Dorst discusses the museums, historical society, and print media that make Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania a postmodern site. This idea is also applicable to
the print media and even the publicity that seems to hunt down Rabbit Hash. Dorst provides a history of the town, looks into town events, productions, souvenirs, and pamphlets. However, unlike Dorst’s study, my focus is on the people that make up the Rabbit Hash community, something he seems to ignore for the most part in his study of Chadds Ford. Because I rely heavily on interviews and observations of community events, my work is more traditional. I feel that this traditional ethnography is more suitable for Rabbit Hash because it is still a thriving community center and the people are the most important aspect of Rabbit Hash; without the community and the important people that have been a part of it, this old town would not have been preserved for today’s and tomorrow’s generations. I, like Dorst, do look at printed materials that the town uses to sell itself, yet I don’t focus on the postmodern elements of the town. My focus remains on the historical and what the town means for both insiders and outsiders.

Another book I chose as a model is Kathy Neustadt’s *Clambake: A History and Celebration of an American Tradition*. In *Clambake*, Neustadt goes into detail about the set-up and break-down of the annual clambake in Allen’s Neck, Massachusetts. The entire book surrounds this annual event, focusing on the history of clambakes and how the members of the community enact and react to this tradition. Neustadt’s detailed account of the event and the meaning of it was very helpful to me when looking at Old Timers Day, the annual event in Rabbit Hash that brings together both the community and outsiders. While Neustadt focuses on an event rather than on the town or the community, I focus more on the community and history of Rabbit Hash and mention Old Timers Day only in the context of the community and how its members interpret the event.
While these two models prove very useful in organizing the material, additional theories assist in the analysis of the events and the town from the perspective of the community members. While I approach the topic of Rabbit Hash with a folkloristic perspective, other theories are also invaluable. One theory from cultural studies that I incorporate is Grant McCracken’s discussion of displaced meaning in his book *Culture and Consumption*. In many ways, Rabbit Hash, the General Store, and the products in the store serve as bridges to an ideal, the golden age of America which includes all of the values of that particular time. Therefore, as McCracken suggests, visitors experience the town as tangible proof of the belief that golden age is something that we can still obtain as long as we are in the right place and consuming the right goods. McCracken’s argument that belief in “a golden past can give credibility to cultural ideals by ‘demonstrating’ that these ideals were once extant” can help explain the appeal of Rabbit Hash. (107).

The look and antiquity of Rabbit Hash also brings people closer to the apparent authenticity of a particular golden age, as Jean Baudrillard discusses in his work, *The System of Objects*. Because Rabbit Hash is an antique, it is closer to the model than it is to the series, in Baudrillard’s terms, thus making it seem more authentic to America and its rich past. This illusion of authenticity accounts for the draw Rabbit Hash has to outsiders and the strong feelings of ownership the locals have for it.

When discussing Rabbit Hash in terms of the community, I find Victor Turner’s idea of communitas to be valuable. In many ways, the community in Rabbit Hash is seen as ideal and the members of the community continue to act as if it is. Turner also becomes useful when discussing liminality. Because of the evolution of the town, there are few jobs in the area. Therefore most people must travel many miles for work every day. The weekends, however, are
a different story and act as a liminal space. In his book *The Anthropology of Performance*, Turner states that liminality “is often the scene and time for the emergence of a society’s deepest values” (102). It is during the weekends that all town functions are held and community bonding is most evident, thus fortifying that connection as the deepest value in the Rabbit Hash community. Foodways provides one approach to this study of community that assists in the demonstration of these strong bonds and values.

The locals in Rabbit Hash are often performers. With the constant pressures from the outside for us to tell our story, members of the community are frequently thrown in front of the camera. When there is no camera around, there are often tourists. Because there is the feeling that people are constantly watching the town, many members of the community admit to “performing” or enacting certain stereotypes to conform to expectations outsiders have. There are many theories of performance that could be used but I chose to use the seminal works by Richard Bauman.

I will argue that the appeal Rabbit Hash has to the members of its community and to outsiders is owed to a feeling of loss that is becoming more and more common in America today. There are ideals of what America is, what America was founded on, and in our current society of the internet and technology, those ideals are lost. Many people live in constructed communities that don’t quite live up to the ideals that people have of community. Because of its antiquity and “old-time” feel, Rabbit Hash provides something that people are looking for in today’s society: to feel connected to a past that no longer exists. My discussion of Rabbit Hash moves from the in-group to the out-group, from the private to the public. The first chapter introduces the town, its history, and how this history shapes the lives of the people living there. This chapter was the most difficult chapter for me to write because it required that I utilize *Ancestry: Our Ohio River*
Heritage, my greatest shame, but also the best comprehensive recorded history of the town. The second chapter focuses on the community of Rabbit Hash and the different groups that make up the community. This community is brought together by many town functions. The biggest town function is Old Timers Day, the focus of the third chapter. This chapter emphasizes community on the private level but also the importance of Rabbit Hash to the rest of Northern Kentucky’s public. The final chapter looks at the media attention Rabbit Hash receives and discusses how the locals react to the constant attention given to them from outsiders and how we are shaped for the public’s consumption.

During the course of my research, my interviewees and I used many terms with contested meanings. These words include history and tradition, concepts central to the first chapter. The second chapter is about the community, another word surrounded with debate. Old Timers Day, the subject of the third chapter, is a festival which also has its fair share of scholarship. Lastly, and most disputed, are authenticity and performance, key concepts in the fourth chapter. While I attempt to quickly summarize the scholarship surrounding these terms within the chapters, my main focus is on how the residents of Rabbit Hash use them to help shape their daily lives and perceptions of the town and its image.

Overall, looking at Rabbit Hash makes it evident that people are longing for a connection to something. Because of its historic appearance and reputation, Rabbit Hash serves as a bridge for Americans, no matter where they live today, to the imagined past and all of the values that we collectively associate with the golden age of America: the small town, the tight community, and the simple life.
CHAPTER I: FROM CARLTON TO RABBIT HASH

The history of Rabbit Hash is an overarching element of the town. However, the sense of history that the members of the Rabbit Hash community have cannot be said to be the actual history. Instead, it is based on stories that have been passed on from the old timers and interpreted by the newer and younger residents. Even though some of the community members are not as concerned with this understood history, they are appreciative of the past as well as the values most commonly associated with “traditional” America. This is evident in the lifestyles of certain community members and how the preservation of the town has shaped its outward appearance.

History, tradition, and heritage are common terms used in reference to Rabbit Hash, Kentucky because it is well-known for having a past and a desire to remain connected to that past through various preservation efforts. While these terms are commonly used by the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, the media, residents, and visitors, they are very loaded and not always examined carefully in the context of the town. The history of Rabbit Hash is based on stories. Of course, through retellings, new interpretations are made and the story is never quite passed on the same way it was received. Ongoing debates in the field of folklore about the terms history and tradition have led to the conclusion that history and tradition are not entities that stand alone but are instead concepts that are based on the past and interpreted by the present, many times for the future. Therefore, when using the term history, I mean the past as it has been interpreted by the current residents of Rabbit Hash. Like the Mormons discussed by Eric Eliason in “Pioneers and Recapitulation in Mormon Popular Historical Expression,” the residents of Rabbit Hash emphasize certain aspects of the town’s past while downplaying others in order to construct this perceived history (192). The traditional values that are emphasized in the town are therefore
social constructions based on the interpretations of the known facts of the town’s past. In order
to understand the Rabbit Hash of today, it is important to look at the past and how it has been
interpreted by the residents.

The town of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky owes Rising Sun, Indiana quite a bit of credit for its early settlement. Rising Sun was founded in 1814 (Clare 36) and eventually became a stopping place for steamboats coming from Cincinnati to deliver goods or take them from the local farmers to sell in the city (Clare 38). For those living across the river in Kentucky, a ferry was implemented in 1813 (Clare 37). It then became necessary for a place in Rabbit Hash to be built to store the goods that were to be loaded onto the ferry to Rising Sun or those goods that were delivered. In 1831, the grange of local farmers in the area built what is today the central part of the Rabbit Hash General Store. The locals would store their crops and goods in the store and then a barter system was implemented. Eventually it became a general store, operated by James A. Wilson, a Virginia native who moved into the area at the age of ten. (Clare 42-43)

Other buildings existed in Rabbit Hash, such as a creamery, a tobacco warehouse, and numerous homes. Most of these buildings were eventually lost to floods. The store is the oldest building standing in Rabbit Hash today. Behind it is a small cabin that was built in the late 1800’s and served as a doctor’s office until the 1930’s. (Clare 60). The Ironworks is another old building in Rabbit Hash that has had many purposes. It is said to have been built between 1910 and 1920 and has served as another general store, a hardware store, a car dealership, a storage facility, an ironworks where wood burning stoves were made, antique stores, craft shops, and an apartment.

Much of this information was obtained through personal communication between my father, Don Clare, and James A. Wilson’s grandson, Robert Hayden Wilson, when my father first
purchased land in Rabbit Hash in the late 1970’s. Oral communication makes up most of what Rabbit Hash has in the way of history. Only within the last thirty years have these actually been recorded. However, other records exist to back up this information, such as ferry bonds and letters that are now in the possession of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society.

One of the most interesting aspects of the town to locals and visitors is its name. The story of how Rabbit Hash got its name is one that locals explain over and over again every time a tourist asks or a news camera comes to town. It has also been included in books such as *Reaching Climax: And Other Towns Along the American Highway* that focus on weird town names, along with other Northern Kentucky towns such as Big Bone Lick, Beaver Lick, and Sugar Tit. Rabbit Hash started out as the Carlton Magisterial district. Don Clare’s research has pointed to a family named Carlton as the namesake of the district. Their home is still standing just on the outskirts of the three and a half acres that makes up Rabbit Hash today. Don explains how the name was changed from Carlton to Rabbit Hash in 1879:

The postal service said, “You guys gotta change your name,” cause it was Carlton and all the mail would wind up down river at Carrolton. Carrolton’s mail would wind up at Carlton. It just ticked off the post office. So they said you guys need to change your name and they said, “Well hell, we’ve been wanting to. This is Rabbit Hash, this ain’t Carlton.” They said, “All right, pick a name.” They said, “Rabbit Hash,” so 1879 is officially Rabbit Hash post office.

According to this account, Rabbit Hash was named by the people living in the town, even before the post office located there was recognized as such. How the name Rabbit Hash was born has been the most interesting part of the story for most individuals and a point of contestation in the past. There are lots of different stories about how the name originated and
they all belong to a subcategory of names recognized by Robert Rennick in his book *From Red Hot to Monkey's Eyebrow* that originate from something that someone has said. In fact, all of the possible Rabbit Hash stories originate from a reference to the food called rabbit hash and occasionally to floods as the reason for the abundance of rabbits. Rennick claims that Rabbit Hash got its name from travelers:

Two travelers met at the Ohio River town of Rising Sun. One was going to cross there into Kentucky and, having learned that the other had just come off the ferry, asked about the accommodations at Meek’s Landing. “They’re all right,” said the other, “if you like rabbit hash. There’s plenty of that at Meek’s table.”

The river had been at high tide for many days, and only the day before the water level had begun to recede. Thousands of rabbits had been driven to the hillsides by high water, and Meek set his men to hunting them down to replenish his pantry.

As the traveler indeed discovered when he crossed the river and boarded at Meek’s tavern, rabbit hash was the order of the day – and of the week, and the month. It was so plentiful, in fact, that after a year Meek’s guests were still being served healthy helpings of rabbit hash – for breakfast, dinner, and supper. It was used for midnight snacks, as appetizers, even as feed for the live-stock, and in picnic baskets for lovers.

Rabbit hash – people got plain sick and tired of it. It seemed it just couldn’t be used up. Travelers were asked to take some with them when they continued on their trips. Many an empty stomach was filled when ample portions of rabbit hash arrived at distant places courtesy of the generous humanitarians at Meek’s
Landing. This Boone County town on the Ohio River is still called *Rabbit Hash*.

(34)

A similar story was recorded in Professor A.M. Yealey’s book, *History of Boone County Kentucky*. In his version, Yealey claims that the travelers were salt traders and cites his sources as “old Kentucky history books, old papers, private diaries of men who explored the river front of Boone County.” (17) According to Don Clare, these accounts cannot be confirmed because there has never been mention of a tavern operating in Rabbit Hash.

The story of the name was also misreported in *Now and Then* (1977), written by four authors from different parts of Kentucky attempting to answer a series of questions starting with biblical issues. Eventually the book turns to more specific Kentucky questions about particular counties, parks, highways, and sites in the state. A section on Boone County, the county which houses Rabbit Hash, discusses Mary Draper Ingles and how it was believed that she spent time in the area during her captivity. Ingles is a well-known heroine in the Northern Kentucky area because Big Bone Lick, just down river from Rabbit Hash, is thought to be the point of her escape from Indians that captured her from her home. By following the Ohio, Kanawha, and New Rivers, she eventually made her way back and her journey has been made famous through many different retellings.

At Carlton the Indians found rabbits plentiful on some small islands and the surrounding undergrowth. The Indians killed many rabbits, and Mrs. Inglis being a good cook made what she called rabbit hash with the rabbit meat. Old timers have said that is the way Rabbit Hash received its name from Mrs. Inglis’ rabbit hash. The party stayed at Rabbit Hash several days in August 1756. (92)
The validity of this account has been seriously questioned because of the dates. This story takes place practically eighty years before the General Store (the first building in the town) was built in 1831 and some twenty years before Daniel Boone (credited with the settlement of Kentucky) even entered the state.

The story that a tourist will most likely hear from a local of Rabbit Hash today is the version that I have been raised to believe as the truth, most likely because my father is the greatest promoter of the tale. This story was recorded and embellished by William H. Nelson, the editor and publisher of a newspaper across the river from Rabbit Hash and a Boone County school teacher who lived in Rabbit Hash after marrying a Carlton. The story originally appeared in the newspaper, *The Lawrenceburgh Register*, but was also included at the end of a story he wrote entitled *The Buried Treasure: A Rabbit Hash Mystery*.

How, you ask, did the name originate? It has been wisely said that in every great emergency a genius will rise competent to guide the helm of State. As with nations, so with municipalities; and our city was not an exception to the rule. The time when this auspicious event occurred was Christmas day. A.D. 1847. As all of your older readers know, this was during the great forty-seven flood. For several days the river had been rising steadily, until now all the houses on the bank were flooded, and the owners were compelled to seek quarters with their more fortunate neighbors. Christmas day fell on the inauspicious season. Instead of the usual rejoicing at its advent, a pall of gloom overspread the community. No roast turkey and mince pies; no eggnog nor rum flip were to be had or expected. Instead of the usual hilarity the masculine portion of the community stood around in sheltered places and watched the great flood
sweeping by in majestic grandeur, bearing on its turbulent breast a great wealth of miscellaneous drift…. Conversation was spiritless, and few words were uttered, save about some scene or incident connected with the watery panorama before them. At length one of the crowd, stimulated by hunger and visions of many past savory Christmas dinners, turned the talk to this interesting theme. Then, in turn, each one joined in by telling what he wished for or hoped to have on his festive board. One said he would have roast goose, caught in the drift the day before; another had a fat hen, caught in a similar manner; another a fat ‘possum, unwarily caught napping and grinning in a hollow log; and so they went on from hog to hominy, until all but one of the party had announced their bill or fare. This one was the jester, although the butt of the company. He stood somewhat apart, shivering violently, not so much from the effects of the cold, however, as from the chronic influence on his system of over-indulgence in any and every kind of alcoholic stimulant that he could buy, beg or borrow. When it was noticed that he had taken no part in the gastronomical conversation someone asked:

“Well, Frank, what are you going to have for your Christmas dinner?”

With a leer and a wink that seemed to intensify his fit of shivering, his teeth chattering like castanets, he answered in just two words, “Rabbit Hash!” (17-20)

With that, it is said the name stuck with “Frank” and then to the town with all of the locals referring to it as that before the post office even recognized it as such.

In the film *Rabbit Hash: The Center of the Universe* (to be discussed at length in the fourth chapter), Don tells this story when asked how Rabbit Hash got its name. Because of the local popularity of the film and the republication of *The Buried Treasure: A Rabbit Hash*
Mystery this is the most widely known and accepted version of the tale. It is interesting to note that this most widely accepted tale among the current locals of Rabbit Hash is the only tale that gives the credit of the naming of the town to the members of the community. The other tales give credit to outside travelers or well-known heroines. The fact that this version is the most widely accepted and embraced speaks to the pride the community has in the town and the desire the current residents have to remain connected to the town’s past.

