

## NRE/Reimer – Festschrift

October 23, 2013

Bill Reimer – Speaking Notes

This is a celebration of those in this room – and those who couldn't make it - who have contributed to the NRE project. I am honoured to represent you in this celebration.

It is the celebration of an adventure that began around 1996 – not as a well-designed plan – or even a project with a clear goal in sight. This was not a project that followed the requirements of a business or community development plan, but one that emerged (and here I have Fran Shaver to thank for this image) like a flock of geese on their way to some destination as yet undefined. We knew we wanted to go south (in the fall) and north (in the spring) but we weren't sure how to get there and we weren't sure about the details.

We also weren't sure who was leading the V formation – and it didn't seem to matter. Someone would tentatively suggest a direction – testing the wind to see what the others were thinking and how far they were willing to go with the sometimes outrageous suggestions we were making. Someone would then propose a project that was **comparative**, for example, but lose courage to press on in the face of the difficulties that comparisons entail.

Someone else would then take over – bypassing the hesitation to suggest that it should also be **national** in scope – only to falter when considering the cost involved.

Again – another person would pick up the theme and suggest a **community** focus, or **longitudinal** study, or **research-participation** study – each time repeating the tentative dance in which we were engaged.

It's no wonder that we began to speak of the project as “Ambitious I” and “Ambitious II” while the details emerged over the weeks and months of those initial discussions.

This dance continued in Quesnel at our national workshop in 1996, in Ottawa when we were invited to testify before the Standing Committee on Natural Resources of the House of Commons, and at Gimli, MB where we held our 1996 national conference. It was a conversation that took place in classrooms, hotel rooms, bars, and presentation halls among people like Ray Bollman, Peter Apedaile, Phil Ehrensaft, and Tony Fuller.

It would have likely remained in the realm of fantasy if it were not for the encouragement of our friends and colleagues who had access to financial support and the knowledge required to access it. In those days it didn't always require long and elaborate proposal submissions. This includes people like Ken Donnelly, Scott Merrifield, Heather Clemenson, and Shirley Dawe – who believed in our dream and had a (sometimes cautious) faith in our ability to deliver.

Using bits and pieces of financing from various sources, we developed a national Community Observatory that was unique in the world – including 32 communities and over 15 researchers who (surprisingly) agreed to make long term commitments to communities in the network – and keep to those commitments.

I remember the complexity of this process (as will Anna Woodrow who did the major work of juggling multiple contracts with multiple conditions) – as community interests and capacities were tested against the wide variety of research styles and capabilities of our research team. Once again, I was terrified, surprised, and thankful how these relationships emerged and were nurtured over the years – and how informative and stimulating they were.

We were welcomed to accompany these communities as they dealt with mine closures (Tumbler Ridge); major transformations of their economic base (Hussar, Ferintosh, Spalding, Wood River, Twillingate, Benito); successes and failures of revitalization initiatives that included redefining themselves (Tumbler Ridge, Tweed, Cap-à-l'aigle, Springhill), integrating newcomers (Seguin, Rhineland), and taking on risky innovations in their social and economic lives (Hussar, Wood River, Benito, Taschereau, Cap-à-l'aigle, Néguaç).

As our commitments and grant-writing successes accumulated (thanks to 2 major SSHRC grants – 1 of them being the largest amount given for social science research), I remember feeling overwhelmed at the enormity of the task we had set ourselves: a national community survey in more than 20 communities, scientifically rigorous yet sensitive to the variety of conditions and styles of these communities.

I also remember what a relief it was to be rescued by people like David Bruce – offering to take on the task of the national surveys. Once again I was surprised and proud of the way in which the team worked together to produce several data sets that were unique, innovative, and rich – data that provided desperately needed information on small town households, employment, community services, and communications.

I also remember suffering the early morning terrors of an international exchange with our Japanese friends – only to have Greg Halseth and Laura Ryser offer to take it on. It's easy to imagine what could go wrong when organizing a trip of a dozen rural Canadians to very rural Japan – from lost luggage to international diplomatic incidents – so when Greg and Laura stepped in, I was not only freed of the terrors but justifiably looked forward to the valuable outcomes of the exchange. The report they produced of the event affirms the value of this experience.

And later – when Iitate village experienced the tragedy of radiation fallout from the Fukushima power plant – the concerned and supportive response of the NRE rural exchange participants confirmed the long-term impacts of the initiative.

