

Excerpt from

**Working Knowledge:
Skill and Community in a Small Shop**

by
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erett Hughes, both passed away while I was working on this project. It is my pe—a cherished hope I would say at the risk of sounding sentimental—that at I have written would meet with their approval. In the meantime Howard cker has filled the role of mentor with detailed readings and discussions of ections, chapters, and finally a few versions of the whole manuscript. He has dged me back on track in a way many of his students will recognize. My debt to wie is deep.

Acknowledgment sections seldom mention the “unmet mentors” whose books d articles have played a particularly important role in the development of new rk. Certainly one studies bibliographies to account for the flavor of new work. t there is usually a small group of authors who have been pivotal. For me those dclude Henry Glassie, John Berger and Jean Mohr, Robert Pirsig, and David dnow.

Several colleagues and friends put a great deal of energy into reading, advis-, and editing. Greg Schaffner, Jonathan Imber, and George Psathas read the nuscript, in some cases several times, and offered in-depth comment, criti-m, and encouragement. Toni Johnson read an early version and provided ically stern council. Tim Curry, Leonard Henny, Wayne Wheeler, Ricabeth iger, and several other colleagues from the International Visual Sociology As-siation gave insightful comments on the photographic dimension of the book. lter Weitzmann helped me clarify the issue of reciprocity and reputation. Jane wards did the same for occupational folklore, and Debra Baiano read and criti-ed numerous drafts of the Introduction. Wayne Froman planted the germ from ich many of these ideas grew in a Potsdam College lecture on technology and rsciousness.

Unfortunately my publisher's policies forbid my acknowledging the contribu-as of individuals at the Press who did far more than their occupational role uld demand to make this book happen in a way that is satisfying to us all.