As demonstrated in the tale above, Rabbit Hash and the Ohio River are not always the best of friends. In 1847, the General Store experienced its first devastating flood. “The Ohio River always comes back to get what it left the time before,” says Don. It’s “an old river saying, it’s an old river belief.” This legend is the source for a song he wrote thirty years ago called “The Flood of 37” where he sings about the river as a “mother and a mistress, a devil and a saint,” and how she keeps waging war on those people living on her banks. The Ohio River is valued for its beauty but it is still a force of nature that cannot always be controlled by man. Every year, during the first two or three months, the water rises when any large accumulation of snow begins to melt up river from Rabbit Hash. Most years, however, the river doesn’t affect much of the town. Most houses in Rabbit Hash are built on the opposite side of the road from the river or are built high enough on a hill to stay safe. The most common flood inconvenience is the water going over parts of the one-lane road (aptly named Lower River Road) running parallel to the river. Many people along Lower River Road plan in advance and get out the rowboats and park their car at a neighbor’s so that they will be able to get in and out of their home. Because of the nature of the river’s flow, when the water recedes, all of the floating debris is left on the Kentucky side of the river, leaving it our responsibility to clean. The years that the water gets really high, it gets into the General Store. The Rabbit Hash General Store is
on the river side of the road and is one of the first buildings to go under, and it has been under water several times. To “fool” the river, as Don called it, the Rabbit Hash community developed a hook system under the store. There are metal rods with hooked ends in the ground and connected to the store. When water gets under the store and starts to float it, the hooks connect and hold on to one another securing the store in its current location thus ensuring that it won’t float away. This hook system has also been used in some of the other buildings in town that could be lost to the rising water otherwise.

The impact of the floods on the town is shown to be significant. A constant reminder of the floods is present in town in the form of flood markers on the ironworks building. At the very bottom of the building is a piece of carved wood hidden behind a barrel-turned-flower pot that reads “1997 64’5”.” Raising your eyes slightly higher than your head, there is another board, “1913 1933 69’6” and then another right above it “1884 71’1”.” Still higher reads “1773 76’.” Finally, if you turn your gaze to the very top of the two-story building, right under the roof and the board carved “Flood Marker” is one carved “1937 79’99”.” These are of course the years of the floods followed by the number of feet at which the river crested as recorded in Cincinnati, Ohio. At Cincinnati, forty feet is considered a warning stage for a flood and flood stage is at fifty-two feet. At about sixty feet is when river water enters the General Store. These markers give a good indication of the severity of the floods.

“Each flood got a little higher, did a little more damage,” Don says. However, the most significant flood was in 1937. According to Don, the water was over the roof of the store and there is still mud in the attic from the flood waters. This particular flood was responsible for taking many of the buildings in the town, including some homes, the creamery, and the tobacco warehouse. The building that we refer to as the blacksmith shop today, but which is actually the
home of antiques for sale, is constructed on the foundation of one of these buildings moved because of the flood. However, this particular building was not actually lost to the river, just moved. “The store down below floated up above in thirty-seven and they built onto it, the Ryle Brothers did,” says Bob, the oldest member of the Rabbit Hash community, having lived there all of his life, since 1928, except for the four years he spent serving the country as a Marine in the Korean War. Today the building is referred to as the Ironworks because of its function in the 1970’s and 1980’s. It is a long, strange-looking building since it consists of two buildings thrown together.

Other than the recollections Bob has of the 1937 flood, there are two other floods that stand out in the town’s memory that have seriously impacted the current Rabbit Hash community. The first of these, in 1964, is not labeled on the Ironworks but crested at 66.2 feet, well below the 1937 flood. Carleen Stephens was a freshman in high school in 1964 and remembers the night the river was coming up and water was getting into the store:

It just so happened that night Cliff Stephens’s brother had passed away and the visitation at the funeral home was that night and everybody in the community went to the funeral home of course, and we come back and the river was coming up and everybody came to the store and moved it out. I left the store at six o’clock in the morning as they brought the cash register out in a boat. And had to go home and get a bath and get ready to go to school, had not been to bed all night. And at that time they had a cooler back here and they had fresh lunch meat in it. We kept the slicer going and made sandwiches for everybody all night long…but everybody in the community was here and there was trucks that come
down from Burlington to load the groceries up. They took it all down to the Methodist church and stored it.

By the 1970’s, Rabbit Hash was circling the drain. People stopped farming and started working farther away from home. They shopped in the bigger surrounding towns of Burlington, Union, and Florence and had no need to visit the General Store. Also, by this time, there was no ferry boat to Rising Sun. What was once a strong bond between the two towns was lost. To reach Rising Sun would take over an hour by car. Rabbit Hash was therefore more isolated and many people had moved on. Louie Scott, born and raised in Rabbit Hash, noticed this and began buying up the buildings of Rabbit Hash. The first building he purchased was the Ryle Brother’s store which is now the Rabbit Hash Ironworks. At the time Louie bought it, it was a feed and hardware store. After Louie purchased the Ryle Brothers Store, he bought other buildings in the town. The owners of the Rabbit Hash General Store approached him to sell their store to him.

Cliff and Lib saw that Louie bought the other building and they approached him and said “we’re tired of this. You want the store?” He said, “Yea, I’ll buy it,” so Louie bought the store. At that time he was living on Ryle Road and building his log house here in Rabbit Hash. So Louie kind of kept the store open and he slept there at night on a roll away bed by the stove so that’s where we would have our meetings. I would always come down and help him plane lumber and mostly hang out and watch the river. (Don)

After Louie purchased the two stores, he purchased the old Doctor’s office which was at that point where an interesting man named Stumpy lived. Don compares Stumpy to an interesting Dickens character: the really old and dirty man that used a hole in the house as his toilet.
After each building was purchased, there was lots of work to be done. They were full of old products and needed maintenance work. Don recounts his days with Louie while cleaning out the buildings.

So Louie got a big dumpster. I came down one night and he was just flinging stuff in the dumpster out of that building. I said, “Louie, you can’t throw that stuff away. That’s historic.” He said, “All right, Clare. You’re in charge of historic and I’m in charge of cleaning this building out,” so he’d throw stuff in and I’d pull it out and put it in my truck and that’s how the Rabbit Hash Historical Society started. I was in charge…. Same thing happened at the General Store.

He started throwing stuff out and I’d take it out of the dumpster and keep it. (Don) Don then took the things he had salvaged from the dumpster and created a small museum, consisting of one display case, in the back room of the General Store. The other items he saved are still lining the top shelves of the store or hanging from the ceiling. There are numerous other items stored in the barn and ironworks or on display in the current Rabbit Hash Historical Society museum.

Once the buildings were cleared out, their uses changed. The Doctor’s office became a residence with different people moving in and out, usually as a transition from outside Rabbit Hash to a permanent residence somewhere near the town. This is also the time that the Ironworks became an actual ironworks where the Rabbit Hash wood burning stoves were made. Don talks of the major trend making or getting the best wood burning stoves in the 1970’s. *Mother Earth News* would feature these stoves. Don states that the winters of 1977 and 1978 were very severe and Louie decided to make stoves to sell the locals at a cheap price so that they could stay warm all winter. However, for insurance purposes, Louie had to go through the
Underwriters Laboratories safety organization, the UL, and it would add $250 to the price of the stove, thus defeating the original purpose. Louie gave the stoves to the locals, sold the rest, and then stopped making any more. Today, the stoves still exist in all of the Rabbit Hash buildings and homes throughout the area including my parents home where it serves as a our major source of heat.

The barn was not one of the original buildings in Rabbit Hash, but was built in the early 1980’s. The barn came from a few miles up the road. It was torn down, moved, and rebuilt near the river in Rabbit Hash. While the barn was used for storage and as a place to manufacture the bank equipment that Louie designed, it was also used for barn dances and other social activities.

The nature of the Rabbit Hash General Store changed at this time too. Don gives credit to the operator of the business at that time, Patty. Patty is an artist and added a hippie element to the store. While people no longer depended on the General Store for groceries, they did depend on it as a place to hang out, so much of the business was in beer and snacks. Rabbit Hash was also a popular lunch spot for men working at the East Bend Power Station which was being built in the early 1980’s. The store sold lots of lunch meat sandwiches. However, the most popular lunch in Rabbit Hash was a six-pack of beer. Patty also began designing the first Rabbit Hash t-shirts which featured Herb, the Rabbit Hash hillbilly. Herb has a long beard and is pictured lounging in tattered clothes, bare feet, and a large hat while holding a rifle on his shoulder. Since he is intended to represent the stereotype of a hillbilly, his jug of homemade corn liquor is nearby. Under Herb are the four main products sold in the Rabbit Hash General Store: Tobacco, Sundries, Potions, Notions. Herb is still featured on souvenirs sold in the store and he even writes guest columns in several Northern Kentucky papers and magazines. Of course Don Clare dictates Herb’s words and is responsible for submitting the articles.
Although there have been some changes in Rabbit Hash since the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, it is this era and this particular generation of Rabbit Hash residents that shaped Rabbit Hash into the community that it is today. These are the individuals that found something special in Rabbit Hash and actively pursued ways to ensure the safety of this historic town. The Rabbit Hash General Store has been designated as a Kentucky Landmark since the 1970’s. However, it was the Boone County Preservation Review Board which Don Clare has had a seat on for decades that put the General Store and other historic homes on The National Register. Don explained to me during our interview that The National Register is kept by the Department of the Interior of the United States Government. In 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act was passed to make a register of America’s historic structures and sites. Because the Preservation Review Board is considered a Certified Local Government, it is eligible for federal money in the forms of grants. One of the most popular uses for this grant money is to fund the research and documentation required to put local buildings on this register. The General Store, along with some of the houses outside of the property of Rabbit Hash, and East Bend Methodist church, owned by the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, were added to the National Register based on research conducted with funds given to the Boone County Preservation Review Board.

After succeeding with that, Don took it upon himself to attempt to get the entire town on the Register as a historic district. This took lots of research, much of which makes up the history of Rabbit Hash published in *Ancestry*. After decades of work and several failed attempts, a hired consultant finally got the proposal through, and Rabbit Hash was finally put on the National Register. Along with the National Register, Rabbit Hash is also a Preserve America Community. Preserve America is an incentive on the part of the First Lady, Laura Bush, to aid in the preservation of historic towns in the United States. Both Preserve America and the National
Register are more for pride than anything else. A benefit of Preserve America is the opportunity for certain grants. The National Register has more circumstantial benefits. Once on the National Register, the buildings are not guaranteed to remain on it indefinitely. Don states that “the idea of a National Register building is the person who built it or was around then, he would come back now and look at the building, he’d recognize it.” Therefore, if something on the building is altered too much, the building will be removed from the register.

Although the National Register cannot save a building from being torn down by private individuals, it does guarantee that no federal funds can be used to impact the building in any negative way. That means the building can’t be torn down to make room for a new road, etc. Before the town was even approved to be a National Register District, it was considered eligible since a proposal had been submitted. A district receives the same rights when eligible as it does when preserved. This was helpful to the community in the 1990’s when the Grand Victoria riverboat casino was put in at Rising Sun, Indiana, directly across the river from Rabbit Hash. Don claims that the original plan for the boat was that it be bright pink with neon lights, accompanied by a lighthouse and an amphitheatre pointing in the direction of Rabbit Hash. Because it is on the river, everything must go through the Army Corps of Engineers, which is federal money, giving Rabbit Hash some say, and an agreement had to be made. Today the Grand Victoria looks like a traditional riverboat and while Rising Sun did get an amphitheatre, the lighthouse was denied because there has never been a lighthouse on the Ohio River.

Around that same time, Louie decided to put the town up for sale. Don Clare was in charge of the sale and making sure the new owner would continue to preserve the town. The fact that an entire town was put up for sale drew lots of attention but failed to conjure any serious bidders. Don and Louie became nervous when the talk of the gambling boat across the river
started so the town was “taken off the market.” Louie had thought about giving the town to the Rabbit Hash Historical Society (RHHS) but it would have “killed him in taxes,” says Don. RHHS of course couldn’t afford to buy the town at that time since it really made no money and still consisted of just Don Clare, Sue Clare, and Louie. One day while at work Don received a phone call from the lawyer of Edna Flower, a Rabbit Hash local. He informed Don that Edna had recently passed and had left something for the RHHS in her will. It was considered a nice gesture but when Don was informed that the amount she left was $250,000, he was shocked. The RHHS invited new board members to join and a deal was made with Louie for the purchase of the town. In the end, everyone was happy with the change of ownership.

Living in a National Register historic district is something that the locals are used to. There is a sense of the history that pulses through the community and there is no denying the old buildings, the lack of running water, and the outdoor toilets. However, when asked about how they enact living in such a historic location, the locals fail to see how they add to the history and ambiance of the town. Most of the homes in the Rabbit Hash area are old homes and antiques are the most common decoration. Old family photos, childhood toys, family heirlooms, antique furniture, and trinkets found in places like old barns are common in many of these homes. Many people, like Duane Doyle and Don Clare, admit to collecting old things. Duane is known in the area for being an extremely helpful community member. He served on the RHHS and is often seen around town mowing grass, taking out the trash, helping to stock coolers, or playing with the children. He is also known to be somewhat of a scavenger, in the nicest sense of the term, in that he is more than willing to tear down any old building that is no longer wanted. He takes it apart and keeps all of the materials and finds some amazing antiques in the process. Like Don did at the conception of the RHHS, Duane keeps all of these old things because they are history.
He also loves the way old rusty tools look and how they constantly remind him of how work was much harder in the past. The house that I grew up in and is my parents’ current residence has many antiques. There are old trunks lining the walls and our entertainment center is an antique icebox. Many of the items in our home that are not old appear to be. My mom finds rustic looking décor to accompany the antiques.

Sometimes this antique aesthetic comes with living in the area. Duane, for example, moved to Rabbit Hash originally because of the proximity to the power plant where he works. He has since grown fond of the history and this has led him to shape his life here in Rabbit Hash. Don, on the other hand, set out with the goal of living in such an area. As a child, he was always interested in steamboats, the river, and pioneers and had the life-long dream of living along the Ohio River in a log cabin. He achieved that goal by tearing down, tagging, and rebuilding the Big Jimmy Ryle house from five miles up the road. Don is not the only member of the community who moved and rebuilt old log cabins in the Rabbit Hash area. Other than the one that he lives in, there are at least eight in the area. One of these cabins is Duane’s. Duane states, “I can’t stand to see something torn down and not reused.” He made a home out of different parts of different homes from throughout the county. Jane Burch Cochran also lives in a log cabin in the area and gives her husband all of the credit for that. He has always been an outdoors person and drawn to history and antiques. Over the years, though, she has grown fonder of the idea of living in the cabin and likes the log cabin aesthetic now.

Terrie Markesbery runs the General Store and also lives in a log cabin. She seemed the most interested of all of my informants when I asked her about the cabin she lives in. She admitted that she and her husband had never really thought of living in a log cabin until they moved to Rabbit Hash. It was “contagious,” she said, something that she caught when she
moved to the area and spent time with other members of the community in their log homes. Throughout the interview, she kept working through possibilities as to why such a trend exists in this particular area. One solution she came up with concerned the landscape. In Texas, where her husband is from, stone houses are common. Kentucky, on the other hand, has trees, so a log cabin maintains a connection to the original landscape of the area. In *The Log Cabin in America*, C. A. Weslager supports this explanation: “The American pioneer family not only adapted to a sylvan environment (and there were about six hundred species of trees native to the United States), but utilized the trees as an integral part of its folkways” (316). Terrie also makes a connection between the rebuilt cabins and the history of the area. She says people are: “trying to reconstruct, not just the log house, but the feeling of old times.” There is a connection to the history, to the old times, because the structures themselves are old.

*The Log Cabin in America* provides an extensive and detailed history of the many types of log cabins in the United States. Weslager states:

Like folk speech or folk songs, the residential log cabin and associated log housing, products of cultural tradition and natural conditions, were created by common people to suit their own needs. Like other forms of folk architecture, log housing was a simple, direct expression of a fundamental human need transmitted orally from one generation to another, or from one man to his neighbor, without written direction or profession counsel. (317)

This is very much the case in Rabbit Hash. It became a trend within the community, with people helping one another out, passed on more through friends than through anything else. The cabin also reflects what most of the locals consider a simple lifestyle. Henry H. Glassie wrote about the current appeal of the log cabin in his article “The Appalachian Log Cabin”: “In this day of
functional design, it may be established as an architectural ideal in that it was molded by tradition and necessity into the perfect dwelling for our pioneers, whose craft and hardiness it reflects” (27). Glassie also observed a connection to a history of the area and a connection to the early settlers of this country that Terrie expressed.

Many members of the community also have professions or hobbies that evince romantic images of the past. In the area are stone carvers, stone masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, and artists who all use traditional methods and styles in their work. The log cabin trend has also made it possible for private builders to specialize in the art of traditional cabin building and rebuilding. Because of the natural environment surrounding Rabbit Hash, there are lots of vegetable gardens and wild game animals, making many members of the community at least partially self-sustaining. Many local men hunt and are knowledgeable about guns. This expertise often leads into an aesthetic discussion since some of them make their own guns, most commonly old black powder rifles.