Along with the researchers and community members I am also celebrating the essential role and support of the staff and students in the project. We were very fortunate to be operating at

a time when people like Anna Woodrow, Joan Marshall, Madeleine Yates, Simone Draca, and Lisa Roy were available and interested. These were people who went far beyond the minimal requirements of their jobs – to enthusiastically include traveling to remote towns, partying with rural folk, and even rising to the challenge of sing-alongs and winter bathing.

I am also immensely pleased to see our student alumni here. When I was preparing the report for SSHRC I was reminded of the more than 120 students who have been involved in the NRE project. It was exciting to work with them. And it remains exciting to periodically receive e-mails from them describing their adventures and the way in which their NRE experiences shaped their lives.

Like Martin Hayes, Jessica Gallant, and Mao Sato who spent many years in Africa and Japan – supporting children and women in international aid agencies.

Like Mike Burns, Cindy Ann Bryant, Lana Sullivan, Jamie Dressler, Jennifer Perzow, Lisa Roy, Trina McKinlay, Becky Lipton, Angela Briscoe, and Janel Fisher who have moved into government and NGO jobs – often in positions where they contribute directly to policy development and practice.

And like Augustine Ependa, Ben Jacob, David Connell, Deatra Walsh, Sara Teitelbaum, Laura Ryser, Tara Lyons, and Vicki Beaupre-Odorico who have successfully navigated the challenges of teaching and research careers.

As expected, only a few of them have been able to find a niche with a primary focus on rural issues – but all of them take their experience with rural people and places into the context of their own adventures.

I would also like to include in our celebration – a recognition of those who have been lost to the formation. People like Andrew Errington, Frank Jackson, Derek Wilkinson, and Tom Briggs who enthusiastically spent some time at the point of our formation – encouraging us to move ahead and pulling us in important new directions.

What remains is a legacy we can celebrate. One where we have learned from each other about the importance of engaging with the communities we study, the value of working with people who are different – and expecting those differences to be sources of new insights and excitement, and trusting that we will continue to be surprised and supported by the generosity, intelligence, and good will of our colleagues.

Thank you for keeping me a fan of this (sometimes) noble lie – and thank you for guiding and travelling on this path with me over the 11 years of the NRE.

I look forward to continuing this journey as I drop back from the point position (for a while at least). I'm eagerly awaiting to see where the next migration will take us – and who will join the formation.





# NRE SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE



October 23, 2013

Airlane Hotel and Conference Centre, Thunder Bay, ON

8:30 – 9:00

REGISTRATION AND BREAKFAST – TIBERIO ROOM A

9:00 – 9:15

OPENING ADDRESS – BILL ASHTON

Session One	Title	Presenter
9:15 – 9:40	Ethics in rural government are fun	Peter Apedaile
9:45 – 10:10	An intangible driver of rural community development: Local governance	Bruno Jean

10:10 – 10:25

NUTRITION BREAK

Session Two	Title	Presenter
10:25 – 10:50	Wealth creation, sustainability and the new rural economy	Tom Johnson
10:55 – 11:20	Social finance as “Impact First investing”	Rosalind Lockyer and Judi Nelson Childs
11:25 – 11:50	Renewing innovative non-profit service provision: Structural barriers and innovative responses	Laura Ryser

11:50 – 1:00

LUNCH BREAK

Session Three	Title	Presenter
1:00 – 1:25	Recognizing the “rural” in rural services provision	Lana Sullivan
1:30 – 1:55	Building capacity: the role of rural traditional media and the new rural economy	Anna Woodrow
2:00 – 2:25	Supportive communities: How those in rural and non-rural areas deal with change	Dianne Looker

2:25 – 2:40

NUTRITION BREAK

Session Four	Title	Presenter
2:45 – 3:10	Revisiting the Capacity Model: An international comparison of forest-dependent communities	Sara Teitelbaum
3:15 – 3:40	The development of rural communities: Palliative care in low German-speaking Mennonite communities	Ling Ling Fan

3:40

WRAP UP

4:30

FINAL WORDS

6:00 – 7:00

COCKTAILS AND HORS D’OEUVRES – TIBERIO ROOM B

7:00 – 9:00

DINNER – TIBERIO ROOM B