A woman in her 70s who lives in the suburbs of Minneapolis recently declared that the best thing about her community is “its small-town atmosphere.” The cornfields disappeared decades ago, she acknowledged, “but we’re still close to the wide open spaces.” Although few suburbanites work or shop in their neighborhoods, attend church there, or become close friends with neighbors, the suburb “is a good location to come and go from.”

Small towns remain cultural touchstones in the United States in the 21st century. Two contradictory images of them persist, Robert Wuthnow, professor of sociology at Princeton University, reminds us. In the celebratory, some say nostalgic view, small towns are dominated by traditional values, warm, neighborly relationships and common purposes. In the other view, small towns are full of unhappy, inbred and intolerant people, who, whether they know it or not, ought to leave as quickly as possible.

In “Small-Town America,” Wuthnow draws on more than 700 interviews, census data and a slew of social science studies to provide a comprehensive, cogent and compelling profile of the beliefs and behavior of more than 30 million Americans who live in towns with populations ranging from 43 to 25,000. For small-town residents, he demonstrates, “community” is not only a physical space and a set of social networks but also a cultural construction, based on stories they tell themselves and others about their values, their choices and their identity.

Every generalization about small-town America “that seems indisputable from a distance,” Wuthnow emphasizes, “turns out to be more complicated when examined at closer range.” On average, for example, one out of five small-town residents has lived in his or her community for fewer than five years. Although small towns remain relatively homogeneous, with a white Anglo population of 85.5 percent in 2010, the Hispanic presence has more than doubled from 1980-2010, from 2.5 to 6.1 percent.

“Small-Town America” is full of surprising findings. Because public schools (and their athletic teams) are “central to everything,” school closings or consolidations, Wuthnow indicates, strip towns of a critical component of their identity. Because structural factors — the profitability of the agriculture sector, the amenities of counties in which towns are located, proximity to an interstate highway — determine growth or decline, pinning too much hope on community leaders, he suggests, “is a recipe for disappointment.”
Although acutely aware of the fragility of small towns, Wuthnow believes they have a viable future. While city dwellers compare themselves to dwellers of other cities, he notes, small-towners compare themselves to urbanites. Many of them insist they’re content to live closer to the land and their friends, in places where a slower pace and smaller scale are preserved.

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