As mentioned before, not everyone moves to Rabbit Hash with this mentality, these hobbies, or these values. Living in this area shapes the lives of its community members, something that they are more than willing to admit. Bobbi Kayser has lived in Rabbit Hash for five years now. She bought her land before she even knew that the little town was just over the hill from her. However, once she discovered it, she and her children became very interested in the local history and tried to take in as much of it as they could by researching, visiting the store, wandering around the museum, and talking with the old timers in the area. This rich history, she says, “makes you feel like you are really a part of America…you own a piece of America.”

Many people also associate living in the area with a natural and simple lifestyle. “It’s so simple. It’s just so pure and genuine and simple place to live,” Terrie says. Marlo Thomas
associates this simple life with not having to “keep up with the Jones’s.” “I don’t think anybody really cares around here.” Jane Burch Cochran is an internationally renowned quilter living in the Rabbit Hash area. She gives credit to this lifestyle for changing her work:

As an artist, it just changed my work totally…. I had the loft in Cincinnati and I was one that grew up with abstract expressionism, paint slinging you know. And so the artist is supposed to live in a garret and make the world beautiful or crazy by transposing, you know painting on canvases on these large walls…. When you’re out here, it’s quiet. You have a totally different kind of energy. And I think it can be a deeper thing. You learn to be calmer, hopefully. You can go more into yourself, subconsciously really and figure out who you are and what your work is. The other thing, going on that, that I think it has affected me is that I used to do very abstract work and now I do narrative work and I’m not always sure why.

She continues the story by telling of how a quilting colleague of hers once told her it is because she is a storyteller and she finds that the storytelling element, even though she doesn’t paint landscapes, comes from living in a rural setting. I have found that I too work better in Rabbit Hash. It is not until I am back home in the country with the birds chirping and the dogs barking that my best work can be written. I find myself more relaxed, less hurried, and more likely to be proud of the work that I do and the stories that I tell.

There are some theories that can account for this sort of connection to the history of the town. The first of these is in Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects*. Baudrillard dedicates a section of this particular work to antiques. “There are two distinctive features of the mythology of the antique object that need to be pointed out: the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with
authenticity” (80). He states that we cannot recreate the moment the antique was produced and our knowledge that it has been passed along to many individuals makes the antique seem more authentic. This is very much the case with Rabbit Hash. Looking at the old buildings and the antiques within them connects individuals to something that they cannot ever really experience. Yet knowing what the buildings were used for in the past, knowing about the individuals who built the buildings and ran the businesses, creates a sense of authenticity. Baudrillard connects the antique to birth, “being born implying, after all, that one has had a father and a mother” (80). There seems to be a loss of that feeling of a homeland. People continue to hold on to romantic ideals of what America used to be, the good intentions the country was founded upon, and the strong individuals who lived here. However, today, people question our country. Are we really as great as we think we are? By questioning this, we are losing a connection to our homeland. We can regain this relationship with our motherland by connecting to antiques. When looking at Rabbit Hash, more specifically the General Store, there is no denying that it is old. When people wander in there, it takes them back to a time they can never regain, what they see as a true American experience that is rare in other parts of the country. There are tourist attractions like Colonial Williamsburg and historic tours in every American city but these are constructed in such a way that the people on the tour, at least subconsciously, know that they are paying for that connection and that that connection is the point of the tour itself. However, in Rabbit Hash, no one is telling you or forcing you to relate to specific moments in history. It is up to the individual to use the ambiance of the town, the buildings, the antiques, and the community to shape his or her own, more authentic relationship to the past.

Another possible explanation for the effect of Rabbit Hash on people living there and visiting is displaced meaning. In the chapter of his book *Culture to Consumption* entitled “The
Evocative Power of Things,” Grant McCracken uses the term “displaced meaning” to describe the gap between the real and the ideal. Basically, what we have and experience daily is not the ideal. The ideal always seems just out of our reach. According to McCracken, “ideals can be removed to an almost infinite number of locations on the continua of time and place” (106).

Rabbit Hash is an example of how ideals can be removed to another time, more specifically a golden age. This golden age is “a largely fictional moment in which social life is imagined to have conformed perfectly to cultural ideals” and to provide “a safe haven for cherished ideals” (106). This, again, refers back to the ideal small-town American community of the past where everyone knew everyone and was willing to help out neighbors and friends. McCracken argues that “goods serve as bridges” (105) between the real and ideal. Whether its owners are conscious of it or not, the Rabbit Hash General Store contains many goods that serve exactly that purpose. First, and most significant, is the Coca-Cola sign. The focal point of the town is most definitely the front of the General Store. The General Store is a white building and the only pop of color on the store is the large chunk of red under the “Rabbit Hash General Store” sign with white letters that say Coca-Cola in the traditional, easily recognized font. The red makes an arrow that points to a picture of the Coca-Cola boy, Sprite, with his bow tie and bottle cap hat. Before one even enters the store, the tone has been set with this nationally recognized consumer product. I feel that this is the actual current purpose of the sign, rather than an advertisement for Coke, because this style of Coca-Cola advertisement connotes American pastimes and icons such as baseball, movie stars, flappers, and even women’s liberation. This concept and the nostalgia surrounding Coke are explained in Martin Shartar and Norman Shavin’s book, *The Wonderful World of Coca-Cola*. There are many other books about Coke, such as *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola* by Mark Pendergrast, that make similar arguments.
According to Pendegrast, Coke was “advertised as a great national drink, a wholesome, enjoyable product which all classes of Americans could share.” Shartar and Shavin also discuss the character known as Sprite. Sprite was drawn by Haddon Sundblom, the man also responsible for creating the Santa Claus that America gladly accepts. Therefore the artwork also serves a purpose. Since it resembles the style of such an important cultural icon as Santa, those viewing it can associate it with feelings similar to those of a happy Christmas or childhood. This sign is then a bridge that takes the viewer to an ideal time sometime in the past, whether it be Americana, childhood, or Christmas.

Inside the store, there are many items that also serve the purpose of a bridge. One of those is, of course, Coke itself. There are many old Coke bottles around the store that have been there for years. There is also an old Coke cooler that holds small eight-ounce glass bottles of Coke. The shape of the bottle and the feel of the glass take the consumer back in time, again to a golden, innocent age where there was nothing more enjoyable that a Coke. Terrie talked with me about the products she tries to carry in the store. She is constantly looking for unique things and uses the “tobacco, sundries, notions, and potions” slogan on the Rabbit Hash General Store sign as a guideline of what to keep in the store. It is important to her to have products that have been around for a long time like certain natural remedies. My experience working in the store has taught me that older generations expect to find certain salves or products in the store because it was something that stores carried when they were younger. When they do find a particular product, they will purchase it to take them back to that period in their life.

Other than old-fashioned products, local products are also important. People visiting in the area like to leave with something that keeps them connected to the town. Here displaced meaning works over space rather than time. Anything that says “Rabbit Hash, Kentucky” is sure
to sell, along with food, candy, and drinks that are made in Kentucky. I personally buy every new Rabbit Hash product that comes out, especially the t-shirts. I wear them proudly because I want everyone to know that I am that girl from Rabbit Hash.

Rabbit Hash is a town with a rich history that infiltrates the lives of the people living there. The residents know about the past and interpret that past, using that interpretation to shape their lives into what is perceived by them, and visitors to the area, to be in congruence with what is traditional in America. These efforts have been recognized and perpetuate the town’s preservation of its history, ambiance, and integrity. While the town has changed immensely over its 175 years, the efforts put forth in the 1970’s have made Rabbit Hash into what it is today: a way of connecting to values associated with the past in America. One of these values is a sense of community, the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER II: A SMALL-TOWN COMMUNITY

While there is no denying that Rabbit Hash, Kentucky is a small and interesting town, the most interesting aspect is most definitely the people considered "the locals." When I talk of the locals, these are not necessarily the people that live within the three and a half acres of Rabbit Hash. That number is only three. The locals are instead made up of the people who live in the areas surrounding Rabbit Hash. There are no towns within miles in any direction so Rabbit Hash is the center of life for those living in the area. I, for example, am still fortunate enough to be considered a local although I have moved on to another state to pursue my academic career. I keep in regular contact with other residents of Rabbit Hash and return home for most events and many weekends. There are different types of locals in Rabbit Hash and a visit to the tiny town doesn’t guarantee that you will run into all of them. The resident population of Rabbit Hash shares, for the most part, the same rural Caucasian background. However, beside the occasional expression of some prejudices by a few individuals, the locals are also extremely progressive demonstrating equality between men and women and tolerance for different ethnicities and lifestyles. The locals themselves differ from one another in many ways and do form cliques, as with any neighborhood. While the residents range from babies to those in their eighties, from farmers and laborers to CEO’s and inventors, and from those that have lived in the area all their lives to people moving in from Los Angeles and Canada, these categories aren’t necessarily the characteristics that define the different groups. The groups are characterized by the amount of time each has been in Rabbit Hash. Although the groups coexist, there have been tensions between them, making the relations less than ideal. However, these tensions never last long and are left behind. For the most part, the community in Rabbit Hash is the ideal small country town
where everyone knows your name, is willing to help, and works together to promote a sense of community that they haven’t quite had anywhere else.

During my interviews, I asked everyone what they considered to be most valued in Rabbit Hash. An overwhelming number of them responded: “community.” Because this is the term that they used, I must address it head-on despite its many interpretations and lack of clear definition. Burt Feintuch examines community in his article “Longing for Community” where he describes the desire for community as one reason people participate in music and dance. In the article, Feintuch states, “I understand community as more than what happens in one, occasional sphere of interaction. To be in community is to participate in a web of connectedness to others that continues beyond special events” (149). He continues by writing:

We all seem to want community, even if we don’t know quite what it is. If we think of friendship and love as moral ways of connecting two people, perhaps community is what we think of as the moral tie that binds us to others beyond our most personal relationships. In such a case, it’s easy to understand community as something for which people long, and even strive. (157)

Henry Glassie explains that “community is a matter of action” in his book, The Stars of Ballymenone (22). Therefore, community is not necessarily something that already exists in Rabbit Hash, but something that has been constructed by the residents.

There are many reasons why everyone values the community so much and works to maintain it. Living in Rabbit Hash pretty much ensures that you are a half hour away from anything else. There are no schools, Wal-Marts, malls, bars, cafes, or restaurants for miles. What we have is the General Store. “You know everybody, especially if you go in the General Store for any length of time. You’ll eventually see everybody,” says Sue Clare. She even refers
to the General Store as the lifeline of the town. Because everyone seems to remain connected through this old General Store and the three and a half acres surrounding it, the store remains connected to the history of that town. The residents of the Rabbit Hash always refuse to admit to enacting certain values, but this idea of community that everyone seems to have is based in the traditions of small-town America. Whether consciously or just because the Rabbit Hash lifestyle lends itself to this particular type of community, Rabbit Hash, Kentucky represents the close-knit, ideal society that the people in Rabbit Hash swear you can get in no subdivided constructed community.

One of these aspects of community that most of my interviewees at least mentioned is that fact that knowing everyone else in town is part of the charm. This is also addressed by Feintuch (150). You know everyone’s business and, unfortunately, with that comes everyone knowing yours. While gossip and having no secrets is something that is bothersome at times, according to Sue Clare, people will leave you alone. However, they are always helpful and many times you don’t even have to ask. Sue spoke of times when people came to our family’s aid. When my dad, Don, had a heart attack, one of the men from the town brought us a load of firewood since Dad couldn’t get outside to cut it for himself. When my grandmother died, Carleen Stephens brought a tray of food to us as a gift from the East Bend Baptist Church, a church that our family doesn’t even belong to. And every year when there is a major snow, our neighbors plow our driveway for us without even telling us.

Everyone that I interviewed had stories like this to demonstrate the closeness of the community. Leslie Green mentions Chris Fryman helping her out by fixing her truck for her and checking out the electricity in a home that she ended up buying. When Tommy and Marlo Thomas were adding onto their home, many men in the area came to help. During events
designed to emphasize community, the help of the residents is most evident. The Old Timers Day celebration requires many helping hands, as will be explained in detail in the next chapter. Any events held by the Rabbit Hash Historical Society to raise money for their town also require lots of help. Tommy is always willing to cook for the events and Duane Doyle is more than willing to clean up the town by mowing the lawn and organizing tables.

Terrie Markesbery expresses the ultimate form of sharing by allowing the locals to run a tab in the General Store. The tab is something that has been around in the store as long as anyone can remember, and it is something that she has maintained even though she has gotten burned by the system in the past. I believe the only requirement to get a tab is that she knows where you live. The less she knows someone, the lower the limit they are permitted to accumulate. Of course all of the locals have tabs and it works on the honor system. She is sharing her merchandise with you for as long as you need to pay her back. It is a romantic concept but one that works between people who trust one another.

One aspect of Rabbit Hash and its sense of community that most parents seem to appreciate is the feeling of safety they have for their children. Marlo, Leslie, and Bobbi were all single mothers when they moved to the area and while they are all in relationships now, there wasn’t that male support in the past. However, in Rabbit Hash, they found the support and help raising their children. According to Bobbi, it was “a village raising the children.” Bobbi says, “You want to give them more than just a subdivision or a school. You want to give them a sense of real belonging as they’re growing up, especially as a single mom.” This sense of belonging was possible in Rabbit Hash where all of the kids in the area numbered their moms. Their biological mom was always Mom #1 while the other women would be Mom #2 or Mom #3. There was always a mom around to watch what was going on, pass out punishments, and pass
out love. In many ways, the kids in the area seem to have lots of freedom because of this trustworthy community and number of moms. “I know who they’re with or they can walk down the road. If they get picked up I understand that they’re going to be okay because they know who to go with and who not to go with and that’s kinda cool when you’re a parent,” says Marlo. Leslie has a similar sentiment. She likes that she can still have a social life, spending time with her friends, drinking a few beers, and having her kids there in the store with her. Terrie’s daughter is much younger than the other kids in the area so she didn’t grow up with the numbered moms. However, Terrie feels very similar to them. When asked what she finds so special about the town and the community, she responds, “It’s a safe place to raise my kid. A place where other people are helping me raise my kid.” She also feels fortunate that there is always someone around that her daughter knows and who will watch out for her. All of the mothers I interviewed are glad that Rabbit Hash is where they raised their children. My interview with Sue Clare, my mother, ended with her comment, “I have no regrets moving here and raising you and Caitlyn here because I think you’ve both turned out pretty dern good.”

Something about Rabbit Hash seems to attract some interesting types of people. According to Jane Burch Cochran, who has lived in the area for over thirty years and now serves on the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, “We like crazies.” As funny as this statement sounds, it is very true of Rabbit Hash. Jane continues by saying, “I do think that people are pretty accepting of you and they’re also pretty accepting of other people that would not fit in other parts of society. Well, they accept the town drunk so to speak…. And I love individual kind of people which I think you probably do too from living out here.” Bobbi adds to this sentiment. “Everybody down here knows they belong.” Many of the people I interviewed referred to how people who live in Rabbit Hash don’t feel pressures like those living in other areas. Because
Boone County is one of the fastest growing counties in Kentucky, there are subdivisions popping up on many of the old farms. These subdivisions became a point of comparison in many of the interviews. There are no rules for landscaping and behavior in Rabbit Hash, as there are in subdivisions. We have more freedoms. As I mentioned in the last chapter, there is no need to keep up with the Jones’. “I don’t think anybody really cares around here,” says Marlo. Leslie said that she wouldn’t be free to be herself in the suburbs. I’m not sure if it is this freedom that makes for the unique individuals or the unique individuals that make for the freedom. Regardless of which one is the cause, there is no denying the connection between the two phenomena.

The locals in Rabbit Hash seem to be onto the gimmick of these subdivisions. The subdivisions in this area are many times referred to as “planned communities,” implying that once a family moves in, they will immediately be accepted into this community that was put together to fill these identical homes. Tommy says:

It’s not like… a planned community where they come in and bulldoze a farm and build houses and build a clubhouse in the center of it and expect these people to get along well…. Like all these people are supposed to gather around there and consider themselves a community and in all reality, a community like that, those people they don’t know. One guy he probably don’t even know is his neighbor’s last name or he might not even know what he does for a living. He knows nothing about him. Whereas around here you know who’s who and what they do and whether you can trust them or not.

Duane Doyle adds to the subdivision discussion by talking about how these subdivisions are advertised as being in a rural setting. He mentions reading about how a builder was building 147
homes on fifty-one acres but maintaining a green space all around in order to give the subdivision a rural feel. Because these are being built in Kentucky, there is an effort for them to somehow remain connected to the land on which they are built, the land which was destroyed for their development, so they are given names like Farmview and Hempsteade.