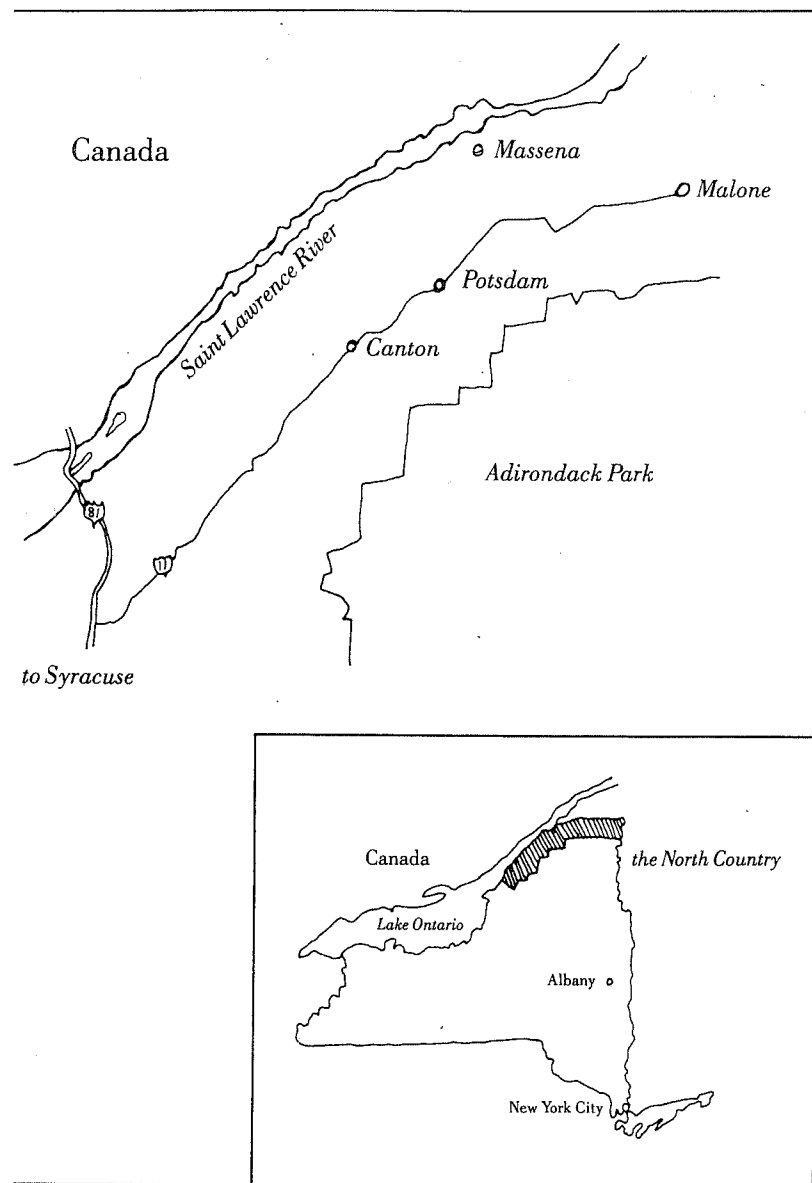
Introduction

I moved to northern New York a number of years ago to teach in a small college. My department chairman noted my eight-year-old Saab station wagon and said, “Well, you’ll be meeting Willie.” It was an odd experience, repeated a number of times over my first few weeks in the North Country. One look at my old car and a new acquaintance would confirm that yes, I’d be meeting Willie.

It was soon necessary. No phone was listed, so on a Saturday morning a few weeks later I wove my way through fifteen miles of back roads and arrived at Willie’s unannounced. I parked by a Saab a few years older than mine and walked over to a trailer surrounded by odds and ends of machinery. I knocked hard; a voice barked back: “Come in!” A man I took to be Willie sat by the win-dow in the front of the trailer drinking coffee, looking grizzled and a bit formi-dable. He asked my business; I replied that I needed a windshield for my Saab, which I intended to sell. He looked out at my car, and I realized I’d been watched as I approached. After at least a minute of silence he said yes, someone *owed* him a windshield that would fit. He’d be picking it up one of these days, maybe in a week or two. When? How much? I thought to myself. But I kept quiet, feeling I was being sized up. Finally he asked me why I was selling the station wagon. I told him I had just bought an old Saab Sonnet, a discontinued and peculiar sports car. Only a few had been made, and from my first impression I didn’t expect him to know anything about what was an esoteric and rather frivolous car. He replied that he had number 244 stored in a barn near Potsdam, waiting to be rebuilt. Its fiberglass hood, which amounted to the entire body of the car from the windshield forward, had been cut into seven pieces by garbagemen in Boston, who had found it sitting on a couple of garbage cans and decided it had been thrown away. The owner returned from a tool-buying errand to find them standing over his demol-ished hood with axes, ready to feed the pieces to the crusher. I nodded. I knew that scene, I said—I’d just moved to the North Country from Boston.

So began a working relationship. I ended up buying a house close to Willie’s, and I’ve sought his help on construction, demolition, rebuilding, and the mainte-nance of a hundred-year-old farmhouse and an assortment of outbuildings. My old Saab has been followed by several slightly newer, most bought cheaply and rebuilt at Willie’s shop. In the way of rural life, the shared work has led to friend-ship and to inclusion in community. Now, ten years later, I write about the man’s work and how that work fits into the “web of group life.”

Although much of what I will say about Willie points to his uniqueness, I know that in similar environments there are many like him. I am speaking of the rural North—areas like northern Maine, New England beyond easy reach of Boston,



New York's North Country.

New York past the Adirondacks, upper Michigan, Wisconsin, or Minnesota, certainly the mountain regions of the West. These are poor areas, and outside the towns their populations are in decline. They are places of long, hard winters and great isolation. Agriculture, if it exists at all, is generally marginal. In the North Country the fields were first cleared from forests, and every spring they heave up a harvest of rocks that must be picked before the work can begin. The season begins late and ends early—farming reduces to a fight with mud and freezing, freezing and mud. Perhaps more natural uses of the land are the old forms of work that persist with improvised and roughly crafted technologies—cedar-oil manufacture, pulp logging, or maple-sugar making.

Mass culture has touched these areas relatively little. There are usually only one or two television stations with poor reception, no cable television outside the towns, and little choice among products, forms of entertainment, and jobs. Small businesses are less regulated than in more prosperous and populated areas, and zoning laws are only now beginning to be written and are loosely enforced. There is a feeling that you do what you must to stay afloat, and people work out among themselves the limits of those activities. John Berger wrote of people in a similar environment in northern England: "They form neither a proletariat nor a traditional rural community. They belong to the Forest and in the surrounding districts they are invariably known as 'the foresters.' They are suspicious, independent, tough, poorly educated, low church. They have something of the character once associated with wandering traders like tinkers" (1967, 89). At the same time, "[they] are not subject to the same frantic pressures as millions keeping up appearances in the suburbs. Families are less fragmented: appetites less insatiable: the standard of living of the foresters is lower but they have a greater sense of continuity" (1967, 133).

