# CHAPTER ONE

## Woven Stories, Woven Lives

During the 1994–95 school year, I tried to learn what roles places played in the lives of the teenagers of Curtisville, California. I wanted to know how kids chose places; how they evaluated places; how they used places, and how they modified places. I wanted to learn about conflicts between teenagers and adults over places, and how those conflicts were managed and resolved.

In order to do this, I became an everyday resident of Curtisville High School, in part because I believed that school would be a place of both importance and conflict, and in part because a high school would easily afford a large collection of teenagers to talk with. I took no established role within the school. I made no attempt to "go undercover" as a student, a pose both ethically questionable and chronologically unlikely. Neither did I pretend to be a teacher, counselor, aide, administrator, custodian or coach. I simply walked the halls, stood on the Quad, sat in the back rows of classes, and talked with anyone who was interested.

Early in my study, I tried to perform the work in a carefully structured fashion. I distributed a questionnaire to all 800 students. I set up scheduled, tape-recorded interviews with over forty students, and had another forty fill out a detailed time-and-location report on a specific date. I did careful observation mapping of a different student every morning, tabulated the number and direction and occupants of cars leaving the parking lot at lunch each day.

Through these exercises, I learned what one might expect. I learned about frequency and location, about pattern and direction,

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about likelihood and density. I learned almost nothing about meaning, almost nothing about what kids thought about all those places they used. Near the end of the first semester, looking through my hundreds of questionnaires, hundreds of pages of field notes, dozens of drawn maps, and a drawer full of interview cassettes, I started to realize that I knew a lot *about* the kids I followed and watched and interviewed, but that I didn't *know* them.[1] For that, I clearly needed a different tool.

The students themselves supplied it. As I sat on the concrete planters of the Quad, my notebook in my lap, kids would occasionally sit beside me and ask, "What are you *writing* in there all the time?" And I would show them some scribbled notes or a hastily-constructed tally sheet, and we would have a brief conversation terminated by the beginning of the next period.

As they gradually learned that I was neither malicious nor disdainful, our conversations grew longer, branched to other topics. They introduced me to other kids, explained to me why someone had said what he'd said or done what she'd done. They teased me to see if I could take a joke, and started including me in their activities.

They reached out to make friends.

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In December, I gathered fifteen of these friends together—people who, in many cases, had no friends in common besides me—and asked them to help me make a change in my work. I was frustrated, I explained, by how little I had learned of the things that really mattered. I asked them if they'd be willing to open their lives to me, to let me be with them over a few days in order to watch them and feel them navigate through their world.

In the end, eleven kids (and their parents) said yes. They were six girls and five boys. They were six seniors, four juniors, and a sophomore. They were lifelong Curtisville residents and new arrivals, town kids and fringe kids and rural kids, inhabitants of seven distinct social groups within the school. I chose them somewhat on the basis of this "representativeness," but more importantly because I knew them well enough to care about the parts of their lives I couldn't see. They chose me as well, of course, opting to take

the risk of extending our friendship outside the easy boundaries of our school personae. Each of them picked a weekend in the spring to escort me through a life in Curtisville.

Every week, I would meet my assigned partner as she or he arrived at school on Thursday morning, and I stayed close at hand throughout the school day. These Thursday mornings were usually the hardest for them; they (or their friends) would often glance over toward me in class or at lunch, and smile tentatively as though to say, "I know I volunteered for this, but *he's still here!*" In every case, though, we talked all day and grew more comfortable with one another; about half of them asked to see what I was writing in my notebook as we went along, and I always handed it over.

After school on Thursday, I went with them to do their chores or their extracurricular activities or just to hang out. I went home with them in the evening, met their families, usually had dinner there, saw their rooms and their neighborhoods. After dinner, I stayed through homework or television or back out into town with their friends. And at the words, "Well, I guess I'd better get ready for bed," I'd pack up my notebook, say good night, and drive home.

On Friday, we'd repeat the exercise. Fridays were quite different, though: the character of the classrooms was looser, students and teachers alike were preparing for the weekend, and my participants and their friends were usually far more relaxed about (or resigned to) my presence. Friday evenings were different as well. Family dinners were rare, replaced by dances or sporting events or parties. Friday nights were less constrained, more social, chosen freely.

On Saturday, the last day, I would come to their houses at a prearranged time and once again be their guest. Like Friday nights, Saturdays were freely chosen; unlike Friday nights, Saturdays were calmer, less frantic. We did fewer things for longer periods, saw fewer people and invested more of ourselves in them. Saturdays were the days in which both they and I learned the most.