Other than the “crazies,” there are many different types of people living in Rabbit Hash making it a very diverse community, something that does not go unnoticed by the locals. “I like the mix of people,” states Duane, “not that you agree with everybody of course, you know, because that’s impossible. It’s just there’s such a wide variety, farmers to millionaires and artists and everything in between.” Here, Duane mentions perhaps the most obvious difference among the residents and that is socioeconomic class. Rabbit Hash attracts some wealthy individuals that build very expensive homes and drive expensive cars. However, these people are considered to be no better than someone working a blue-collar job, living in a trailer, or driving an old rusty pick-up. You often see people from different classes visiting one another’s homes or riding in one another’s cars. While many forms of media today pretend that we live in a classless society and fail to address the differences between them, economic distinctions are obvious in Rabbit Hash. No one really addresses these issues unless provoked, not because we are pretending that there is no difference, but because we fail to see it as an issue. Everyone gets along fine.

Another obvious difference that exists among the members of the community is in age. I am, at twenty-four, one of the youngest members of the visible locals. Some of my best friends are thirty-five-year-old mothers with teenage children. My dancing partner is a sixty-year-old man and I play Euchre some weeks with a seventy-nine-year-old partner, Bob. Leslie seemed the most interested in this aspect of the community, finding it to be something unique to Rabbit
Hash. “I don’t really think there’s many places that you have that many age groups where we can all actually party together and hang out.”

While the community is very close and open, it can be divided into different categories. While they are useful to break down the diverse residents, these categories are also quite fluid. There are individuals that don’t necessarily fall into one category, but may instead fall between two of the categories. The first type of locals consists of those that have lived in Rabbit Hash their entire lives. When Don first started collecting the oral history of the town, these are the people that he went to, the old timers. Don remembers talking with Robert Hayden Wilson (the grandson of James A. Wilson who opened the General Store), who he refers to as “the most colorful” man in town. There are two church buildings in the Rabbit Hash area, less than a half mile apart, the East Bend Baptist church (which still holds three services a week) and the East Bend Methodist Church. The Methodist Church has not held services for at least thirty years, and today the building is maintained by and belongs to the Rabbit Hash Historical Society. Robert Hayden referred to the churches as “the white church,” East Bend Baptist, and “the red church,” East Bend Methodist. He says that in the past, which church you went to on Sunday determined whether you shopped at the Ryle Brothers’ Store or the Rabbit Hash General Store. Mimicking Robert’s voice, Don adds, “Sunday they’d gather outside the church and talk politics. Well then on Saturdays, they’d gather at the store and talk religion.” Don explains that at that time there were no social castes based on class because everyone was a farmer earning close to the same amount of money. Instead, they would create castes based upon political or religious affiliations. While there was no rift between the two groups, it was a way for them to help define themselves in a community where there were no real differences. Now, most of the old timers have passed on and it is getting harder to find people that have lived in the area their whole lives.
Today, Bob is the oldest town resident and has spent all but four of his seventy-nine years in Rabbit Hash. Those four years away were spent in the Marine Corps fighting in the Korean War. Bob also has family in the area. His cousin has also lived in the area his whole life and raised his kids here. Tommy is the son of Bob’s cousin. He has been all over the country working for long periods of time in other areas; however, he always returns to Rabbit Hash. “It’s where I grew up, you know, all I know. I been other places but just always wind up back here.” To him, Rabbit Hash means home. “These are the people that I know and they’re my type of people. To me, it’s a way of life.” Carleen Stephens and her husband have both lived their entire lives in Rabbit Hash. Carleen was born on Lower River Road and then when she got married moved to her husband’s farm, also on Lower River Road. She says she has stayed in Rabbit Hash all her fifty-seven years because of the community and she also serves as a member of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, helping to preserve the town in which she grew up. “I like the sense of community. Everybody knew everybody, everybody helped everybody.” According to Carleen, the Rabbit Hash General Store, along with the two churches, has always been the center of the community. Don states that it has been the “pulse of this civic area all its life. No matter what generation, you hung out at the store. It’s where people socialized or talked.” Henry Glassie speaks to this idea of place as key to “constructing community” in his work on Ballymenone. According to Glassie, gathering at the hearth, or ceili, is “central, essential” to the residents and is a time for connection. (Ballymenone 25) The General Store is the ceili for those living in Rabbit Hash.

The store is definitely the center for a second type of local. Today, this group sometimes considers themselves the old timers since they are some of the oldest people living in the area. However, they are people who weren’t born and raised in Rabbit Hash but moved into the area in
the 1970’s. This, of course, started with Louie Scott buying up the buildings in Rabbit Hash.

My father, Don, was a musician, and one of the roadies for his band moved to Ryle Road, about ten miles from Rabbit Hash. My parents then began going there to “party.” It was on Ryle Road that my parents met Jane Cochran, her husband, and Louie. When Louie bought the property in Rabbit Hash and was sleeping in the General Store, many of the men would collect there on Friday nights and drink whiskey while discussing possible plans for the town. These were also referred to as “Historical Society Meetings.” Of course then everyone wanted to move to Rabbit Hash. Don went door to door looking for land to buy so that he could live along the Ohio River. Eventually he met Beulah Riggs, an old woman with a large farm. While she said she wasn’t going to sell, she allowed Don to camp on her land. Eventually they became friends and when she decided to sell, Don and a friend purchased the farm together, each getting about 35 acres.

Sue Clare associates this movement with a post-hippie era. She says that in college these individuals were the hippies and after college they were looking for something different, a way to live off of the earth and be self-sufficient. Today this generation has been in Rabbit Hash the longest, some nearly forty years. They mixed well with the old timers when they moved here and worked to keep the town going. They also used to be the locals that were seen at the General Store daily working or just hanging out. However, today they mostly keep to themselves and stay at home having passed the torch and turf to the next generation of locals.

The last category of local consists of those that have moved into the area fairly recently. There are many reasons for people moving to Rabbit Hash. For older residents, it is usually a place for them to spend their retirement. For some of the younger people, it is the closeness of the community that draws them to the area. Many of them, like Leslie Green, who has lived in the area for about six years now, spent time in Rabbit Hash before ever thinking of moving to the
area. Making friends, finding relationships, and wanting a safe place for their children to grow up are all reasons that bring this group to the area. Marlo Thomas has been living in the area for about four years now. Initially she was a tourist who had ridden to Rabbit Hash on a motorcycle with a friend. She met interesting people in the area and came down frequently. Eventually her children made friends and she started dating Tommy. They bought a home together four years ago and she has been living in Rabbit Hash ever since.

With all of these categories, there is no doubt that the community is quite diverse. This is something that all of my interviewees attempted to express. Jane referred to it as a microcosm of the world. There is a wide range of socioeconomic classes that intermingle on a regular basis, as well as many age groups. This is most evident in one more category of local that I did not include in the original three categories I discussed because it is made up of members of each of the other three. This is the group that I have come to refer to as the “visible locals.” These are the people that any visitor to the town is likely to see in the General Store, sitting on the porch, or wandering around outside. This is also the segment of the Rabbit Hash population that is the closest to one another. They see each other almost every day and even seem to travel in packs. There is a core to this group of locals and many satellite people who may not be around every weekend or for all community events. While there is no denying that alcohol plays a part in the activities of this particular group, I must say that not everyone participates. Others that do participate do not do so in excess. Alcohol is somewhat of a tradition in the town and has been a part of most social events as accounted by the old timers’ stories. Perhaps it isn’t so much a Rabbit Hash tradition as it is a rural, small-town tradition.

Growing up in Rabbit Hash doesn’t necessarily ensure that you are one of these locals. Certain things are expected of you. You must attend all major Rabbit Hash events and be seen
around town most weekends. However, living in Rabbit Hash doesn’t even seem to be a requirement. There are many individuals who don’t live in the Rabbit Hash area but are in town more than some of the people living in the area. Not only do they spend lots of time in the town, they add to the sense of community by helping out other members and actively working to preserve the town. The visible locals are not the only ones that help around Rabbit Hash. Everyone participates in events and the betterment of the town in different ways. Other groups may not visibly participate by taking out trash and helping to set up for events, but they may donate money or dedicate their efforts to help in official Rabbit Hash Historical Society business.

This segment of the population is most visible on the weekends. “When I come here on a Friday, I’m not leaving until Monday morning,” says Marlo. This is the general consensus among the Rabbit Hash locals on the weekends. The nature of the weekend activities differs depending on the season. During the winter, tourists are scarce. From Friday evening to Sunday evening the town belongs to the locals. After finishing up work for the week and any number of various chores, it is expected that you head to the General Store. Although the sign says that the store closes at seven, rules are bent. The locals gather in the store around the wood stove discussing the events of the week. There is always a group on the front porch multi-tasking as both smokers and sentries. Surveys are taken - who drives by and doesn’t stop, how many unrecognized vehicles pass, where could so-and-so be going. As mentioned before, in a small town your business is everyone’s business, not because we are nosy but because we know. There is one requirement if you expect the store to stay open for you and that is to support the local economy, most widely expressed by the purchase of a twelve-pack or series of twenty-two ounce beers. The assortment of beers to choose from is as wide as the assortment of people but it seems the more time we spend together, the more our tastes merge into the default Bud-Light.
Most locals skip dinner with families or co-workers in order to arrive at the General Store as early as possible on Friday evenings. Of course they are hungry but the desire not to miss a second of the festivities overrides any other sensation. You can always get some sort of snack at the store. Tim is known for bringing a dish on Friday. He is a self-employed small engine mechanic and gardener. Business is slower in the winter months once he gets everyone’s chainsaws running so he dedicates his Friday afternoons to cooking. He is also one of the first to arrive at the store but waits to bring the food out until everyone else arrives. He wants everyone to have a fair shot at eating it plus it is always a good idea to feel out the situation with whoever is in charge of running the store that particular evening. If they have somewhere to go, the store closes at seven and the locals must decide where to go next. In this case, the food will be saved until arriving at the residence of whoever offers up their house first. No one wants to drive too far from home. It is a long drive to anywhere and dangerous in the winter. There are patches of ice, deer running from their wooded homes that the hunters have discovered, and cops. No one wants to drink and drive but many want to drink.

Saturdays very much resemble Fridays but people arrive at the store much earlier or are in and out all day. Having worked in the store, I began to recognize patterns. Tommy is a good representative example. He will come in shortly after opening and buy a Mountain Dew or V8 juice on his way to perform some task, whether putting a roof on someone’s barn or hauling any number of things. Around one or so, he will come back for a snack to accompany lunch and another soda. Then around three or four, he comes in, takes his coveralls off and buys a twenty-two-ounce beer. He has most likely settled for the evening. After four, the only people you will see in Rabbit Hash are the locals. The visitors from Cincinnati want to get home before it gets too dark, or they have other events to attend. The rest of the crowd slowly files in after various
tasks have been completed or hangovers have been properly nursed to repeat Friday’s discussions and activities.

On Sundays, the day of rest, all responsibilities are cast aside. You may have something you wish to complete but you are not permitted to do so on a Sunday as voted by the locals, Marlo being the most vocal about it. She has instituted Bloody Mary Sundays, which begin at noon at her home. This continues until three when the crowd heads the two miles to the General Store. At three o’clock on the otherwise boring winter Sunday afternoons begins the highlight of the weekend: Swingin’ Sundays! Various bands from the Cincinnati area are invited down with the promise of a check and free beer to perform. There is bluegrass, rockabilly, blues, Cajun, and any possible combination or derivative of those genres, which will be discussed at length in a later chapter. Some Sundays, though, the party doesn’t leave Marlo’s house. Marlo and Tommy are football and NASCAR fans and will host parties depending on how well the Cincinnati Bengals are doing or how big the car race is.

The summers in Rabbit Hash are slightly different. The weekends are still packed full of activities but people are more likely to see one another throughout the week. On the warm summer evenings after work, most of the locals will pass through Rabbit Hash for at least one beer and to see who else is around. Some nights there is no one around other than the store operator, but on other nights, the whole town might be around. Since it stays light until nearly 10:00 pm, the locals lose track of time and stay sitting around the picnic tables a little longer than intended.

In many ways, the weekends in the summer are similar to the weekends in the winter. Once you are in Rabbit Hash, you don’t really intend to leave. Town fills up on Friday evenings with most people sitting outside rather than in. It isn’t necessary for the store to stay open late,
although it often does, because everyone is outside. Eventually there will be a mass exodus of
the town to someone’s house, all depending on the week. One Friday night a month, there is a
barn dance. The bands that play the barn dances are often the same bands that play the Sunday
music. The music starts at 7:00 pm and it goes until 10:00. Inside the barn there is always food
and Terrie moves much of her beer and soft drink stock to the barn to sell during the dance.
When the barn doors close, there is sometimes a fire on the river bank, but again, often the party
continues at someone’s home where they host a fire. Saturdays and Sundays are very crowded
with motorcycles and tourists during the summer, and the locals tend to avoid sitting in town as
much as possible. Some days the picnic tables or one of the yards in Rabbit Hash is the
 gathering point, but most often the locals collect at someone’s home. There are many ways that
the locals keep themselves amused. One weekend, at Leslie Green’s house, hillbilly bowling
was created. What started out as lawnmower races between some of the kids in the area turned
into a weekend-long party. There are many different versions of hillbilly bowling. The one that
I remember started with a BB gun. All of the locals were in Leslie’s backyard around the fire pit
and Tommy walked up with a BB gun and started shooting empty beer bottles. Eventually the
gun was taken away and empty beer bottles were being thrown at other empty beer bottles. A
garbage can was set up away from the house with a board across it with three empty beer bottles
sitting on it. Everyone stood at one end and took turns throwing bottles at it. As the game went
on into the next day, different rules were made and a point system was devised. While it is one
of the fondest memories the Rabbit Hash locals have, it is one of the events that can never be
recreated. Marlo sums the weekend up perfectly: “What is not to love about this community?
Drinking, hillbilly bowling, kids dragging each other around on lawnmowers. See you can’t get
that in the suburbs.”
Although everyone has a wonderful time during these activities, where everyone wants to be during the summer weekends is on the river. The Fancy Free is an old houseboat owned by one of the Rabbit Hash locals. While this boat is nothing amazing to look at, according to Marlo, “Once you’re on it and you’re in you’re like ‘I am one of the coolest people in the entire world because I am on this boat.’” The boat ride is a rite of passage among this group. It seems that you aren’t really in until you have been “shanghaied” on the boat for a weekend. Although this boat is something that takes the residents away from Rabbit Hash, it is still known among the boating community on that section of the Ohio River as being from Rabbit Hash.

These weekends in Rabbit Hash exist as a liminal space for the Rabbit Hash locals. Liminality is an in-between stage during the transition from one stage to another evident in rites of passage every individual goes through. Lucy Jayne Kamau discusses liminality in reference to communal societies in her article “Liminality, Communitas, Charisma, and Community.” “In liminal contexts, the constraints of ordinary lives have been removed. The individual no longer need wear a mask. Having been liberated from the constrictions of normal society, a person can be free to express his or her personal interests, preferences, and abilities” (19). She goes on to explain that communal societies are intentional, with the people intentionally living outside of the normal society. This “level[s] and strip[s] of their old identities and they are joined together in commonality” (19). These communities are described as being located in rural areas and the members are “united in their common circumstances” (21). Although Rabbit Hash is still very much a part of ‘normal society,’ it is somewhat outside of it. Everything considered ‘normal’ is at least twenty miles away. Still, Rabbit Hash is not an intentional community as described by Karnau in that it is not a communal society. I will take the idea of liminality one step further and say that Rabbit Hash is perhaps in a perpetual liminal stage between normal society and
communal society. The unique weekends experienced by the locals are just that: weekends. This does not happen every day of the week. During the week, the locals must experience and deal with the normal society including commutes, jobs, and responsibilities. Normal life does not involve fun, food, and drink all of the time. There are more concerns during the week. This is when the locals are individuals experiencing their “extreme individualism” living for themselves and doing what they must do. In comparison, the weekends mean that the locals do not have to leave home. They can remain in their homes or the General Store for the duration of the weekend. The weekends exhibit “extreme collectivism” where everything is done with other members of the community. It is a time for socializing and forgetting your responsibilities and your outside, ‘normal’ persona. You can be exactly who you are with no concern for rules of propriety enforced by the normal society. However, the weekends always end. This creates a constant state of liminality. The drive home on Friday afternoons is the transition from individual in normal society to part of a ‘we’ in the liminal society. The winding down on Sunday evenings marks a transition from the social member of ‘we’ back into the individual with responsibilities in the ‘real world’ outside of Rabbit Hash. There is always a constant back and forth between the two worlds making it impossible to be fully part of just one. There is never a complete transition from individual to ‘we’ or from ‘we’ to individual. Regarding liminality Turner writes, “It is often the scene and time for the emergence of a society’s deepest values” (102). It is obvious that Rabbit Hash exhibits deep values. The sharing and tight community exhibited by the locals is what an ideal of small-town America is all about. During the liminality of the weekend the community emerges as the most important aspect of the locals’ lives, representing one of the deepest values of Rabbit Hash and, in the common conception, of American values.
Thus far, I have made it appear that Rabbit Hash is an ideal community. That, however, is not always the case. With diversity, there is sure to be some adversity. This came to a head in 2003 after the Rabbit Hash Historical Society took over the town. When Louie owned the town, any complaints about how the town was being run went in one ear and out the other. He didn’t bother himself with those matters. When the RHHS took over ownership though, some residents assumed they were a city council. Sue Clare, member of the RHHS, says, “For some reason people think we can make rules or laws.” The main goal of the RHHS is to preserve the historic integrity of the town. Because they are now the owners of the town, they are also responsible for town maintenance and collecting rent. And while all major decisions regarding the town are in the hands of the RHHS, they are not required to hear the input of the locals. For many years now, the town has been overrun with motorcycles on nice weekends in the summer. Although these bikers are good for the General Store’s business, every local will tell you that they are somewhat of a nuisance. First of all, the motorcycles are noisy, which ruins the quiet that initially drew many locals to the Rabbit Hash area. Secondly, there are so many of them that parking in town is nearly impossible. This is hard to swallow for those who are used to pulling their car directly in front of the store and running in to pick up a few groceries. And lastly, many residents question the respect that many of the bikers have for the town. They often park their motorcycles in the street, making it nearly impossible for a car to get through, they walk in the middle of the street looking at one another’s bikes, and there is always garbage left behind. This, of course, does not apply to everyone who rides a motorcycle into Rabbit Hash. When I worked in the Rabbit Hash General Store, I had a wonderful time meeting the bikers and found that while they appreciated Rabbit Hash for different reasons than the members of the Rabbit Hash
community, they appreciated the town nonetheless and wished no harm upon it. Other locals did not see it that way. They wanted the motorcycles gone.