Although he was describing northern England, Berger could have been writing about New York's North Country. Saint Lawrence County, which forms its major area, is the largest county in New York State (at 2,768 square miles, it is nearly twice as large as the second-largest); and yet of the sixty-two counties in the state there are only three, all in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains, that have fewer people per square mile.¹ There has been economic vitality in the small Seaway city of Massena, but at present it is in steep decline because General Motors and Alcoa, the two main employers, have sharply reduced their operations. In general the rural economy of the region is depressed. This is even more striking given the economic contributions made by four colleges and universities situated in two North Country towns, Potsdam and Canton.

Geographically the North Country consists of a band of relatively flat to slightly hilly and rocky land bordering Lake Champlain on the east. The region

ends along the Saint Lawrence Seaway about a hundred and fifty miles to the Thousand Islands, where the Saint Lawrence River flows out of Lake Ontario, entering the Seaway on the north and merging gradually into the northern reaches of the Adirondacks to the south. The geography is important because in the north the mountains form a largely impregnable barrier and the only highway leading out of the region, Route 81, passes through a "snow belt" at the eastern end of Lake Ontario that typically has the highest snow accumulation of any comparable area in the United States. The snow belt makes leaving the area in winter highly uncertain because of the infamous "whiteouts" that blow up in an instant, reducing visibility on the freeway. The nearest major airport is 150 miles to the north in Syracuse, across the snow belt. In the North Country the leaves begin turning color in the last week of August and are gone by early October. The weather is as fierce as those of mid-Minnesota or northern Maine. All these factors make the area more thoroughly than any region I have visited in the United States. It is not uncommon to meet people from the North Country who have never been outside it, even for a visit.

Agriculture in the North Country is in decline and concentrated on fewer and fewer farms. It is still possible for single-family dairy farms to survive financially, but several economic, geographic, and social factors make it increasingly difficult.² Along the road I drive daily to work, for example, roughly half the farms have gone out of business during the past ten years. There are several abandoned houses and deserted, half-collapsed barns.

The isolation and the absence of what has become suburban American culture is the basis of life for people like Willie. Simply put, Willie's combination of mechanical and engineering skill makes him indispensable to others who depend on machinery, dwellings, and vehicles that are old and often improvised from recovered parts. Just as the region is "nonstandard," Willie is an iconoclast and individualist, a mix of traditional and modern knowledge and skills. Stating it another way, however, creates an incomplete picture. One of the fundamental realities of the area, by any reasonable index, is poverty. The difficulties posed by geography and material limitations are not always, even for people with Willie's skills, the basis of creativity and growth.

Willie's individualism, born in skilled work, extends to the relations he establishes as a businessman. To an outsider the things that influence whether a particular job is done may seem irrational—lucrative jobs may get stalled while Willie does small repairs for neighbors or works on projects of his own. The shop, however, operates by a logic that, while not obvious at first glance, ensures that Willie remains in control of his time and his energy.

Within the general environment of the rural North, Willie's work world is many-sided. Each kind of work is done through a different system of exchange.

The overriding purpose of the shop seems, from the car bodies that surround it, to be Saab repair. This may be surprising to those who think of the Saab automobile in its recent incarnation as an expensive and elegant artifact of middle-class suburban culture. Traditionally the car had been the opposite: inexpensive and long-lasting, pragmatic and ugly; suited for rough roads and cold weather. It is an example of a technology suited to a region. The major components last unusually long, and the car engenders an unusual loyalty among its owners. At the same time, the early Saabs were demanding and eccentric. It was necessary to mix oil in the gasoline; at full throttle the two-cycle engine sounded more like a chain saw than an automobile. Even the colors drew attention: pea-soup green, grape, the dullest battleship gray, a faint lavender called "silver mink." And because the cars last so long it becomes necessary to maintain all kinds of things that most car owners never even think about. Tinker work. You get drawn in again and again. Just one, two, three small repairs, you find yourself saying, and the car will be like new. An odd reversal sets in; the car gets a paint job because it seems to deserve it.

