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Field Research Report



- Summer 2017 -

My dissertation investigates the community and economic development strategies that communities impacted by the Bakken oil boom (~2007 - 2014) employed with a focus on large-scale public infrastructure projects. During Summer 2017, I collected data for three case studies in North Dakota: The Western Area Water Supply project, the recreation centers in Williston and Watford City, and two higher education foundations - Williston State College Foundation and Dickinson State University Foundation.

Thanks to a travel award from the Center for Western Lands & Peoples, I was able to conduct six weeks of field research in western North Dakota and eastern Montana. As illustrated by this page's pictures, the WLP award enabled me to:

- Live full time in Williston, ND - a major Bakken service hub
- Conduct 30+ qualitative interviews
- Meet with tribal members from the Fort Berthold Reservation
- Assist at a ranch's branding
- Attend meetings for Western Area Water Supply Authority & the ND State Water Commission
- Collect and scan 100s of pages of documents for future analysis
- Explore the Northern Great Plains

I would like to thank WLP for their support of my summer 2017 field research.





Western Area Water Supply (WAWS) Project

The WAWS project is a \$469 million public-private partnership built to address growing residential and industrial water demands related to the Bakken oil boom. WAWS has not been able to cover its debt due to the downturn in oil activity. The rapid pipeline construction resulted in reclamation issues for farmers and ranchers. This summer I conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders, including water authority members, representatives from the Independent Water Providers, and landowners. I also attended a meeting of the State Water Commission at the state capital in Bismarck.



Recreation Centers in Williston & Watford City

Williston and Watford City built large recreation facilities that rely on tax revenues to pay for their bonds. Both centers are now struggling to make payments due to lagging oil prices. This case study examines the development philosophies behind these investments and who benefits. I conducted interviews with community leaders who advocated for the recreation facilities. I also digitized meeting minutes from the Watford City Park Board for future document analysis. Finally, I bought a membership to the Williston center to conduct ethnographic participant observations.



Higher Education Foundations

Williston State College Foundation benefited from oil royalties and increasing donations from the Bakken oil boom. The Foundation created a scholarship to give two years of free tuition and fees to all high school students who graduate from ten counties in Montana and North Dakota – all counties that were oil impacted. In contrast, the Dickinson State University Foundation was accused of misconduct with regards to their development debt and the leveraging of restricted assets that put its tax exemption at risk. The Foundation was put into receivership and dissolved. This summer I conducted interviews to investigate the foundations' diverging trajectories.



Participant Observations

The Center for Western Lands & Peoples travel award enabled me to spend six weeks living in Williston, North Dakota. This immersive experience allowed countless informal conversations with community members and with the owners of my AirBnB, both of whom work in the oil industry. During my stay in Williston, I took extensive field notes, which will be used to triangulate findings from my interviews. Here is an example from May 31: “The post office was bustling like everywhere else. The man ahead of me was mailing something to Sweden, so I’m starting to recognize just how internationally connected Williston is behind the surface of white pick-up trucks and ATVs.”