The greatest proponents of banning motorcycles were those who had moved to Rabbit Hash thinking it to be a wonderful place to spend retirement and who did not associate with the visible locals. Many of these people had spent their entire lives in the city or the suburbs and were used to city councils that managed their community for them. In Rabbit Hash, this is not the case. They proposed many changes to the RHHS to get rid of the motorcycles, going so far as to suggest the General Store be closed down. The stance of the RHHS was that people coming to town on motorcycles are tourists and, while they do cause traffic and noise issues, there is nothing anyone can do to prevent them from coming to our town. This response was not accepted and unfortunately for my father, Don Clare, President of the RHHS, he received much of the blow. Every day there were several letters in the mailbox saying the same thing that they had said before. There were messages on our answering machines demanding attention. Finally a meeting was called for the Rabbit Hash locals and some of the motorcyclists. In the end, it seemed to accomplish nothing but it left my dad in the hospital: he suffered a heart attack, having taken all of the complaints as personal insults.

Things quieted down after the heart attack and when biker season ended, but they still have not been resolved. While people are still irritated with the bikers, more of the pressure has been put on the visible locals, with attempts to stop the music, community activities, and hanging out in Rabbit Hash. The attempts to stop these activities have been manifested in calls to the police and resulted in officers sitting in town all weekend making sure that no one does anything in excess. There have also been calls to the health department warning them of community potlucks. Luckily none of the potlucks have been shut down by the health department to date, but
it was implied that they will continue watching. There is bitterness from both ends with offensive nicknames such as Porch Monkey (a racial slur modified to describe the visible locals hanging out on the front porch of the General Store) and URB (which stands for Up River Bitch but also plays on “urban” since many of these individuals are from an urban setting). Tommy sums it up:

They’re transplanted Rabbit Hash citizens and they think that they’ve got some clout and some pull around here and you know they’d like to see things done their way but their way, in my opinion, is not the way things have always been around here…. They want it to be like a picture post card place where the good ole boy can’t come down here and sit and hang out. They want it to look like a Norman Rockwell picture so that when, on occasion, they do have a friend come in from town and visit they can come down here and buy them an ice-cream and a candy bar and say, “Look we live in this little quaint town that don’t change by time and nothing ever happens here. It’s so quiet and peaceful here.”

While Tommy’s statement is one-sided, it does express the interests of both groups. The visible locals are just doing what they feel has been done in Rabbit Hash since 1831. The “transplants” on the other hand have a different idea of preservation, one that is more concerned with preserving the parts of America that Cracker Barrel and Main Street, USA speak to. They want a more romanticized version of the past and the simple life. The visible locals want the America that stresses the importance of community and allows for them to get away with things that are prohibited in the city or suburbs.

These conflicting ideals of what Rabbit Hash should be will be probably never be resolved but there was an effort on the part of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society in 2004 after
the motorcycle debates to bring the entire community together for a potluck meal. The roads around Rabbit Hash make an awkward circle so I went out with my mother, Sue Clare, one evening and drove her while she placed invitations in the mailboxes of all of the homes in that circle. We drove out of our way to make sure we hit the mailboxes of a few residents always present and helpful around town but who live just outside this circle. The potluck was held in the barn on a Friday evening. Drinks were sold and everyone brought a covered dish or two. All categories of locals were present, which really put the diversity in perspective. However, everyone ate civilly, mingled, and played cards. There was peace among everyone that evening, and in my interviews, many people expressed a desire for another one of these community events to take place.

This potluck reminded many of the older residents of the early Old Timers Days, the topic of the next chapter. Potlucks have always been an important feature in the community and demonstrate the importance of food when bringing a group of people together. According to Joseph R. Gusfield, in his article “The Social Meaning of Meals: Hierarchy and Equality in the American Pot-Luck,” the significance of a potluck dinner is best explained in reference to its differences from formal meals. The potluck is not the focal point of the evening. The food is put back stage to the socializing and, in the case of Rabbit Hash’s Swingin’ Sundays and the barndances, the music. Potlucks also allow for a larger party. With everyone bringing ‘something to the table,’ it is easier to feed everyone than if just one or two people were preparing the food. Where formal meals imply a hierarchy of host and guest, a potluck does away with those as both labels and ideas. The “heighten[ed] informality” of the potluck creates a “sense of closeness” (302) thus furthering the equalizing effects of the event. Gusfield concludes that potlucks enhance communality. “Both the communality of the meal and the lack of clear
structure for the evening throw people back upon each other, emphasizing their common levels and their mutual interests and appetites in food” (303). This effect is demonstrated at the Rabbit Hash potlucks because there is no structure or set rules as to when to eat and how much you can eat. Instead, the focus is on the people there and how they are equal. Participating in an event in Rabbit Hash demonstrates that the person has some interest in music, food, history, community, or just a unique experience. This makes for a very interesting and accepting dynamic between the individuals which may not be the case outside of the experience. Because the potluck “ceases to be the product of host and hostess and is taken over by the guests of their product” (304), Gusfield argues that it exhibits communitas.

Much of what happens within the Rabbit Hash community can be discussed in terms of communitas. The weekends in Rabbit Hash have become a ritual for the visible locals. Every weekend is the same with few variations yet the same pleasures. The weekends fulfill the social function that rituals serve. This social aspect can be understood with the concept of communitas. Victor Turner defines communitas as “the implicit law of wholeness arising out of relations between totalities” (84). Those totalities are “extreme individualism” and “extreme collectivism” (84). This provides for equality among members of a group. However, communitas is somewhat idealistic and is “never quite…realized” (84), an idealized community where everyone is treated as equal. Turner relates this back to Buber’s idea of the “I-Thou and ‘essential We’” (84). In other words, how I, as one person in the community, relate to the others of the community and make from it a ‘we.’ That ‘we’ separates us as something different from outsiders but equal among ourselves. Rabbit Hash may come across as idealized yet the locals have managed to make it into a place where the members of the community are not only treated as, but are, equals. Like any society, there are those with more than others. These inequalities
are expressed by the jobs people are doing and even the cars they drive. Although it is known that there are certain stratifications among the group members, that knowledge does not hinder the socializing or sense of equality within the group.

The residents of Rabbit Hash work to construct and maintain a strong sense of community, which they perceive as a central feature of a traditional rural American small-town way of life they want to preserve or recreate in Rabbit Hash.
CHAPTER III: OLD TIMERS DAY

Rabbit Hash, Kentucky has experienced a growth in popularity over the years. What was once an old town that Sunday drivers found by accident is now a thriving tourist destination with a strong sense of community. This popularity has taken Rabbit Hash from the realm of the private, the small and intimate community, and opened it to the public. Though visible on the weekends, this transition is most evident on the Saturday before Labor Day each year at the annual Old Timers Day celebration. Old Timers Day is the closest thing to a ritual or festival in Rabbit Hash. According to Jack Santino, “festivals are periods of communal celebration” (xviii). This was the initial purpose of Old Timers Day. Today, however, Old Timers Day fits more into Rory Turner and Phillips H. McArthur’s definition of a public display event. In The Emergence of Folklore and Everyday Life, they state: “Public display events are characteristically active in terms of participation, and tend toward the use of multiple genres and activities” (185). These “genres and activities” include categories such as “Drama and Contest,” “Food and Drink,” “Dance and Music,” and “Crafts and Arts” (85), all of which are present at Old Timers Day. Discrepancies arise when looking at how different people view today’s Old Timers Day. In “Apple Butter in Northwest Ohio: Food Festivals and the Construction of Local Meaning,” Lucy Long writes:

As with any celebratory event, the festival’s meanings and functions differ according to different participants. Aside from personality and personal taste, participants’ responses to the festival are connected to their relationship to the festival – as organizers or volunteers, as town residents, or as “day-trippers.” (60) Therefore, what exactly is being celebrated (history, community, food, summer, etc.) is not the same to everyone. In response to these differences, some organizations like Grand Rapid’s
Historical Society (Long 62-63) and the Rabbit Hash Historical Society attempt to incorporate new elements and reminders of what the festival was meant to originally celebrate. In the case of Rabbit Hash, Old Timers Day is meant to celebrate the town’s past, community and continued preservation.

Old Timers Day began in 1980 as a way to bring the community together. In many ways, it was the model for the potluck given by the Rabbit Hash Historical Society discussed in the previous chapter. According to Don Clare, Louie Scott started Old Timers Day because “he still had that sense of community.” Don continues:

He started this thing that he called Old Timers Day where he’d invite everybody down town. He’d pay for meat. We’d cook the meat and everybody’d bring a covered dish. It was like a big social of people who lived here, people who used to live here.

It was these first few Old Timers Days that the older generations of the Rabbit Hash community today liked the best because of how they emphasized community.

Old Timers Day was originally held over Fourth of July weekend. According to Sue Clare, Louie “kept saying he wanted all the old timers to get together and tell stories about growing up in Rabbit Hash.” He invited everyone living in Rabbit Hash and others that had grown up in the area but had since moved away. The party was held primarily across from the General Store in front of the little blacksmith shop. “Everybody would sit around and talk all day long and tell stories and take pictures,” says Sue. “The store would be open and the beer would be flowing,” she adds. The interviewees who were around for those first Old Timers Days emphasized that this was an event strictly for the community. It wasn’t anything that was advertised. It was not for the public. Many of them even referred to it as a family reunion.
because it was one day a year that people who used to live in the area would return to visit old 
friends and family.

While the party was a potluck, Louie purchased the meat and would designate a few 
people to cook it. Everyone else was expected to bring a covered dish, making it a potluck 


dinner. Carleen Stephens says, “You just told your neighbor to come to Rabbit Hash and bring a 
dish and we just got together and had a day together.” As discussed in the last chapter, potlucks 
are important to a community because the lack of structure in the meal promotes a sense of 
closeness and togetherness among the people in attendance because everyone is sharing 
something that they made with everyone else. Potlucks are of course not perfect. Although she 

loves them, Jane Burch Cochran recalls the days when she found herself very frustrated while 
waiting in line for food. Her biggest pet peeve were the kids that would come out of the line 
with plates full of brownies and other desserts because she feared there wouldn’t be enough left 
for her. Of course certain items would go quicker than others, but she remembers that there was 
always plenty of food for everyone.

The day started early, with people collecting in downtown Rabbit Hash throughout the 
day. Sue said that everyone in the area would be down to socialize with everyone else. “All the 
Baptists would come too and they’d all mingle even through there was drinking, smoking and 
swearing.” Jane Burch Cochran remembers that there wasn’t as much going on at the early Old 
Timers Days as the current ones. People were there for the social aspect and the food. In the 
evening, Don’s band would play. The first Old Timers Day was before the Rabbit Hash barn 
was built so the band would play in the blacksmith shop or on the porch of the store. After the 
barn was built, the band often set up on its porch. Carleen Stephens remembers the old Old
Timers Days. “We used to come up here at 7:30 on a Saturday morning of Old Timers Day and park our truck so we had a place to sit when Donnie and the band started playing.”

As the years went on, more and more people began attending Old Timers Day and many things started to change. First of all, the date changed. Everyone found that the Fourth of July weekend was too hot to sit outside all day so the event was moved to Labor Day weekend instead. While it still gets fairly warm that weekend, it is much cooler than early July. The event also grew as people in the area started to invite their friends and family. Others living nearby, but who were not necessarily part of the community, also began coming and bringing people with them. Some of the operators of the store also began advertising Old Timers Day in local papers to bring a bigger crowd. Because there was no admission fee to the event, it was hard for the General Store to make a profit after the bands were paid and the stock was purchased. It was hoped that outside advertising would bring more people who would buy drinks and souvenirs to make up for the loss of profit. Although this has helped, the biggest change it has brought is the amount of people.

Because of the amount of people, the potluck of course became much bigger. To guarantee that those people who brought a dish would be the ones benefiting from it, tickets were passed out. Those in attendance would deliver their dish to the table where someone would ask them how many people were in their family. They would then get that many tickets and were able to go through the food line at dinner time. With different managers of the General Store, Old Timers Day changed a bit. Jane remembers that when a man the town affectionately referred to as Whiteman because of his last name ran the store he announced that the old timers would be the first to go through the line. While that act was small, it meant a lot to Jane because it was a reminder of what the day originally meant to the community.
Today, there is no potluck on Old Timers Day because of the crowds. Some people would attend Old Timers Day before knowing much about it and fail to bring food. In order to get tickets for the food line, they would buy chips and dip from the store to pass off as their dish. Also, with that big of a group of strangers, there was fear of not always knowing who prepared your dish. Judging by the strict health department regulations today, I imagine that if the potluck was still an element of Old Timers Day, the health department would be watching closely and maybe even shutting it down. Terrie Markesbery, the current operator of the General Store, is responsible for making the decision to end the potluck dinner and bringing in outside vendors. While no one blames her for this, there is still a sense of loss. What was once a very private meal shared by all of the members of the Rabbit Hash community has been lost to the overwhelming popularity the public have given the event. There is no longer a shared meal to bring everyone together. People simply purchase food throughout the day whenever they feel any pangs of hunger.

As with any public display event, music is an important element. “Music is a very important factor in generating the shared experience and celebration so crucial to the success of the festival” (Turner and McArthur 85). However, this also demonstrates another way in which the day has turned from private to public. Don Clare has lived in the area since the 1970’s and was accepted by the locals early on. Because of this, his band was asked to play the first Old Timers Days. While he was the only member of the band who actually lived in the area, his band mates were also accepted in the community. Danny was a member of the band who also lived in Northern Kentucky and he acted as the emcee for the Old Timers Day events. Jane refers to Danny as a “hoot” and finds his performance on stage to be one of her fondest memories of the event. I remember as a child being very excited that my dad’s band would play
because that meant that the children of his band mates would be in Rabbit Hash and would be spending the night at my house. His band wouldn’t play until the evening, but during the day, the Rabbit Hash String Band would play traditional bluegrass. Today, there are many bands that play throughout the day. However, none of the bands have any ties to Rabbit Hash other than it being a trendy venue to play. While these bands play traditional bluegrass, rockabilly, blues, folk, Cajun, or roots music and appreciate the town for what it is, they are outside the community and still represent outsiders.

Because more people are entering the town, parking has become a problem. In the past few years, Terrie and the RHHS have worked out this issue by getting the county to close the road going through Rabbit Hash and by organizing parking on private land down either end of Lower River Road. Some locals run a tractor pulling a wagon with hay up and down the road all day picking up people after they’ve parked or returning them to their cars when they want to leave. At any given time, there are several kids on the wagon just enjoying the hay ride up and down the road.

With the bands and the food vendors, Old Timers Day today more closely resembles a street fair or festival than a day to remember the history of the town. There are some ways that the connection to history is attempted though. The Rabbit Hash Historical Society has a tiny cabin museum in Rabbit Hash under the best shade tree in town. The museum used to be open every weekend with a volunteer sitting outside answering questions and accepting donations. However, as more and more bikers came to town with their interest more in the machines between their legs than the history of the town they were visiting, the RHHS found it a waste of time to remain open. Now in order to look through the museum, an appointment is required. Other than by appointment, the only time that the museum is open is on Old Timers Day. The
museum is the building farthest away from the General Store, from the beer booth, from the food vendors, and from the bands. Sitting outside of it under the shade tree is where my parents, Don and Sue, spend most of the day. This is also where the other members of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, such as Jane and Carleen, spend most of their time. When people who used to live in the area come to Old Timers Day, they also sit by the museum. It is therefore the spot where today’s old timers collect and socialize. I spend at least half of my day at this end of Rabbit Hash listening to the latest town gossip and stories about how things used to be. I also am put in charge of helping to raffle off whatever has been donated to the RHHS to raise money for town maintenance. In the past, Louie’s mother, Sally Scott, would always make a quilt and donate it to the RHHS to raise money. She had been unable to do this the past several years due to her age, and she passed away in early 2007. Others have followed her lead and helped to donate items for the raffle. Besides the raffle, the RHHS also makes money selling whatever new products they have available. Recently these items have been DVD’s of the movie made about Rabbit Hash or posters and postcards advertising the movie. This past year there were new stickers and posters commemorating the 175th birthday of the Rabbit Hash General Store.