Willie's talents and store of used parts make it possible for Saabs in the area to carry on for ten, fifteen, even twenty years. He knows their secrets and celebrates their unorthodoxies as well as their engineering sense. His shop is surrounded by Saab bodies slowly giving up their parts, moving piece by piece toward a state of final uselessness.

Broadly speaking, Willie does each type of work for a certain clientele, and each is bought and sold in its own way. Most of the rural poor cannot afford even the old Saabs. Willie's Saab business flourishes as much as he lets it largely because there are four colleges within twenty miles of the shop, and college students and professors tend to gravitate to old Saabs. Many make the trip and have work done in a reasonably standard manner for relatively standard fees. But even these dealings are influenced by many things that may keep Willie from his work. Among those who come to have their Saabs fixed are those who are least understanding of the way the shop operates and lack the patience required to deal with someone who enters into contracts in independent ways. For three years there wasn't even a phone in the shop or the trailer; you had to drive out and hope to have the work done on the spot or relay messages via citizens band radios and neighbors. It could be frustrating business, especially when a job got stalled for

reason or another. But there are also, among these people, those who appreciate Willie's skill and understand the balancing act he performs daily as he parcels his work out among more people than he has time for.

Others in the North call on Willie's skills and energies for different types of work. Among these are the farmers. Willie lives close to the seasons and feels their imperatives. It is said that he cannot be made to work for a person but will work for the seasons—when a farmer's equipment breaks down Willie will be there to repair it in the field or rebuild it in the shop. For this work everything else is put aside. Many of the farms are small, undercapitalized, and financially precarious operations trying to hold on for the next season or the next year. For this group Willie welds, rebuilds, and refashions machinery that more prosperous farmers would give up on—and possibly have. And several of these richer farmers rely on Willie to cope with the inevitable breakdowns from pitting steel against dirt and rock.

Aside from farmers, local people depend on Willie for a range of services that are more difficult to categorize. Most (but certainly not all) have little money and depend on machines and dwellings that are in ill repair, improvised, and makeshift. Willie might be called to do a welding job on a furnace in the middle of the coldest night of the year. A well casing may have to be repaired four feet underground because it was improperly installed fifteen years before. Plumbing and electrical systems that were haphazardly put in malfunction in ways that defy expert solution, and fixing them requires a mind that is not locked into established ways of seeing or doing. Willie may design a building, repair a sawmill, or rebuild a vehicle to get a woods operation back to work. Local cedar-oil stills, well-drillers' rigs, and auto-wrecking setups have all been nursed back to health with Willie's repairing, redesigning, and rebuilding.

The payment for these services is complicated. It may include cash, but the payments are generally not figured on a straight hourly basis. Much more often payment is in the form of barter or in favors either done in the present or to be called in the future. Although Willie spends a lot of his time in this work, he makes little money from it. He often seems to take on jobs for the challenge they present. Indeed, it seems sometimes that the payment is mostly in the opportunity to be present for Willie to work through a tricky problem.

This is work done for neighbors. It is not enough to live within ten or fifteen miles; to be neighbor to Willie you have to behave in a way that is routine in the shop but sometimes mysterious to outsiders. A person becomes a neighbor by passing informal tests, but you generally don't know what the tests are or whether you have passed until the time comes to ask for help. You become a neighbor by giving back, but the payment is seldom in kind. It is not that Willie will call and

ask for help in the woods or on a project that needs an extra hand, though if you happen to be there when help is needed you will be expected (if you have the time) to lend that hand. The issue rather is whether you take the time for the small deeds; whether you put yourself in Willie's shoes and sense when a small social or physical contribution is needed. But you don't know if you are a neighbor until that moment when you are really in need. An exorbitant offer of money or a promise to do better next time you have a chance to repay a favor will not bring Willie out into the cold night. When you ask for help the chips are cashed in. If you have paid your dues—if you are a *neighbor*—Willie will come, and he will stay until the problem is solved. For these jobs often no money is exchanged. The most important work, ironically, is not sold but given.

Relations with customers and neighbors, however, are not always smooth or consistent. Deals and understandings routinely are broken or misunderstood and sometimes reformed. To understand the meaning of work, then, is to see it as a currency of community, the basis of exchange. To accurately describe these dealings that sometimes go sour is a difficult part of my task, because the people I have written about are my neighbors as well.

