members of the underclass to do the same. There is no real evidence that it has done so in any widespread way (and certainly not the way actual inner-city jobs or effective educational opportunities would), but that does not mean that the holiday is unnecessary. It remains to be seen how widely underprivileged communities will celebrate Kwanzaa in the coming years. There are potential benefits if they do, particularly since Kwanzaa undoubtedly has a more positive ethnic message than rapper Ice-T's "Cop Killer" or Khalid Muhammad.

Kwanzaa is not just a device for hostile separatism, as it may have been when it started; it can also be seen as a force for a cooperative, "pluralist" society approaching the American ideal. As the ubiquitous slogan has it, "one, and yet many."

NOTE
This essay previously appeared as Anna Day Wilde, "Mainstreaming Kwanzaa," Public Interest 119 (spring 1995): 68–79.

My wife and I walk up the limestone stairs and into Waterville's historic Weaver Hotel. We are here for an English "high tea." Inside the hotel, first built in 1905, I feel like I've stepped back in time. I am surrounded by women in Victorian dress and the delicate sounds of stringed instruments. We are directed across worn oak floors to a table covered with a white lace cloth and set with blue willow china. From our table, we notice the polished hard pine trim and numerous paintings depicting frontier life. We gaze through a large six-foot window onto Waterville's Front Street and notice a large crowd gathering. As we sit down, an elderly, genteel-looking woman serves us from a three-tiered cake plate brimming with tea sandwiches and pastries. We sip almond tea as we taste blueberry scones with clotted cream. We notice the crowd on Front Street now seems agitated. People are running around, pointing and talking excitedly. The sounds of cello and violin bring us back to our English tea. We sample quiche Lorraine and tea sandwiches of smoked salmon and cucumber watercress. We finish the tea with desserts of lemon curd, white chocolate tartlets, Madeira cakes, four cream chocolate drops, and English tea cakes. Several large blasts from a shotgun jar us from our casual conversation. Our hearts race as we notice men running down Front Street shooting pistols and shotguns. A cowboy lies face down on the dirt road. People along the street are laughing, cheering, and walking away. The "End of the Line" gang has just performed another street play depicting good and evil on the frontier.

Victorian Days is in full swing.
Community Festivals as Civic Communion

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that community festivals provide a special moment in civic life when a community reflects upon, celebrates, and ultimately presents an image of itself. Cultural theorist Frank E. Manning argues that community festivals represent a “text” or a vivid aesthetic event that depicts, interprets, informs, and celebrates social truths.\(^1\) Anthropologist Carole Farber holds that community festivals “provide ideal entrees into a community's symbolic, economic, social, and political life.”\(^2\) Robert H. Lavenda, a cultural anthropologist, has referred to festivals as “one of the few moments in the annual cycle when . . . a community publicly celebrates itself” . . . and a public culture emerges.\(^3\) Likewise, Michael Marsden, a professor of English, suggests that “the community festival might provide a significant window into the culture of a community. It may well provide us with a narrative about the community’s cultural essence.”\(^4\) And communication professor Raymond J. Schneider contends that by examining the way people play—the way they take time out to celebrate or to tell stories during festivals—we are able to determine much about the culture and even subcultures shared by communities.\(^5\) All of these scholars, representing a variety of academic disciplines, argue that through civic festivals communities celebrate, sanctify, and promote important local sociopolitical structures. In short, community festivals function as civic communion.

Community festivals are brief but recurring intense moments in the life of a town or city when citizens come together to celebrate some facet of their community. In this celebratory process, citizens also organize and perform important cultural, community truths. Community festivals have been labeled “authentic popular culture,” highlighting important local values, histories, events, and/or individuals. Further, by highlighting or privileging certain events, issues, and people over others, community festivals also function to create and sustain certain community hierarchies. Through festival performance, communities highlight and reinforce a certain public identity that is ultimately communicated to both local citizens and external publics.