Saturday nights were often spent alone at their instigation, just the two of us coming to terms with the fact that they'd be on their own again on Sunday, that their shadow would vanish. As part of that, they wanted to be reassured that I was still a friend, that I wouldn't abandon them now that their utility had been depleted. They wanted to talk about what I'd seen, to come to agreement on what the stories meant. And they wanted me to set their stories into

social context, to know whether they were "weird" or "strange" in relation to the other kids I'd been with to that point. None of them knew many other teenage lives in such close detail as I had just seen theirs, and they wanted me to reassure them that they weren't alone, that their actions and desires weren't abnormal.

Somewhere around midnight or one o'clock on Sunday morning, I'd head home and try to rest. And on Sunday, I would spill out observations and ideas onto the computer's keyboard, transcribing and amplifying and trying to understand the three days' contents of my notes.

Finally, on Monday morning, I'd meet my participant one last time as she or he arrived at school, offer my thanks once again for their help, and hand them a twenty- to thirty-page account of the weekend. I did this for three reasons. The first and technically most important was that I wanted them to make corrections, and to offer alternative interpretations to the ones I had concocted (which many did). The second was that I felt it was important not to talk about them behind their backs—they deserved to know what I was saying about them before a wider audience saw their stories. And the third was that these stories acted as small gifts for their large service. At the very least, they were mementos of an unusual event; at best, they were portraits drawn by someone who cared about them and wished them well.

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The reader will perhaps have noted my repeated use of the word "stories," and wondered whether or not I was simply being colloquial. Perhaps I meant instead "evidence" or "empirical data." So it is worth spending a moment to talk about stories.[2]

In their 1993 anthology of narrative study, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich asked, "What must be added to *story* to make it *scholarship*?"[3] In other words, what makes stories into ethnographic research as opposed to documentaries, travelogues, journalistic essays, or other forms of nonfiction? Their answer was that it had to make the move from a narrative to a conceptual mode.

My question in return is, why *should* ethnographic writing be set apart from those other fields? Why should we strive for a privileged position in the canon, some supposed area that lies beyond

story? All well-told stories have a conceptual structure—there has to be a framework under all that data, whether the data is presented by Joan Didion or Henry Glassie, or else the data just remains the unreadable chaos we started with in our fieldnotes.[4] That framework, always created rather than found, provides clues to help us see, allows us to draw connections between events that seem distinct. Constructing that framework, making those connections, making *sense*, is the intellectual's job.[5] The difference between storytellers and social scientists is that storytellers use their frameworks—soft-pedaled, almost invisible—to build narrative links, to give emotional weight to the story, whereas social researchers usually use the stories—or more likely, snippets and quoted lines—to exemplify their frameworks.

Literature teachers David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky talk about "strong writing"—thick, dense, metaphoric, purposefully unclosed, not artificially unified—and say that it offers an invitation to "strong, aggressive, labor-intensive reading." They write in the early pages of their anthology:

> To say that [these essays] are challenging is to say, then, that they leave some work for the reader to do . . . To take command of complex material like the essays and stories in this book, you need not subordinate yourself to experts; you can assume the authority to provide such a reading on your own.[6]

When we tell stories whole, in plain language, with a minimum of explanation or exposition, we allow more potential readers to take an empowered and active stance toward the work we provide. When we write with strength, we surrender power.[7]

The construction of this book is my invitation to your strong and aggressive reading. The following chapter is a portrait of Curtisville, the spatial and cultural landscape within which its teenagers lived. The main body of the book is a series of twenty chapters, each based around specific kids' experience of a particular place. I have divided these stories and their associated places into three groups—"Around Town," "At School," and "At Home"—because those three most generic place types held fundamentally different

social roles and standards of behavior. The interpretive and narrative voices vary from chapter to chapter in their proportion and predominance, but each chapter is, foremost, a story: scenic, temporal, reported in action and real-life dialogue, constructed to convey not mere facts but also meaning.

After an aggressive reading of these twenty stories, the reader deserves to ask questions, just as I was left at the end of my year in Curtisville with stories and questions. In the final part of this book, "After the Fact," I have tried to anticipate the largest of those questions—How do these stories make sense together? Why should others care about the unique case of Curtisville? Is there hope for change, and what would change look like?—and to draw out what I see as the dominant ideas of these stories in a way that offers one possible set of answers. Without minimizing the power of the stories themselves, I can say here that one major theme is the role of institutions in the lives of individuals, and the other major theme is the active or passive responses that individuals make in the face of these institutions. These two dimensions represent the warp and the woof from which modern lives and stories are woven—not just in Curtisville, and not just for teenagers, but for us all.