Issues regarding the ethics of disclosure have a long history in sociological field work, particularly in community studies. Dramatic examples I have thought about in relation to my study include the case of Robert and Helen Lynd, who published two books, ten years apart, on Muncie, Indiana. In the preface of their second book they review the reception of the first:

When *Middletown* first appeared, many people were immediately proud of the fact that the city "had been written up in a book"; the Chamber of Commerce used on its literature, "Selected as the Ideal American City," and this phrase was widely used locally. Shortly after its publication, the book was placed in the cornerstone of the handsome new downtown Methodist Church, and this elicited from the editor of *Middletown's* Democratic weekly the gleeful jibe: "If any of you people had taken the trouble to read *Middletown* and had read what it says about your Methodist Church . . . that book would never have been placed in that cornerstone. I am looking forward to the day when you people will read it and rush to tear down your 'cathedral' in order to get that damned book out of the cornerstone. Just because it is a wonderful book that tells the truth." (1937, xii)

Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman fared much worse with the publication of their community study *Small Town in Mass Society*, primarily because they described an "invisible government" of four men who were easily identifiable, although their names had been changed. A social movement arose in the town against the book, though the evidence was that few people had actually read it. A local newspaper described the culmination of the protest:

The people of the village . . . waited quite a while to get even with Art Vidich who wrote a "Peyton Place" type book about their town recently. The featured float of the annual Fourth of July parade today followed an authentic copy of the jacket of the book. . . . Following the book cover came residents . . . riding masked in cars labeled with the fictitious names given them in the book. But the payoff was the final scene, a manure-spreader filled with very rich barnyard fertilizer, over which was bending an effigy of "The Author." (Vidich, Bensman, and Stein 1964, 342)

These are obviously dramatic examples of the community response to having been written about, and in both cases the authors left the areas when the books were finished. Presumably the research did not have a lasting effect on their relationship with their subjects. When you write about people you intend to continue living among, the issue becomes considerably less abstract. Howard Becker summarizes ethical issues in regard to the publication of field studies and concludes that while social scientists ought to be wary of any kind of censure, in the end the only guide to what should be published is one's own conscience (1964, 279-84). I think that Becker is correct, particularly in stressing that we ought to ask ourselves whether the publication of specific material that is potentially damaging or embarrassing is truly needed. Bennett Berger (1981) also approaches the problem in a way I found helpful, by discussing the gap between the perceived and the lived reality among rural communards from a perspective that is never cynical or snide. Indeed, Berger notes that it is a function of all social life to do the "ideological work" of adjusting to the gaps between the perceived or idealized and the lived.

In the case of this book the issue is subtle and difficult. In allowing me to study his work and world, Willie has also given me a profound responsibility to present my results in a way that makes sense to him. On the other hand, the book has got to make sense to the part of me that is a sociologist, and though we live in the same world geographically and share a friendship, my training certainly leads me to see things from a different perspective than that of most of my neighbors. . . . Sociologists are probably always strangers, in some sense, to the communities they live in. Throughout this book I have included stories about how specific individuals sometimes broke informal rules and temporarily changed their relationship with Willie. I have been in this position myself, particularly as I worked through "city" ways to learn how to behave in a rural environment where reputations are long-standing and small acts have enduring importance. The people I have written about are often my friends and neighbors, and though I have changed their names in this narration, they may be able to identify themselves. To eliminate this material would be to not tell the whole story, or at least the most complete account I can provide. My great hope, one I have thought

about a great deal, is that the individuals whose stories I've told will accept the sociological purpose of the telling and not be personally offended.

I have organized my study of Willie's work into two general topics. The first section of the book is called *The Nature of Work*; the second, *Contexts of Work*. The categories that make up these distinctions have emerged through a dialectic process of ongoing observation and reconsideration—an example of what Glaser and Strauss call "grounded theory."³

First I discuss Willie's work in terms of how it resembles that of the premodern *bricoleur* characterized by Claude Lévi-Strauss. To examine the work process more deeply I then discuss Willie's "deep knowledge" of materials; the corporeal or kinesthetic knowledge evident in the work; and the relationship between work and time that is found in the shop. The overriding definition of the nature of work is based on a discussion of the evolution of skill in modern work. The skill found in Willie's work is important to understand because, along with many other skills in modern life, it is disappearing. Willie's kind of skill is an element of an earlier cultural form continuing in a small pocket removed from the general culture.⁴

The second broad topic of the book concerns the relationship between Willie's work and its social, geographic, and economic contexts, including Willie's lived definitions of use value in contrast to general cultural values of planned obsolescence. This can be stated as the ecology of Willie's life—the way his work continually redefines the relation of people's material culture to their geographic and biological setting. Other contexts of work include how Willie defines himself through his work and how his work leads to a sense of acting and being in the community.