Interestingly, however, many scholars have also pointed out that festivals remain a virtually unstudied context of civic life and cultural production. Michael Marsden and Ray Browne, for example, contend that “the community festival is one of the least understood areas of celebration.”\(^6\)

Festivals are paradigmatic of civic communion. Initially, festivals are symbolically and behaviorally framed moments in the life of communities. They are generally annual events, organized around some significant community event, history, issue, or person. While festivals do occur repeatedly, they are not the normal state of community affairs. They are, as Roger Abrahams writes, “times out of the ordinary . . . when gifts are given and ties are renewed, and community of spirit becomes more important than social structure.”\(^7\) During festivals, according to Alessandro Falassi, a community’s “daily time is modified by a gradual or sudden interruption that introduces ‘time out of time,’ a special temporal dimension devoted to special activities.”\(^8\) Festivals are a moment of both celebration and pause. Festivals offer special moments of reflection and performance of cultural truths. Lavenda argues that, through festivals, “municipalities create a momentary, if recurrent, . . . symbology of local significance” (emphasis mine).\(^9\) Festival organizers take significant time out of their daily routine to produce the event. For the core organizing group, festival preparation ultimately becomes a full-time endeavor. As the event grows closer, a sense of urgency and intensity settles over the organizing group. Likewise, festival-goers take time out from their daily and practical affairs to participate in this performance of local social structures. Further, as Falassi argues, “Festival time imposes itself as an autonomous duration, not so much to be perceived and measured in days or hours, but to be divided internally by what happens within from its beginning to its end, as in the ‘movements’ of mythical narratives.”\(^10\) Importantly, festivals are recognized as a special community moment. It is a transitory yet significant event, bracketed by months of planning and concluded with a time of celebration and festivity that ultimately performs a text of some community ideal.

Festivals are special events generally organized by a small group of deeply committed citizens and produced by an ad hoc committee of concerned citizens. These citizens come together for the express purpose of organizing and producing the community festival. This production group often begins slowly, meeting irregularly and sporadically months in advance of the event. As the event gets closer, however, the group meets more and more frequently and the communication becomes more intensely focused on the impending festival. It is also not unusual for the organizing committee to draw in outside assistance from townspeople or public and private agencies.\(^11\) These outside groups often function as consultants or evangelists, energizing both the organizing committee and local citizens. These evangelists may help organize and produce the festival.
or function as special entertainment features drawing in additional community participation. Lavenda summarizes the civic communion character of organizing community festivals when he writes, "Organization of the festival, since it takes several months of meetings and coordinated effort, creates a special sense of solidarity among organizers."

In addition to participation through organizing the festival, community events such as festivals provide a moment of common experience, a reference point for interaction and reflection in which a broad range of collective participation from local citizens is invited. Frank Manning, for example, argues that "celebration is participatory... Celebration actively involves its constituency; it is not simply a show put on for disengaged spectators." Initially, the organizing group often tries to be as inclusive as possible. It seeks to include business leaders, civic leaders, volunteer groups, and educational groups in the creation and production of the festival. It needs to include a variety of stakeholders not only because of the variety of special knowledge and skills necessary in producing festivals, but also because involvement from a variety of community sources likely increases the civic participation in the festival. Actual festival performance exhibits a broad range of participation. From a town's children reciting poems to historical reenactments of significant events, from speeches to community-wide parades, from dances to business leaders promoting the community to outside vendors by selling wares at the festival, the shared goal is to attract and entertain a large and diverse group. Festival celebrations are also available to anyone wishing to attend. Certainly many centrifugal forces exist in the community including religion, politics, patterns of kinship, class, social networks, mutual interests, and work. But festivals provide a momentary opportunity to transcend these differences and come together as a collective body to produce, reflect upon, and perform community ideals and identity. As Lavenda et al. conclude, festivals "provide a meeting place and a set of common experiences" for citizens.

Also characteristic of communion is full and active participation—what Ivan Karp calls "totalizing participation." Festival participation often involves the entire person. Citizens listen to and watch parades and festival performers. Participants smell and taste foods distinct to the particular area and festival. They can touch crafts, festival performers, and community monuments. Citizens become part of the festival performance, joining in parades, dances, speech events, or community skits.