Throughout the day, many tourists visit the museum and buy things from the RHHS or donate money. Jane enjoys meeting these people because they are very nice and want to connect with the people from Rabbit Hash. Even though they are not from the area and are not the people that she knows, she finds them to be just as interested in the community as those who have been around for years.

Next to the museum, Jane’s husband sets up his machine that grinds corn into cornmeal. This has not always been part of the Old Timers Day celebration but ties in nicely with the event since it is something old that outsiders enjoy seeing when visiting the town. Jane finds it funny...
that when she looks over at that old man grinding cornmeal, it is her husband, just reiterating to her that times have changed and that she is part of the up and coming old timer generation.

On the other side of the museum sits the barn. During Old Timers Day now, the barn remains open so that people can wander in there and look around at the antiques while taking a break from the sun. It also serves as a nice shelter from the rain if the weather decides to give us a less than perfect day.

Across from the barn, where the blacksmith shop sits, and where the Old Timers Day used to be held, are vendors. There are curly fries, burgers, hotdogs, wraps, and sometimes even people selling homemade crafts. Back across the street and next to the barn is where the party really seems to be located. There are picnic tables and a large tent set up in the yard next to the river. The band’s stage is set up there, putting their backs to the river. This party zone leads right over to the beer booth which is located right next to the General Store. On the other side of the store are the rented outdoor restrooms and sometimes even more food. Old Timers Day now seems to be divided between the party and the history but people both visiting and residing in Rabbit Hash are free to travel freely between the two. It seems that one provides the public with a glimpse of the private while the other, the actual party, welcomes them in to be a part of the private for at least that one day.

The party is still very much run by the Rabbit Hash community. Every year Terrie has Old Timers Day t-shirts made with a different picture and the date telling what number Old Timers Day it is. She gets the shirts to sell but has some made up that say “Staff” on the back to give to the locals who work during Old Timers Day. People working in the beer booth, taking out garbage, driving the tractor/shuttle, or working in the store receive one of these t-shirts. While they don’t cost Terrie too much in price, they are a wonderful way to pay the locals for
their help. It does more than provide them with a t-shirt. It gives them a label. That “Staff” on the back lets everyone in town on that day know that these peoples aren’t just visiting; they are actually working and helping out the town in which they live. She, like everyone in the town, admits that she is proud to be a Rabbit Hash local and is more than happy to advertise her role in the community. Terrie says, “I think that people that put forth the effort to make the community should be recognized on that day.” This makes the shirt have more than a monetary value. It acts as cultural capital. Terrie will not sell these “Staff” shirts to outsiders no matter what price they offer her. I’ve seen her argue with a customer the day after Old Timers Day who wanted to buy a “Staff” shirt that she had left over. Before talking to her, he had first tried to convince me that she had promised to sell him one of the shirts the day before. The only way to get one of the shirts is to be an actual Rabbit Hash local.

The event described in Kathy Neustadt’s Clambake has many similarities to Old Timers Day. They started off as closed community events but evolved over the years to include the public and have been modified accordingly. As with Neustadt’s clambake, although the locals are still in charge of Old Timers Day, it is really no longer for them but for those visiting the event. Even if it is not something that the locals consciously consider, how to appeal to outside visitors is part of the job. Because the town has already been constructed as a National Register Historic District, certain expectations must be met. That’s where the museum comes in. It acts as a reminder of the past. To spread the word about the town’s preservation, every new plaque is unveiled during Old Timers Day and every preservation award is mentioned. Keeping people happy is another big issue so food is provided. Plans are made ahead of time to order more drinks and for certain brands of beer to be included in the beer booth. Children too must be
considered so Leslie Green dresses as Goofo the clown to entertain the younger visitors with face painting and games.

Sometimes the activities at Old Timers Day appear to act out certain hillbilly stereotypes or expectations that visitors may have of us. One of these was at the Old Timers Day in 2000. At that time, our mayor, Goofy the dog, Goofo’s namesake, had just passed away. Not only were we the town that elected a dog for mayor, which will be discussed at length in the following chapter, we were the town that held a memorial service for him. I sat at the museum and watched the parade given in Goofy’s honor pass through the town. This parade was longer than the town itself and consisted mainly of locals dressed like dogs and dogs dressed like people. A eulogy was given by Boone County’s former judge executive. However, the town seemed most proud to be the first district to ever euthanize a public official.

One event that began in 2005 is the Miss Rabbit Hash Pageant. This doesn’t work like most pageants. All that is required to enter is signing your name on the sign-up sheet. In some cases it isn’t even necessary that the individual herself put her name down. Sometimes people just do it for their friends. I wanted no part of the Miss Rabbit Hash Pageant so I was shocked to be pulled out of the beer booth during my shift because I had been signed up for the competition. The other contestants were mostly pretty girls in their early twenties. However, my stiffest competition came from my dear friend, Chris (yes, as in Christopher). Chris and I were the only two Rabbit Hash locals in the competition. I was in my Rabbit Hash “Staff” shirt and Chris was wearing a burlap skirt and coconut bra. The votes, done by audience cheering, were strongest for the two of us since we were the only locals out there. Somehow I pulled ahead and won the first ever Miss Rabbit Hash Pageant. Of course, I was given a tiara which was made of plastic. I was also given a sash, made of burlap, and a bouquet of weeds. I also received free corn on the cob
the rest of the evening. While being the first ever Miss Rabbit Hash is one of my personal favorite Old Timers Day experiences, it also says something about the community. We are a strong community that supports one another, evident in that Chris and I were the top two contestants among some beautiful young women, but also the people in Rabbit Hash are willing to make fun of themselves. The Pageant was done in true Rabbit Hash style, making the awards for Miss Rabbit Hash out of available products with a hillbilly stigma. We have fun but also give visitors what they expect.

Unlike the clambake Neustadt describes, there is no particular purpose for bringing everyone together because there is no longer a meal that is shared by everyone attending the event. In *Clambake*, it is the meal that brings everyone together. However, for Old Timers Day, it seems that the day itself is the reason for attending. Both events, the meal and the day, are polysemic, having as many meanings as there are people experiencing them. For the locals, it is a day to be proud and to show off the community they are a part of and how hard everyone works for it. For the visitors, it is a day for fun. The free admission to Old Timers Day can’t get any cheaper and the beer and food are reasonably priced. It is a day for everyone to feel connected, no matter where they are from, because they are all experiencing the day together. Not only is there a connection between people, but a connection to the land. There is no denying the allure of the place and why it has become one of the most important historic sites in Boone County, Kentucky.

However, as mentioned above, the event no longer seems to be about the community. The community is evident before and after the event. There are days of preparation described in *Clambake* and the members of the community know what job they are expected to complete. This is similar to the day before and the day following Old Timers Day in Rabbit Hash. There
are people with designated jobs. Terrie hosts a get-together in Rabbit Hash the night before the event every year. In many ways, the Friday night before Old Timers Day serves the same purpose that Old Timers Day originally did. It is just for the community. Don and Sue are usually around town preparing the museum for its one required opening a year and the visible locals are working on the tent and preparing the stage for the bands. According to Duane Doyle, although there are members of the community that are responsible for certain jobs every year, there is always someone new coming in and trying to tell them how to do their job. In return for all of the help, Terrie will have someone, usually Tommy, cooking dinner. She’ll also open the beer booth and give away free beer to those that have helped. Duane says, “Luckily for us there’s a lot of people that drink around here because it seems like they’re the ones that do the most volunteering for things.” As strange as that sentiment sounds, it is the truth.

To many of the locals, the pre-party is more fun than Old Timers Day. They stress the importance of it being just for them, the locals. It is a time to gather and spend time together. Their reasons for this are the same reasons that the new old timers give for liking the original Old Timers Days. They stress the importance of it being just for them, the locals. It is a time to gather and spend time together. Carleen seems to lament the loss: “It was just us.” While everyone admits that the tourism is good and helpful for the preservation of the town, there is a sense of loss of ownership of what was once so dear to the community. Don admits that the evolution of Old Timers Day was natural but justifies his generation’s feeling of loss. “You establish something and then somebody comes along and changes it. You just criticize that. You don’t like that.”
Marlo Thomas says of today, “It’s just like the locals and the community getting ready for the tourists and the people coming down to share in what we share.” She is happy to be sharing the community with others but is glad that the community still has its time together.

Because this is an event that has been going on for nearly thirty years now and has shown no signs of slowing down, it has become somewhat of a tradition. In *Clambake*, Neustadt uses the ideas of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger to discuss the bake as an invented tradition. She writes that they define invented tradition as “revered folk customs and ritual complexes that appear to be based on older social orders but that are, in fact, constructed and reconstructed by different groups and generations in such a way as to legitimate existent institutions and values” (16). This definition can also be used to look at Old Timers Day and the purpose it serves in the Rabbit Hash community. There is no denying that Old Timers Day is an invented tradition in this sense because the ideas of community that Old Timers Day was founded upon were based on “older social orders” of what community should mean in a small town where efforts were being put forth to save it. There is an idea in America that every small town is made up of a close group of individuals that know each other and each other’s business. The efforts put forth by Louie and the rest of the community were to preserve this idea of community that is so commonly associated with old towns, thereby legitimating this valued aspect of Rabbit Hash as well as the romanticized institution of community. However, this tradition changed as time went on to help legitimate other institutions and values. Because Rabbit Hash is a historic district, it is valued within the larger community as a historic jewel. Therefore Old Timers Day could not remain for the few people who make up the official Rabbit Hash community. It instead had to be shared with the larger community because of what it represents to the tri-state area and even to America: a town that somehow held on to the traditional old time values of community and the
simple life. As Rabbit Hash became more and more of a tourist destination, the event had to be modified to represent those ideals. It was then necessary for each of the General Store operators to change the day and the business to cater to this audience.

Overall, I think that the move from private to public in most of Rabbit Hash’s town functions speaks to a sense of loss the nation is experiencing. It is becoming harder and harder to remain connected to the past in America and people in general are looking for ways to do that. One way to remain connected is through tradition and through festival. Neustadt writes that “the Allen’s Neck Clambake represents a kind of subtext within the larger discourse on the relationship between culture and celebration” (182). This relationship is that loss and the celebration is the way for the culture to attempt to hold on to some aspect of the past. The celebrations in Rabbit Hash have this subtext coursing through them as well. Even though the events get further and further from the original and authentic small-town experience, Old Timers Day is still representative of that time and serves that function for many in attendance. And while members of the community do lament the end of the original Old Timers Days, some things haven’t changed. It remains a gathering place for the community and serves as a party and a reminder.

The transition of Old Timers Day from private to public status is one that many festivals go through, having incorporated many of the genres and activities associated with public display events. Many of the same changes that Neustadt’s Clambake experienced apply to Old Timers Day since it is a celebration that started on the community level but evolved into a very public event. While these events are interesting to look at and share, there is something deeper in them that speaks to the sense of loss of connection to the past that the public seems to be trying harder and harder to regain. While Rabbit Hash continues to have functions for just its own community,
there is no way to prevent the spread of popularity the small town is experiencing at the hands of
the media and the surrounding community, the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV: THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

The attention Rabbit Hash receives manifests itself not only in the form of tourists and traffic. Rarely a week goes by when Rabbit Hash fails to be mentioned in some media form. Don Clare is one of the proponents of this, writing several guest columns in local newspapers and magazines, and accepting reporters’ frequent requests for interviews and television appearances. All of the media attention surrounding Rabbit Hash reiterates its importance to the greater community as well as forces the Rabbit Hash local community to make adjustments to their lifestyle accordingly. These adjustments often manifest themselves into performances that work toward a sense of authenticity.

Authenticity is another concept that stirs debate in many academic circles because it is still unclear what makes something authentic. What is and is not authentic is completely subjective “depend[ing] on who is looking at it, in what context, and for what purpose” (Evans-Pritchard 49). However, it is something that is sought after by tourists as expressed by Deirdre Evans-Pritchard in her article about Native American jewelry and in Jennie Germann Molz’s work on Thai restaurants. According to Regina Bendix:

> The quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and antimodern.

> It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and shows recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity. (8)

Many people visit Rabbit Hash to experience something authentic and old, which includes the preserved buildings and interesting residents. The residents of Rabbit Hash respond to this attention with performance. Richard Bauman discusses how performance can be a part of “ongoing social actions” and does not necessarily need to be framed for the audience
(Performance 48). However, it is very much for an audience: the tourists. Knowing the expectations of these tourists, the residents of Rabbit Hash negotiate their behavior providing visitors with a “staged authenticity” through their performance. Molz discusses Dean MacCannell’s term, staged authenticity, in her article “Tasting an Imagined Thailand.” Staged authenticity happens in a middle ground between the backstage area, where tourists are not permitted, and the front area, where the show is performed for them. “In between the inauthentic front region and the authentic back region, he argues, is a continuum of representations that are more or less authentic, depending on how close they are to the back or front region, respectively” (55-56).

Some of these performances have been recorded by the many video cameras that visit the town, initially for news stories focusing on Rabbit Hash’s name and preservation efforts. The town has also been used as a set for films, television shows, and commercials. The first real buzz about the town was during the first attempt to sell it, after Don and Louie bought a $500 advertisement in the National Trust Newspaper. The fact that an entire town named Rabbit Hash was being advertised as for sale was different and interesting. Don remembers:

It generated all kinds of publicity. We got calls from all over the country, letters…. Morning talk shows would call me like Bob and Tom you know just to make fun and interview me right here on the radio like in L.A. or Massachusetts so we got all this free advertising for $500…. It was mostly magazine articles and papers.

These phone calls were just the beginning of the Rabbit Hash media attention. An event in 1998 really brought the town to the center of worldwide attention.
The year 1998 marked Boone County, Kentucky’s bicentennial and, in celebration of this occasion, all of the towns in the county were asked to hold their own events. Rabbit Hash has some very innovative minds and it was decided that an election would be held for Honorary Mayor of Rabbit Hash since we are not an official town with any official political positions. In the past, everyone had referred to Louie jokingly as “The Mayor” but it was time to pass the torch. To take this idea one step further, it was decided that this election would be a true mockery of politics and the votes would be based on money. Each vote would cost a dollar and in the end whichever candidate had the most money backing him or her would be the new mayor. Furthermore, no one was limited to just one vote. Everyone would vote as many times as they wanted. The resulting funds would go to the Rabbit Hash Historical Society and its quest to preserve the local East Bend Methodist Church. The election process began normally enough with colorful local people running for office. Eventually, however, some of the local dogs were nominated. Perhaps because it was something of a novelty and because he had some wealthy backers, Goofy, an area mutt, received the most votes, making nearly $5,000 for the local church. To be fair to Goofy, he was the most visible candidate in town and visited everyone’s house throughout the day. While this was something fun for the Rabbit Hash community to take part in, people outside of the town became fascinated with the dog that became mayor. As a result, the town was on all Cincinnati news programs and in area newspapers. This eventually drew national attention and people began driving to Rabbit Hash, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mayor.

After two years in office, Goofy passed away. He had testicular cancer and had to be put to sleep. Of course the fact that Rabbit Hash euthanized its first elected public official and that his final resting place is rumored to be in a landfill attracted more attention. While outsiders
were fascinated, the Rabbit Hash locals put Goofy to rest on Old Timers Day in 2000 with a memorial parade and an official eulogy. The attention culminated in December 2004 with the premiere of a documentary film, *Rabbit Hash: The Center of the Universe*. During the summer of 2002 Jude Prest, director/actor/producer and documentary filmmaker, discovered Rabbit Hash from the Grand Victoria Riverboat Casino across the river in Rising Sun. According to Prest, he was working on a Discovery Channel special about riverboat gambling at the Grand Victoria and told the Grand Victoria PR person he wanted to go across the river to film the boat from the opposite shore. She tried to talk him out of it, explaining that it would take hours to get over there by car and that it was just a strange little town called Rabbit Hash with a dog for mayor. He went anyway and admits that he became obsessed with the story, asking several questions and contacting Terrie at the store who directed him to Don Clare. Even though his shot of the Grand Victoria, which had some lights out and read “GRA TORIA,” didn’t turn out, he was inspired to work on another project.