I have studied Willie's work from several angles, but the categories I have ended up with are my own.⁵ In naming and classifying its elements, I have separated out aspects of Willie's taken-for-granted world, presented them back to him in discussions we have recorded, and finally used them to translate Willie's experienced world into terms that those unfamiliar with the culture can understand.

METHODS

Rather than exactly defining my methods, I will show with a brief "natural history"⁶ how the study emerged and developed. This natural history is necessarily autobiographical in that the research has been a part of the past few years of my life and my family's.

As a beginning sociology professor I often taught field methods by having stu-

dents take photographs of their subjects and their social environments. During my first five years at the SUNY college at Potsdam I revised my doctoral thesis several times to eventually publish a book (Harper 1982) that included photographs and a fieldwork narrative. I was thinking a great deal during these years about the possibility of a fresh research project that would integrate fieldwork and photography. The demands of my life—like, I suspect, those of many beginning professors with a heavy teaching load and a young family—made it difficult to begin fresh new work. My photography had ground to a halt, and the only thing I had written were several versions of my book. During these years, however, I spent a great deal of time with Willie. He was an adviser and problem solver on many difficulties we encountered with our machines and building projects. At the same time, I saw that the problems we faced living in a rural environment were similar to those of many in the neighborhood, and as I observed Willie I began to see how his work combined skills that were important to a wide range of people.

Eventually I was able to free enough time and energy to begin a fresh study. At first I was interested in a purely photographic study of Willie's shop. But even as I got to know Willie, I had a hard time getting down to serious photography, primarily because I didn't want to call attention to myself. At first I hung around in the background taking snapshots in an offhand manner. The photographs were uninteresting because the details of the work were missing. Furthermore, the shop was dark, and using a strobe would have drawn yet more attention. I realized after a few unsuccessful attempts to photograph this way that I would have to explain my plans—as, of course, I also needed to do for ethical reasons—and to begin photographing in a forthright and even aggressive manner.

I was able to approach the subject partly because of my first book. Willie saw the process of revision, reconsideration, and further revision as similar to his own working method. Seeing the finished book gave concrete form to our ideas about a second book. In part, I think, because Willie was interested in the subject matter of the first book, the railroad tramp, he accepted the idea that we would collaborate on a second. Like the tramps, he felt that only a few like-minded people understood his type of work and how it was part of a functioning rural neighborhood.

I began photographing with a strobe and a short telephoto macro lens to concentrate the camera on hands and materials; the small details of jobs in progress. Switching periodically to a wide angle lens made it possible to photograph the work in its context. The photographs, lighted by the strobe, showed the detail I had wanted from the beginning. As long as I took care not to flash the strobe in Willie's face while he was working it did not pose a serious problem, though it made my activity the center of attention in the shop. For a while some of the men came around less often, and I wondered if the photographing irritated them

enough to keep them away. Willie said they came and went as they pleased and left it at that.

There was, of course, the question of what to photograph—a question more complex than it first appears. Although photographs adorn sociological textbooks, these are probably the worst places to look when considering how to use photographs in research. The relationship between text and images in these books is generally casual. The illustrations have usually been added by editors to “dress up” text, and the level of description in the photographs is almost always very low. The utter obviousness of the legends reinforces the image that sociology mostly restates what everybody already knows. Unfortunately most social scientists tend to think of photographs as unnecessary but sometimes pleasant (and sometimes distracting) additions to the real (written) work.

However, some sociological and anthropological studies have made good use of photography as social description.⁷ And there are also documentary studies that sociologists would do well to imitate.⁸ But the issue is complicated by the varying levels of quality within the documentary tradition. There may be a similar relationship between journalism and sociology and photojournalism and visual sociology, best summarized by the idea that while the primary purpose of journalism is communication, the purpose of sociology lies more in explanation. Yet these can easily become self-serving generalizations.