In a religious community, holy communion recalls important religious texts and truths as part of the service. These texts remind and encourage the faith community to participate in a certain lifestyle, according to religious values. Likewise, community festivals are organized to dramatically enact important civic values. As Carole Farber argues, "the small-town festival is precisely [a] key dramatic performance—a performance in which official town myths and ideology are presented and re-presented in parades, talent shows, costume judging, sports competitions, masquerades, and the like." By highlighting, celebrating, and performing important community symbols, histories, events, or people, the festival is a moment when citizens collectively participate in reflection and promotion of civic truths.

**Victorian Days as Civic Communion**

Victorian Days is a festival that highlights the prairie Victorian past of Waterville, Kansas. As a promotional brochure proclaims, "Waterville's Victorian elegance was born out of a more rough-hewn time." In the late nineteenth century, Waterville briefly rivaled other cow towns like Abilene, Kansas; Kansas City, Missouri; and St. Joseph, Missouri, in terms of commerce generated from the cattle industry. Because of rail car availability and good grazing land, cattle were herded to Waterville and then transported east. The railroad was a significant presence in Waterville, and while cattle were shipped east, the railroad brought settlers west. Capital flowed into the town. During this time, "the little town shed its rough image and took on a gracious air of gentility as the monied and professional people began building new homes." The cattle boom, however, didn't last long, and the money, the railroad, and the capitalists soon left Waterville. Still, there are remnants of this bygone era. Large, stately Victorian homes, "replete with gables, gingerbread balconies, colonnades, turrets and towers, still stand today along the tree-shaded streets of Waterville." Don Fitzgerald also writes that the Victorian homes stand as a symbol of "the financial success of early Waterville... a reminder of the Victorian era and the 'Gay Nineties.'" A once-elegant hotel and an opera house also remain as reminders of Waterville's past. Victorian Days is a festival that performs and celebrates these former times through an English "high tea" in the historic Weaver Hotel, frontier reenactments of pioneer days gone by and street performances of good and evil, Victorian home tours and Victorian dress, an 1880s church service and a saloon, and quilt displays and tea shops created specifically to highlight the Victorian era.
Victorian Days in Waterville provides a good example of the civic communion function of community festivals. There are two moments of civic communion associated with the festival. Waterville citizens begin celebrating and sanctifying their community as they plan for the festival, and the second civic communion moment occurs during the actual festival weekend.

Civic communion begins with the genesis of the festival. As with all civic communions, this festival begins with a strong commitment from a small group of individuals. Victorian Days is actually the brainchild of LuAnn and Ruth Ann Roepeke. These sisters-in-law had a strong desire to host a community high tea and saw the opportunity to use the tea as a vehicle to create a community festival that would also highlight Waterville's Victorian past. The Roepekes reached across Waterville to recruit a number of women to help them produce this community festival. They tapped other Roepeke relatives, but also many unrelated women who possessed special skills in organization, communication, education, baking, and media relations. As LuAnn explained, "You ask the women that you know are capable of doing what you're wanting done . . . and try to get them in a slot that really fits their talent." Waterville's festival committee is currently constituted by sixteen to twenty dedicated women who have now produced the festival for eleven years. These women have connections all across Waterville, and the breadth of this committee membership translates into a broad level of support from a variety of segments in Waterville.

This organizing committee decided that the Victorian Days festival should enhance the visibility and promote the identity of Waterville and that they would use the funds they raise to help preserve historic community buildings. Ultimately, they have decided to organize and produce a community festival that would (1) highlight the prairie Victorian past of Waterville, (2) feature a "high tea" and Victorian home tours as festival centerpieces, and (3) use the money raised to preserve Waterville's historic buildings.

Victorian Days is organized for the last weekend of April. Preliminary planning for the festival begins in September, but the significant and intense planning begins in January. Planning meetings are models of organizational efficiency. The committee chair methodically moves around the table asking each of the women present to report on their Victorian Day activities for the prior month. Unlike so many academic meetings, nearly everyone on the Victorian Days committee attends every meeting and has progress to report. Meetings last 90 to 120 minutes and are almost always on task. There are some moments of small talk, but most speech is directed at the purpose of organizing and producing Victorian Days.