*Rabbit Hash: The Center of the Universe* started out as a project about the election but evolved to incorporate many more aspects of the town including the unique community and the charm of the place. While some of the community members were initially skeptical of the film, many others stepped forward and agreed to be interviewed and included, as Prest discusses:

I think at first, there was probably a little hesitation. Most people got what we were trying to do with the film right away... everyone got right behind it. There was one guy... who absolutely did NOT want us there... but I think he was just trying to preserve the town’s innocence and thought that by us coming in...and doing a movie...that we might ruin the quaintness of the town. Our intent was
always to honor and pay homage to the town. But on the whole, everyone was and continues to be AMAZING!!

Prest speaks fondly of his experiences with the town and its locals, and this fondness, to the pleasure and warm reception of the community, is expressed in the film, whose title comes from the fact that so many people in town actually refer to Rabbit Hash as the center of the universe.

Prest recalls:

The [review] that always stuck with me the most and was the one I valued the most said...(paraphrased...) that the beauty of the film was that when it starts, you really don't know where I'm going with it. That it looks like I might even be making fun of these people...but that pretty soon into the film, you really start to get that this is an homage. That these are incredible and incredibly smart people....That what could have been a one joke film really turns out to be a slice of Americana that just doesn't much exist anymore... That one meant an awful lot to me....and it was exactly how I structured the film...the idea was to almost make it look like stereotypes at the very beginning and then turn it all on it's ear by showing just how intelligent, cool and in on the joke the whole town is.

The film fits a trend that Anthony Harkins discusses in his book entitled *Hillbilly*:

In contrast to the negative and stereotyped images of their “hillbilly” genre predecessors, these films celebrated the simple values, sincerity, and goodness of the “plain folk” and featured plots in which the hayseed protagonists overcome symbolic representations of the evils of modern urban America: pretentious big-city snobs, exploitive businessmen, and corrupt politicians. (162)
In *The Center of the Universe*, Prest shows that the town of Rabbit Hash did overcome all of these obstacles, finding a way around “corrupt politicians” by voting man’s best friend into office and countering stereotypes about hillbillies by boasting about the famous artists, inventors, and CEO’s living in Rabbit Hash.

Of course the film continued to perpetuate the image of the town as “that town that had a dog for mayor” and drew more media attention, with Don Clare and Jude Prest doing television and radio interviews nearly every day leading up to the premiere of the film. To show their support of the film, the Rabbit Hash locals rented a limousine and went to the Madison Theatre in Covington, Kentucky in style. People from all over the tri-state area came to the premiere because they knew someone who lived in the town or had just been following the story. Don and his old friend Danny Wilson played songs inspired by Kentucky and the river, and the Rabbit Hash String Band, featured in the film, also performed. It was a wonderful night and everyone wanted to be a part of the town and the community. The theatre had to turn people away at the door, having sold out of tickets, so they decided to show the film again the following evening. Since then, Jude has taken the film to festivals all over the country, winning some of them. Even when the film doesn’t win, it is a crowd pleaser.

The popularity of the film speaks to more than simply the election of a dog as mayor. It, like the tourists and constant media attention, speaks to something that has been lost in modern society. One of the romanticized images in popular culture today is of a small-town community where everyone knows one another and people live a simple life. Films and television programs feature close knit groups of friends or neighbors that are not as common in everyday life and society. However, this close community is something that represents old time values and images of what America once was. Rabbit Hash becomes packaged as an authentic old American town
where the old-fashioned values of community and simplicity have remained intact despite the evolution of the rest of the society. Rabbit Hash becomes more than Rabbit Hash but rather a bridge to the romanticized American past, a way to remain connected to the land, the country, and its history. While this was not Jude’s admitted intention, his film serves the same purpose as other popular culture texts but with a sense of authenticity because it is all true, although with certain details left out.

Because of all of the attention, Don Clare announced at Old Timers Day 2004 that the mourning period for Goofy was over and the polls were open to determine the next honorary mayor. To get things rolling, Don nominated his own family pets: Lu-Lu the pot-bellied pig and Higgins the miniature donkey were two of the first contestants in the 2004 election. Votes were cast for both of them along with a turtle that was present for the day, a few of the local dogs, and the cat living in the General Store. There wasn’t even the illusion that a human could actually win this particular election. This brought much more media attention to the town from local sources, national sources, and eventually international sources.

Everyone knew that the attention surrounding this election was going to be significant but the level it would reach was unpredictable. Because the actual presidential election of 2004 was such a serious one, the humor of the Rabbit Hash election was a nice break for the media covering the national election. The first hint was when Don was featured on ESPN’s top ten weird stories for the day. After that CNN jumped in and did a story where they met with several of the candidates and talked to several of the locals. The host from CNN put himself in the running, but throughout the entire segment, the only vote he had was his own. The attention culminated with a call from Jimmy Kimmel Live. I described the election and the evening of Monday October 18, 2004 in an article for the Boone County Recorder.
As a Rabbit Hash General Store employee, I had to remain neutral when discussing the election. As First Daughter of the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, I had to advocate the importance of voting and making oneself heard, preferably the sound of one’s wallet opening. And as a pet owner, I had to assist in the counseling of LuLu the pig and Higgins the donkey when the pressures of running for a prestigious office got too much for one quadruped to handle. Unfortunately because of my many ties with the election, I was forced to be informed, answer questions, and subject myself to the many forms of media being bused into the little town daily. At work I would give out my home number and at home I would give out my work number, anything to put the Rabbit Hash Local ball in someone else’s court. But the one night I couldn’t get away was the extremely rainy night of Monday October 18th.

I had gone to the store to pick up my check and the town was buzzing, it really was. The buzz of a large satellite truck parked outside the store was heard throughout the entire town. There were many people there I knew so my quick errand turned into an entire coffee drinking session. I watched as the candidates were dragged into the store behind their owners and largest supporters, the dogs dressed like people and some people dressed like dogs, just to make their appearance on the Jimmy Kimmel show. When I heard that my dad had recruited half of the men in the store to help in the transfer of the pig and donkey I decided to stick around and get a glimpse of what my donkey looked like in a cargo van and how they planned on getting those two stubborn animals in front of the camera without eating wires and chewing on the camera man’s pants. Higgins
unloaded himself from the van and onto the porch without a problem, but LuLu, not realizing that the tailgate of the truck was already down backed nearly all the way out of the truck. Although she is a pot-bellied pig, she still is a solid glob of heavy pig and it took three grown men to keep her from smacking onto the pavement. The entire time this was going on, LuLu was screaming and a pig scream is perhaps one of the most heart-stopping, fear inducing noises ever. It was after the chaos of both farm animals being put on the front porch of a store that my dad decided that I wasn’t able to leave. I had to stay there and make sure the two behaved while he played nice with the camera men. I was also needed in the pushing and pulling of animals into their designated spot in front of the camera since Dad had pulled some back muscles attempting to keep the pig from falling. After about an hour of chaos, it was time to place all the candidates and their supporters in front of the camera. There was my town, my friends, my dad, and my ridiculous pets doing a live satellite interview with Jimmy Kimmel at 11:30 on a Monday night with me crouching behind the counter cringing expecting that Silly Jimmy to pull out some harsh or demeaning words about the place and the people that I love so much.

The night ended with some jocularity and a large gift from Higgins on the porch. The candidates were loaded into their respective modes of transportation, as were the humans. Some left and went to bed while others, like myself, went home and waited for the end of Monday night football, the evening news, and Nightline. Finally at 2:00 a.m., I saw my town on Jimmy Kimmel Live (from three hours before), made peace with the insanity, and fell asleep.
On November 2, 2004, while the General Store was still not able to sell alcohol because it is the polling place on Election Day, people began collecting in the barn with pre-purchased alcohol. After voting in the real election, there was a gathering in the barn to announce the new mayor of Rabbit Hash. It was tense in there while the biggest supporters of the candidates debated on whether or not to vote any more and how many more votes they should cast. In the end, Jane Burch Cochran and her husband became the owners of the new mayor, Junior, a black lab. “I sleep with the mayor,” says Jane Burch Cochran.

With Junior came even more publicity. He was a guest on a morning talk show following his election and has been a part of many Cincinnati activities. Part of Junior’s office was filmed for a special on Animal Planet, also made, produced, and directed by Jude Prest and The Center of the Universe crew. Mayor Dog followed Junior on his campaign trail, showing what he did around his community to help out. Animal Planet required a charity aspect of the program so Junior was shown breaking ground for a Boone County dog park and as the spokesdog for the Women’s Crisis Center of Northern Kentucky. Women are often hesitant to leave abusive environments because they fear for their pets. This particular shelter offers women a place for their pets as well so that they too will be safe from abuse. While there is no doubt that Mayor Dog was well-done, it failed to capture the Rabbit Hash feel like the previous film. There were paid actors in the special along with helicopter footage, a tour bus, makeup and hair stylists, cell phones, and narration by Ben Stein. The community was not very receptive of the special and Mayor Dog appears to be the end of the mayor fascination in the community. For the most part everyone is a little sick of it and, while it did raise money for a good cause, the locals are ready to put it to rest. There is more to Rabbit Hash than having a dog for mayor.
Rabbit Hash has definitely been shaped by the media. The media made Rabbit Hash famous as the town with a dog for mayor and the media perpetuates the image of the simple, old time values of the small community. Of course the town itself does its fair share in perpetuating this small-town image and values. There are several products that are created for and sold in the General Store that work to do this, along with many information pamphlets and websites created by the Rabbit Hash community for the benefit of the outsiders, those who visit the area. In his book, *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma*, John Dorst writes that “Claude Levi-Strauss seems to have believed that the modern western world defies ethnographic documentation, that it is simply too complex to grasp in this way” (2). Because of that complexity, Dorst decided to look at Chadd’s Ford, Pennsylvania outside of the boundaries of ethnography. The book analyzes the products created by and sold by the locals of Chadd’s Ford to present their town and construct a meaning surrounding it. He says this self-presentation is an auto-ethnography and “the ceaseless reproduction of images of itself is its definitive activity” (4). This construction of meaning based on texts and images is a postmodern approach to defining a Site. The idea of a Site comes from the study of tourism. Rabbit Hash also becomes a Site, in the postmodern sense, because its image is usually the first experience of it that outsiders have. It is produced and reproduced in the form of postcards, paintings, television footage, pictures in newspapers or magazines, and on the internet. In many ways, Rabbit Hash itself is as guilty as anyone in constructing its image of itself as small-town America. In some ways, it is a gimmick.

In the Rabbit Hash General Store, the most popular items are beverages. This is often a beer but most likely a soda of some sort. The General Store offers a diverse array of sodas. Many of them are organic but others simply represent the past. While Coca-Cola can be purchased in the regular sixteen-ounce bottles, it can also be purchased in the eight-ounce glass
bottles, which, as discussed previously in the first chapter, helps to serve as a bridge to another
time, a simple past previously constructed by Coca-Cola’s image. Other than the old Coke
bottles, old-fashioned root beer and sarsaparilla are sold. These are also hard-to-find items that
also have an old-time feel. Ale-8 is another popular soda sold in the General Store since it is
made in Kentucky. Other than drinks and snacks, the best selling items in the General Store say
Rabbit Hash on them somewhere. The first to be sold out are always the t-shirts. Many of the t-
shirts have an image of the General Store on them with the name above it. There are also t-shirts
with Herb the hillbilly on them. I have a difficult time looking at these objectively because they
are images to which I have grown quite accustomed. It also took me many years to find the
humor in the “Volunteer Fire Department, String Band, and SWAT Team” shirts as well as the
Rabbit Hash Ironworks shirts that advertise “Tomcats Thrashed” as one of the job descriptions.
When I remove myself from the perspective of a local who has grown up on these images, the
content of the shirts becomes much funnier.

I have always said that growing up in Rabbit Hash makes nothing seem weird. In many
ways, as a child, you just accept things for what they are and have no comparison to the way
things really are in other parts of the world. It took me getting out in the world to actually look
at my hometown and realize that there is something weird going on there and that the people in
the town do have an amazing sense of humor about it all. The Herb t-shirts perpetuate the
hillbilly stereotype that many people seem to have about Rabbit Hash because it still exists
preserved so far away from the rest of civilization. The String Band t-shirts speak to the small-
town aspect of Rabbit Hash. The community of Rabbit Hash is so small that people can, in
theory, fill all of these three seemingly unrelated roles in a community. In fact, it is stated in the
film, all you need to do to be a part of it is to buy a t-shirt. The Ironworks t-shirt serves a similar
function relating Tomcats Thrashed to the work of an Ironworker. This may even be a subtle tribute to Sheenie Craig, owner/operator of the General Store before Louie bought it and self-proclaimed dog catcher, catching stray dogs in the area and terminating them in the “dog barn” down the road. The humor in these t-shirts and the Rabbit Hash name stand out to visitors and tourists as well as strangers someone may encounter while wearing the shirt. The image of the store and of Herb the hillbilly also grace ceramic mugs, can cozies, magnets, patches, stickers, and hats and all serve the same purpose as the t-shirts. They are keepsakes of a visit to a small Kentucky town that brought the individual closer to some part of history and old-time ambience. In some circles, the t-shirts act as cultural capital. I wear my old Rabbit Hash t-shirts passed down to me from my parents with pride, especially when strangers are even offering me a trade for them. My t-shirts are older and therefore closer to the beginning, the authentic Rabbit Hash experience.

Postcards are also a top seller in the store because they sit close to the register and are much cheaper than the other items for sale. The most popular postcard of the General Store is a photograph that was taken in the 1980’s. In front of the General Store, instead of a slew of motorcycles, is a horse drawn wagon. There are people sitting on the porch of the store in older looking clothes like bib overalls and a long dress. This is, in all actuality, a picture postcard image of small-town USA where time has seemingly stood still. While this was a day that actually occurred in the town and was not setup for the sole purpose of creating this particular image, the fact that this image was chosen to represent the General Store and be sold to visitors is an act of the town and General Store operator to construct a Rabbit Hash feel for visitors to take home with them.
Most of the other postcards feature the highly recognizable outside of the General Store, but the store is not the focal point. In one particular postcard, the fuzzy background of the postcard is the General Store and the focal point is a row of motorcycles parked out front. This image is very different from the image in the last postcard I discussed. This picture is not attempting to sell Rabbit Hash as a historic town where time stands still. Instead this card is a reminder to visitors that Rabbit Hash is a biker destination. It is a place to admire the bikes of others as well as show off your own. Other items in the store have catered to this particular group of Rabbit Hash visitors such as patches and pins for the bikers’ leathers and stickers to go on the bike itself.

Another popular postcard features three teenage boys lounging on the ground. Each of them has what can only be described as a shit-eating grin, looking as if they have been caught, with two rifles, a pistol, a knife, and a bottle of liquor. This photograph is said to have been found in the General Store but no information, like the names of the boys and the year, are given. The photo isn’t so much black and white as it is shades of pea green. This characteristic as well as how the boys are dressed says that it is an old photograph. It is assumed that these were local boys who were participating in good ole boy activities like shooting and drinking. It conjures up feelings of the good old days and a simpler life when carrying guns and underage drinking weren’t social problems, just a way of life. These boys also could be the inspiration behind Herb, the lounging hillbilly discussed earlier. Either way, this untraditional postcard image still sells an aspect of Rabbit Hash even though the General Store is not present in the photo.

Two of the more recent postcards are directly affected by the media. The first of these is of Junior wearing his red, white, and blue hat and a bow tie in front of the General Store. Junior is the focal point of the photo and this particular postcard is most often bought by those same
visitors that ask where the mayor is or if I know him. Even though it was the media that shaped the mayor dog aspect of Rabbit Hash, the General Store and the Rabbit Hash Historical Society are both making a profit off of it. The mayor’s image also graces the labels of hot sauces and other spices and herbs such as Hillbilly Butt Rub. Junior represents tourism based on the media attention and not necessarily the historic aspects of the town.

The other postcard is of an old photograph of the town of Rabbit Hash taken from Rising Sun, Indiana in February 1907. None of the buildings in the town really stand out because it was taken during a flood and so they are hidden by the high water. While this photograph speaks to the relationship between Rabbit Hash and the Ohio River, there has been something digitally added to the photo to make it a top-selling postcard. RABBIT HASH is spelled out in large white block letters mimicking the famous Hollywood sign. This is obviously because of the release of Rabbit Hash: The Center of the Universe and all of the other attention Rabbit Hash received because of it. However, the photo is made up of the same shades of pea green as the one of the three boys. This, along with the high water, gives the postcard a darker feel than Hollywood. Rabbit Hash isn’t tinsel town full of bright lights and glamour. Instead it is a simple place with a history and real problems. The town that is represented in the film and on the postcard is the actual town requiring no actors, writers, or set designers. In Rabbit Hash, what you see is really what you get.