In less useful documentary studies the depth of the involvement, and thus the level of understanding between photographer and subject, may be slight. The result is best summed up in Becker's comments:

When social documentary photography is not analytically dense the reason may be that photographers use theories that are overly simple. They do not acquire a deep, differentiated and sophisticated knowledge of the people and activities they investigate. Conversely, when their work gives a satisfyingly complex understanding of a subject, it is because they have acquired, a sufficiently elaborate theory to alert them to the visual manifestations of that complexity. In short, the way to change and improve photographic images lies less in technical considerations than in improving your comprehension of what you are photographing—your theory. (1974, 11)

The first photographs I took at the shop lacked any coherence from Willie's perspective. They were really photos by an interested outsider, seeing exotic forms in the routine of the shop. Howard Becker would say I lacked a theory, which in his terms is “a set of ideas with which you can make sense of a situation while you photograph it. The theory tells you when an image contains information of value, when it communicates something worth communicating. It furnishes the criteria by which worthwhile data and statements can be separated from those

that contain nothing of value, that do not increase our knowledge of society" (1974, 12).

The question of what to photograph became, in fact, the question of how to see things at least roughly as Willie saw them. The goal of the research was to share Willie's perspective. It is a gradual and incomplete process, now ten years long and not over yet.

My efforts to gain a perspective close to Willie's, however, have been systematic. The primary method has been a process called "photo elicitation," first described by John Collier (1967) as a way to integrate photographs into interviews.⁹ In the photo elicitation interview the subject and the interviewer discuss the researcher's photographs, giving the interview a concrete point of reference. This approach is different from other sociological interviews because a photograph, rather than an interviewer's question (which may or may not make sense to the individual being interviewed), is the focus of attention. Roles are reversed as the subject becomes the teacher. The photo elicitation interview also points the photographer in new directions as the subject tells what is missing in the photographs and what should be included in subsequent ones.

Organizing the photo elicitation interviews was difficult at first because explicit schedules at Willie's have a way of getting lost in the demands and moods of the immediate. It wasn't clear where we would work, since with two young daughters, his house is full of activity, while customers and friends drop in at all times of the day or evening. Once begun, however, the interviews went smoothly. Willie matter-of-factly discussed the techniques of work that show the depth and extent of his knowledge, details of exchanges of favor and material that make the analysis of the relationship of work and community clearer, and "biographies" of machines and even parts that show how Willie makes the leftovers of the world into replacement parts and even new machines.

I organized the interviews by selecting photographs around specific themes and projects. Having in mind a general theme for each of the sessions, which usually lasted two to four hours, I brought along several photographs that were related directly or indirectly to that theme. Many of the most useful photographs were sequences showing the progress of a job or project. The time represented by a sequence of photographs might represent as little as a half hour, in the case of a particular repair, or as long as seven or eight years. Photographs of a particular piece of machinery or a part or a completed project were also useful. The key was to get beyond the obvious. Willie could look at a series of images and sum up the repair into an astonishingly brief statement. It was then necessary for me to get him to elaborate by asking questions or offering my own observations. We fumbled along on some of the photo sequences that did not go anywhere, and other photo-

graphs that I would not have expected to yield a particularly telling insight provided just that. In the beginning interviews I had a tendency to fill up silences with statements that praised Willie as a master of esoteric technologies. As the interviews continued, I became more comfortable with the silences (which generally meant that Willie was studying the photograph and thinking, rather than waiting for verbal cues or support) and, as I learned more about the subjects of the photographs, gained more confidence in the questions I did ask.

We eventually completed over thirty hours of interviewing. I then transcribed the interviews, producing about three hundred pages of text. All the photographing, interviewing, and transcribing took place during summers, vacations, and weekends, so there were periods of up to five months between interviews, giving the project a gradually mounting momentum. As I transcribed an interview session I digested the material and integrated it with previous interviews, field notes, and photo sequences. The final writing included the juggling and continual rearrangement of small sections that were selected directly from the interviews, field notes, and analytic passages.

I also collected field notes in a traditional manner. During the three years when I gathered the bulk of the information, I wrote short narrative passages almost every time I returned from a visit to the shop. These are descriptions of time I spent with Willie, working, helping, or just visiting. The vignettes tell stories that include the give-and-take between Willie and his customers and friends; they may tell how a job comes to be done or not done. Willie often tells stories as he works, usually to make a point about something that has just happened or to take a break from work. Several of the fieldwork passages retell these stories.