Strikingly, during the planning phase of Victorian Days, this group of women transforms from the individual identities of separate women living separate lives into a cohesive committee moving toward one goal—producing Victorian Days. Cooperation and the community goal of staging Victorian Days is paramount. Weeks before the festival, most of the committee meets at Ruth Ann's house to bake pastries for the high tea. At a meeting in March 2001, Ruth Ann announced that the baking was finished and that "you girls now need to all take some of these things and put 'em in your freezers." Following the meeting, all the boxed pastries disappeared into the night and into freezers across Waterville. At an early April meeting, Gay Stewart and Ruth Ann were looking for tables for "Priscilla's Ice Cream Parlor" and for the one-hundredth-year celebration of Ruth Ann's Victorian home. Women from around the table reported whether they had tables and where in their homes they could be located. "That table is on my deck; just come by sometime and pick it up," one announced. Whether the problem is cleaning downtown buildings, baking pastries, transforming downtown businesses into tea shops and ice cream parlors, finding props for displays, or finding volunteers, this committee models cooperation and interdependence, always keeping the objective of producing Victorian Days as the preeminent goal.

The second moment of civic communion occurs the weekend of festival performance. During the festival weekend, a sociocultural text of Waterville is performed through street performances, the English high tea, home tours, and the various Victorian shops created for the weekend. Through festival performance, citizens and visitors celebrate and enact cultural symbols and values associated with Waterville.

Waterville's sociocultural text is performed through a number of symbolic rituals. Falassi argues that festival rituals valorize civic symbols through processes of symbolic intensification and symbolic inversion. He further explains that during festivals, people do things they normally do not do; "they carry to the extreme behaviors that are usually regulated by measure [and] they invert patterns of daily social life." These two symbolic processes often function in concert. For example, a symbolic reversal occurs so that an important community symbol can be valorized or intensely highlighted. The civic function of all this festival symbolism, according to Falassi, "is to renounce and then to announce culture, to renew
periodically the lifestream of a community by creating new energy, and to give sanction to its institutions."

Symbolic inversion, a process by which a community reverses the "normal" state of affairs and in the process highlights important cultural symbols, is performed in several ways during Victorian Days. For example, throughout the Victorian Days festival, important Waterville symbols are transformed from their standard state into spaces and symbols of civic import. Most important, the Weaver Hotel and Waterville's Victorian homes are transformed from private, mundane, and relatively unused spaces into sanctified community symbols. In 1906, the Waterville Telegraph called the Weaver Hotel "the pride of Waterville," and proclaimed that "we believe we can boast of having the finest hotel of any town of its size and even many times larger in the state." Today, the Weaver Hotel stands unused and vacant for much of the year. It is, in many ways, symbolic of rural America's steady decline. Still, the hotel remains an important civic symbol of Waterville's past prosperity. So, for Victorian Days, the hotel is identified as the space for the festival's most important event—the English high tea. Weeks before the festival, Waterville citizens clean, paint, and ultimately transform the hotel from a derelict building into the luxury hotel it once was. Much the same process occurs for Waterville's fine Victorian homes that are used as tour sites. For example, Alan Minge's Victorian home is frequently used as such a tour site. The Waterville Telegraph explains that Minge's current home is "an exquisite Queen Anne house" first built in 1895 by banker Samuel Powell. The newspaper goes on to state that Powell "had come from Buffalo, New York, and brought charm, class and plenty of money from the East to build his house."25 Home owners, festival committee members, and even hired help converge on the houses to transform the private homes into public museums of Victorian display.

Other public spaces are also physically and symbolically inverted. They are transformed from their normal, everyday functions into spaces dedicated to articulating a sociocultural text of pioneer Victorian times. Educational and economic spaces are converted into festival performance spaces. For example, a downtown building normally used as the Valley Heights Preschool is transformed into "Priscilla's Ice Cream Parlour." A one-time produce market, now a vacant building, is converted into "The Front Street Saloon." The Waterville library becomes a display site of quilts constructed by local women in community quilting guilds. The local Masonic Hall is transformed into "Victoria's Tea Shop."

Even Commercial Avenue—home to Waterville's business district—is closed to vehicular traffic and transformed into a blacktop arena for Victorian-era performances. "Wheelmen"—Victorian-era bicyclists—ride up and down Commercial Avenue on antique bicycles, providing symbolic import to this form of transportation made popular during the Victorian era. At the east edge of the street, the Victorian Days festival performs its railroad heritage with a miniature steam engine and train that provide children with rides. Pioneer encampments were also set up at the end of Commercial, performing vignettes of life that early settlers in and around Waterville might have faced.