Another way that Rabbit Hash works to shape its own image is through the internet. There are three major websites dedicated to the town and even a page on myspace.com. The first website is RabbitHash.com and is the site for the Rabbit Hash General Store. The website’s homepage is a brown scale of several children sitting on the front porch of the General Store. Every time a new page on the website loads, another saying “going round town” appears.
Sayings such as, “Pert near, but not plumb,” and “Work? That’s for donkeys and they turn their ass up at it,” appear and, in reality, these sayings are not “going round town.” However, they all speak to the old country aspects of the town as well as perpetuate the country stereotype. This is also demonstrated on the menu where certain things are spelled phonetically like “tell yer friends,” “how to git here,” and “give us a holler.” The website provides dates of all the activities going on in town as well as valuable information including directions and some history. The most interesting aspect of the website is that people are able to join and leave comments on the website. In the history section of the website, several people have posted questions about the history, attempting to tie themselves to the town. While there is no doubt that the old members that made up the Rabbit Hash community branched out into other areas of the country, there is always an attempt on the part of visitors to connect themselves to the General Store and Rabbit Hash history. This became most evident to me while working in the store when visitors would tell me about how they had a grandmother or great uncle who lived in Rabbit Hash or visited the town years ago. Again, this desire to remain connected to a piece of American history that is seemingly unchanged by time manifests itself in a visit to Rabbit Hash or the website to share a story or two.

Another website is run by the Rabbit Hash Historical Society, RabbitHashUSA.com. This site also attempts the country feel. The background is old boards that could be from any old barn and the menu is on a spiral-bound notebook with a font that looks like handwriting. The menu also says things like “happenins,” “tobacco,” “notions,” and “potions” that link to pages about the history, the mayor, or the Rabbit Hash Historical Society’s purpose. The construction of the website also speaks to an old rustic simplicity as does the terminology of the menu. Under “Our Programs” listed as preserving Rabbit Hash are things like tomato picking and story-telling.
Because it is run by the RHHS and not the General Store, the interests are a bit different. Rather than a calendar of events, this website offers a more detailed history of Rabbit Hash and information about the RHHS and its goals. Because the mayor is affiliated more with the RHHS, having raised many funds for the non-profit organization, there is a portion dedicated to Junior. Overall, it sells the same image of Rabbit Hash as the previous webpage but focuses more on Junior.

The third website, RabbitHashTheMovie.com, is dedicated to *Rabbit Hash: The Center of the Universe*. The feel of this website is different from the other two because it is attempting to sell a product rather than the town. It is also the only website of the three that barks at you when you enter it. The images are of the promotional material for the film as well as the stars in it, like Wynonna Judd. (Wynonna, while a Kentucky native, is not from Rabbit Hash, but the producers wanted a big name for the film.) This website was the first of the three to be professionally done and attracted lots of attention. It also has a message board for members to post on, and these posts are very similar to posts on the General Store’s page, looking for information or connections to the town.

The Friends of Rabbit Hash General Store on myspace.com has 605 friends. This page started out mostly as a way for local bands to connect with Rabbit Hash about gigs. Rabbit Hash General Store’s Swingin Sundays during the winter months and the barn dances during the summer have become highly sought-after gigs for bands from all over the Cincinnati tri-state area. Because of this, Rabbit Hash has become somewhat of a hip place to be for those who want a break from the trendy Cincinnati areas like Clifton where they live. Bobbi Kayser maintains the myspace page, keeping the few locals that are on myspace in the top friends along with the bands that are playing in Rabbit Hash in the near future or played in the recent past.
Bobbi has been a big part of the music in Rabbit Hash, making fliers for the events as well as getting many of the bands to contact Terrie about playing in town. Bobbi’s fiancé is in a Cincinnati rockabilly band and uses his connections to help in the planning of music in town.

Bobbi thinks that Rabbit Hash is coveted by so many area bands because, unlike in bars, they are the center of attention in Rabbit Hash and are able to maintain a close connection to the crowd because they are on the same level as the crowd. It also allows for outsiders to become part of the Rabbit Hash community. People follow the bands to Rabbit Hash and will participate in the potluck, bringing wonderful food to the event. By sharing a dish and the experience with one another, tourists are more likely to relate to the locals. This can create a somewhat nostalgic feeling in them, excited that they are so warmly received by ‘those nice country folk.’

Participating in an event in Rabbit Hash demonstrates that the person has some interest in music, food, history, or just a unique experience. This makes for a very interesting mix of individuals on a level playing field with no prejudices, which may not be the case outside of the experience.

Along with the locals and the bands on the Friends of Rabbit Hash General Store’s myspace page are people who follow the Cincinnati music scene, friends of Rabbit Hash locals, people who have visited the town, or people who stumbled across the page and found it to be interesting. All of the comments that the page receives are positive, discussing how they enjoyed their visits. Bobbi said that she often receives messages asking her about the Rabbit Hash history and she usually directs them the Rabbit Hash Historical Society’s website. This myspace page really serves a networking purpose and is another way that outsiders connect themselves to Rabbit Hash by friending the town and leaving comments. Rabbit Hash seems to be trendy among area hipsters at the present time because it is different, offbeat, and somewhere not everyone goes. I doubt that it is really the publicity or the history that necessarily speaks to this
segment of Rabbit Hash tourists, or friends. I find that it is just the next cool thing. Because I am a Rabbit Hash local, I sometimes become quite possessive of my little town, and when I see that people from my high school who used to jokingly tease me about living so far out in the middle of nowhere are friends with the General Store on myspace, it sometimes bothers me. I am not alone in having this mentality and even though we don’t necessarily want to have these possessive feelings about Rabbit Hash, part of us does want to keep this town for ourselves and limit the number of outsiders that come in on a weekly basis. In the words of Marlo Thomas, “Why should I be so selfish as to think that I can keep this all to myself?”

While this is the attitude we attempt to maintain, there are things that the Rabbit Hash community admits to doing when outsiders are around. While these tactics are not meant to scare off the outsiders, they serve as a reminder that this is our community and that when they go home we will still be here. Again, I feel this speaks to the pride that the Rabbit Hash locals have of their town and it takes some testing of the outsiders to make sure that they are willing to respect the town for what it is, including the people in it. While some of the Rabbit Hash locals, including myself, are concerned with our public image and whether or not the media is going to shape the Rabbit Hash community as a bunch of backward hillbillies, most people are unconcerned. However, some of them do admit to performing certain roles and acting out certain stereotypes when outsiders are around. This is sometimes a test and sometimes for their own amusement. Tommy is one local who always pops into my mind when I am thinking about this issue. He is friendly to everyone but always out to make someone laugh. If this requires that he play the hillbilly, then he will. He refers to it as “Put[ting] on a little hillbilly charm.” He says, “If they’re all nice and polite and need a hand or something, we put on the southern gentlemen charm type thing… but if they roll in here and they’re all rude and pompous and
uppity we turn on the redneck thing.” There seems to be a clear distinction to Tommy between the hillbilly and the redneck. The hillbilly is the friendly country person, what Angeline F. Price refers to in her article entitled “Working Class Whites” as good country folks. The redneck, on the other hand, is the negative image given to county people, or what Price refers to as white trash. I first began paying attention to these particular acts after *Rabbit Hash: The Center of the Universe* was made and people were initially nervous about how it was going to portray the town. As mentioned previously, Jude Prest made the focus of the film the good country folk rather than white trash.

Members of the community still do enact both the hillbilly (good country folk) and the redneck (the white trash). Many times, this is an actual performance. Terrie Markesbery admits to performing certain roles and acting a certain way when outsiders come to town.

Let’s keep it quirky kinda thing. I do sort of go by that cause, you know, its Rabbit Hash. I’ve said that to people before, “Well, its Rabbit Hash you don’t expect me to hurry or give you good service do you because I don’t want you to get used to that….” Everything can be a little crooked or everything can be just slightly off because we somehow have a little bit of leeway there.

This is something that Terrie suggests sets us apart from the visitors. She says:

I think that they’re stereotyping because they don’t expect to see that when they come in, that you’re hip to the scene. I think they expect that we’re out of touch or backwards and you know we’re not …so sometimes its fun to play on that.

Yea, I definitely play with it.

It seems as if Terrie suggests that the outsiders sometimes harm us, whether intentionally or not, by expecting us to conform to certain stereotypes of country people. These stereotypes fit both
categories, redneck and hillbilly. In order to protect ourselves from these stereotypes that suggest exploitation and a struggle for power, the Rabbit Hash locals consciously enact the stereotypes, thereby giving us the control of the situation. If, for some reason, the local does not feel like playing on a certain day, the visitors of Rabbit Hash may not walk away with the authentic experience they were expecting. This further reinforces the binary of us vs. them, country vs. city, simplicity vs. fast-paced life, and it all falls under the control of the Rabbit Hash local.

Terrie also discusses how some of the stereotypes she performs aren’t necessarily a conscious effort, but because they make sense and fit the lifestyle that Rabbit Hash necessitates.

Playing a little bit, I do, you know, I sometimes I feel like I’m fitting this stereotype when I bring wood in, or carrying a pail of water or something cause it sort of feels like that’s what women back in the day would be doing…. Wearing hiking boots with a skirt because its practical and because you need to because you can’t, I’ve seen so many high-heeled women get stuck in those crevices.

Working within cultural studies, there is a point in which one must succumb to the possibility that some stereotypes exist for a reason and this is one of those times. Living a rustic lifestyle does necessitate certain activities that are stereotypical of a hillbilly or redneck life. This matter-of-fact way of looking at stereotypes was broached during just one of my interviews. Duane Doyle mentions that there are members of the community who do not work, who hunt and drink all day, and who live on hillsides.

The ignorant hillbilly, they’re there…. It’s not really a stereotype, those are actual hillbillies. It just adds to the blend and a lot of the times those are the families that have been here the longest.
At times, this can be quite confusing. Yes, there are people in Rabbit Hash who, without trying, do fit stereotypes and notions of what country folk are like. However, there are also times that people purposefully enact these stereotypes to exercise power and control over outsiders. When around only community members, locals are themselves. This may include actions that fit under certain stereotypes. However, when outsiders are present, the locals are aware they are being observed and those same actions then become a performance. It is the locals’ knowledge of the outsider that makes the action a performance. If the locals were completely oblivious to how they may appear to outsiders, then the outsiders would have the power and could stereotype accordingly. It is the knowledge of the possibility of stereotyping that gives the local the power in this particular situation. This is not simply one-sided either. The locals are also quick to stereotype outsiders when they enter the town and can change their act accordingly, as suggested by Tommy earlier in this discussion.

There are many ways that performance has been studied in the field of cultural studies but none that explains what happens in Rabbit Hash. There is no doubt that this is a performance. The collection of essays entitled *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies* discusses many different types of performance, which suggests that the performances in Rabbit Hash are no less study-worthy than the performances in other communities. According to the editor of the book, Judith Hamera, “A performative is both an agent of and a product of the social and political surround in which it circulates. Its effects are reinforced through repetition” (6). Therefore, the behavior of locals in Rabbit Hash is caused by the tourism in the town and also helps to attract more outsiders looking for the authentic small-town experience that they’ve heard is possible in Rabbit Hash. The more times this happens, the more common the behavior becomes, and it turns into a habit. Don Clare is a good example of
this. His wife, Sue, discusses how he has changed the way he talks since moving to Rabbit Hash. He now uses improper grammar and pronunciations that used to irritate him, like long a’s and wrong uses of verbs such as, “I seen it.” Sue says that it “was conscious at first” and “made him look the part” but now it has infiltrated his regular speech patterns.

Every year, more and more people visit the town of Rabbit Hash, whether they saw it on television or heard about it through a friend. This constant increase in tourists creates a demand for souvenirs and information that perpetuate the town’s authentic historic country image. The locals then become responsible for the feelings the tourists leave with, having created all of the products and information. The locals also give a performance, but because Rabbit Hash has no real back or front region, the residents are constantly performing in the middle ground to provide an authentic experience.
CONCLUSION

The work that I have done on Rabbit Hash has been a life-long project. My research really began as observations I made when I was working in the Rabbit Hash General Store and started to recognize how the town appealed to many different types of people. This experience renewed my love for the town, something that I had lost while in high school. Finding an outlet for my interest in the work of many cultural theorists, anthropologists, and folklorists helped to shape the project into what it is.

Throughout this study, I look at the perceived history of Rabbit Hash and how it has shaped the lives of community members and the experiences of visitors and the media. Rabbit Hash serves as a reminder of the idealized American past that stressed the importance of a simple life and traditional values. Rabbit Hash is a bridge to that past and speaks to those who feel a sense of loss of traditional America and traditional values. The preservation effort put forth by those living in the town and how they choose to live their lives is a way for them to remain connected to the past. Because history and tradition are concepts shaped and molded by the people, the connection that the residents maintain is a feeling of ownership. While they do not actually own it, the most popular stories that circulate through town focus on the people that were there before. The most popular story about the name’s origin gives credit to someone living in the town. Therefore the residents are self-sustaining and don’t require anything from outsiders.

Central to shaping Rabbit Hash into an idealized American small town is the sense of community. The importance of community is stressed by everyone living in the town. The locals make their presence known and strive to work together in the best interest of preserving the town’s rich history. With different community events and the sharing of food and drink,
everyone is made equal. The locals of Rabbit Hash exhibit communitas in these events, especially in the liminal space of weekends in the town when work lives are forgotten and life is suspended in the rural setting of Rabbit Hash. Community is also something that is achieved actively. The residents of Rabbit Hash actively strive to achieve the sense of community, and as a town they continually define themselves by emphasizing what they are not: a constructed subdivision community. This allows them the opportunity to expand their circle to include interesting individuals that don’t necessarily fit it elsewhere as well as the freedom to make themselves stand apart from regular society. This unique community is something that keeps the residents around and draws in new people.

The importance of community is stressed in the annual Old Timers Day celebration held in Rabbit Hash over Labor Day weekend. This celebration marks a transition from the private to the public realm. What was once a very private event, shared by only the members of the Rabbit Hash community, has become more and more popular over the years and is now open to the public, even advertised. Today, Old Timers Day is a time when the Rabbit Hash community comes together to share their town with many outside visitors. There is an effort made on the part of all of the volunteers to give the visitors an authentic Rabbit Hash experience by offering food, drink, and old-time music. This conception of authenticity is based on what the Rabbit Hash residents think the tourists want and expect from an event with a name like “Old Timers Day.” Because the celebration is an invented tradition that changes with each generation, there are different ideas of what the day should be. The newer crowd enjoys the party and catering to visitors while the older residents who have participated in Old Timers Day from the very beginning lament the days when it was just about them and preserving the town and community.
Another way in which Rabbit Hash has been made public is through its growing popularity in many different forms of media. Rabbit Hash has become a popular music venue and tourist site. This popularity is due to the media attention surrounding Rabbit Hash’s tumultuous political history and the movie and news stories made about it. In many ways, members of the Rabbit Hash community shape the town themselves by performing for outsiders and the cameras, creating the image being sold to the public by the news media and in the General Store. The three websites dedicated to Rabbit Hash provide a perfect opportunity to shape the image of the town presented to outsiders. Rabbit Hash is most often perceived as a backwards rural town fostering hillbillies with bad grammar. Many of the locals admit to performing that role when outsiders are around to help distinguish themselves from visitors and to maintain some power over them. This performance is not a performance in the traditional theatrical sense because there is no stage or backstage. Instead, Rabbit Hash has only a middle ground where the locals must constantly negotiate what they think visitors expect and what they themselves do in their daily lives.

What exactly is it that makes Rabbit Hash so popular? What I can deduce from my observations, interviews, and reading is that Rabbit Hash speaks to a wide variety of people because of the values placed on historic sites in this country today. Rabbit Hash serves as a bridge to the past and by visiting or tracing connections to the town and the buildings in it, one is able to connect oneself to America and therefore have a tie to the land. The work that the community has done to preserve the town has become a source of pride for the residents and something that visitors and outsiders admire. The stress placed on community by the residents is a self-perpetuated cycle. People move to the area for the small town community and work to maintain it. With the concerted efforts of everyone who is affected by time spent in Rabbit
Hash, it can be guaranteed that the town will remain as it is for future generations to experience and use in the same ways.

In the end, I have learned a great deal about my town and the people in it. I have a newfound respect for Rabbit Hash and all of the residents and greatly appreciate and value my experiences there. I hope that my work has helped the town by spreading the word about the efforts made to preserve it and to encourage others to visit and share the unique Rabbit Hash experience with us. When starting this project, I was warned there is a danger in ethnography and that is to romanticize the researched community. Because Rabbit Hash is such an important part of my life, as are the people there, I can’t help but speak fondly of it. I did, however, strive to provide a balanced analysis.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Eliason, Eric A. “Pioneers and Recapitulation in Mormon Popular Historical


Gusfield, Joseph R. “The Social Meaning of Meals: Hierarchy and Equality in the


McCracken, Grant. “The Evocative Power of Things: Consumer Goods and the Preservation of


Yealey, A.M. *History of Boone County, Kentucky: Reprint of Articles Published in Newspapers Over a Period of Fifty Years.* Covington, KY: c1960.