These field notes were a journal of observations that guided me through early stages of writing. At the same time several of these vignettes (I eventually wrote over fifty of them) revealed insights I thought were particularly telling. Some work as short stories: presenting characters and developing a small conflict and its resolution. In telling the story of the shop, they often told the story of the neighborhood. As I began writing the manuscript I thought that though I might include excerpts from these vignettes, there would be no place for them to appear intact. I eventually reconsidered this decision when I saw an important voice being lost. The book now includes Willie's voice and mine, both moving from analysis to narrative. By keeping these voices intact I retain the nuances of meaning embodied in each. To organize the book I have worked partly like a film editor—juxtaposing images to text and laying on different levels of sound as I build from narrative to analysis. The physical structure of the book thus becomes an important element in itself.¹⁰

Although I can describe my different approaches and themes, I have found at

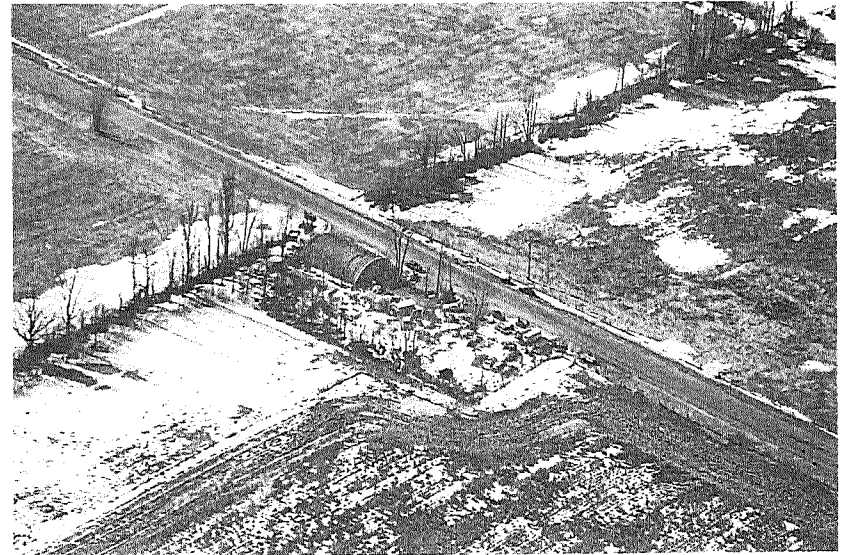
times that the closer I look in the process of research, the more difficult it is to be sure of what I've learned and the harder it becomes to communicate that tentative understanding. It is the opposite of what common sense would suggest. Seeing something closely ought to make it easier to understand and describe. John Berger says that the fieldworker, eager to see everything possible, is "inevitably half-blind, like an owl in bright daylight." I am drawn to that description, for it communicates how I see my own limitations as a fieldworker and the limitations shared by all attempts to describe and analyze.

My work draws on a number of disciplines but does not fit precisely into any of them. As a community study its emphasis on the life of a single individual is unusual. The method of observation is common to anthropology, and a case study approach has a long, if controversial, tradition in sociology.¹¹ This is a study of material and folk culture, with an unusual emphasis on visual methods. I feel I have improvised a method of observation and reporting that is similar in some ways to the way Willie takes on a task. Still, it is hard to precisely categorize what I have produced. Rather than attempt such a categorization, I can get a certain sense of relief and perhaps inspiration from Henry Glassie's resolution of his own biographical/community study:

We have one enterprise. We could call it historical ethnography or local history or folklore in context or the sociology of the creative act or the ecology of consciousness—the potential for flashy neologism seems boundless—but whatever its name, study is distorted and reality is mangled when disciplines harden into ideology, categories freeze into facts, and the sweet, terrible wholeness of life is dismembered for burial.

... if work is good old categories will slip and shift, and then melt away as we find the place where social science joins the humanities, where art and culture and history, time and space, connect, where theoretical and empirical studies fuse. (1982, xiv)

The key, I think, is a simple idea that is the base of all ethnography. I want to explain the way Willie has explained to me. I hope to show a small social world that most people would not look at very closely. In the process I want to tell about some of the times between Willie and me, thinking that at the root of all sociology there are people making connections, many like ours.



2 Willie's shop, aerial view.