The people involved in Victorian Days also engage in symbolic inversion. During the festival weekend, community members assume roles unlike their everyday personas. High school girls become "can-can dancers" in a saloon. A physician's assistant becomes the proprietor of the ice cream parlor. Retired farmers' wives become elegant servers at an English high tea. Speech communication graduate students become Victorian home tour guides. Dress functions to assist with the performance of symbolic reversal as everyone wears costumes reminiscent of a pioneer Victorian era.

Not only do festivals employ symbolic inversion to highlight important sociocultural truths, but festivals also employ symbolic intensification to valorize civic structures. Symbolic intensification occurs through festival performances in which participants engage in some extreme or exaggerated behavior with the purpose of highlighting and emphasizing some valued civic structure. Falassi suggests that symbolic intensification may occur through "rites of conspicuous display" and "ritual dramas." Rites of conspicuous display "permit the most important symbolic elements of the community to be seen, touched, adored, or worshiped."26

Two powerful examples of rites of conspicuous display include the English high tea and the Victorian home tours. Each of these festival performances highlights artifacts and activities that most festival-goers do not possess or engage in. Most festival participants have not participated in a high tea. Most likely, festival tourists have not sampled the varieties of tea and the range of pastries provided, so the festival tea allows them to engage in a performance of high society. Likewise, the home tours are performances of conspicuous display. As Falassi argues, "Sacred shrines...are solemnly displayed and become the destination of visitations from within the immediate boundaries of the festival, or of pilgrimages from faraway places."27 Private homes are constructed as public museums. Festival-goers "sign in" to gain entrance into the homes. At one home, tourists
were required to don surgical booties before entering. Festival participants were directed by volunteer docents through magnificent homes restored to Victorian elegance and adorned with objects of wealth. The festival thus provides tourists a vicarious sampling of foods, activities, objects, and lifestyles that they have heard and seen but not personally experienced.

In addition to these rites of conspicuous display, Victorian Days also performs ritual dramas. According to Falassi, "By means of the drama, the community members are reminded of their Golden Age, the trials and tribulations of their founding fathers in reaching the present location of the community." The Golden Age and values of Waterville are enacted through various dramatic performances. The "End of the Line Gang" displays good and evil with a street drama depicting "Waterville's early history as a rough railroad town." The performance illustrates the danger of frontier Kansas and the importance of being able to take care of oneself. Depicting the clash between duly appointed lawmen and vigilante bounty hunters, the performance features outlaws riding into town, kidnaping ladies from the local saloon, only to be thwarted and killed by local sheriffs.

Ritual dramas are also performed during Victorian Days by "reenactors" who set up pioneer camps depicting prairie life during the late nineteenth century. These pioneer camps illustrate the hardships pioneers faced when cooking, washing, and maintaining cattle and horses. The pioneer camps illustrate the harsh conditions on the prairie and the values necessary for survival on the Kansas plains. Additionally, school children in period dress perform short declamations and recite Victorian-era poems in Waterville's "Game Fork Schoolhouse"—a one-room schoolhouse built in 1904. A religious service honoring the frontier church is also conducted.

Ritual dramas also draw festival-goers into the dramatic performance. Citizens line the streets to watch the "End of the Line Gang" enact frontier values through their street performance. The twenty-first-century audience becomes a frontier crowd, heckling evil and cheering justice as frontier law is dispensed through saloon fights and street shootouts. Bystanders are thus transformed from festival spectators into participants in a larger drama depicting the civic values of the frontier. Likewise, festival participants touch, smell, and taste the constructed frontier in the drama of the pioneer camps. Tourists touch and smell recently tanned leather. They watch and smell as iron is molded through fire into horseshoes,hammets, and nails. They smell and taste food cooked over open campfires with cast-iron kettles. In short, festival-goers become active participants in a frontier civic drama depicting appropriate behaviors and values.

Community Constructed through Victorian Days

From the Victorian Days festival, a civic image of Waterville emerges. Victorian Days casts Waterville as an affluent, God-fearing, pioneer community on the Kansas plains. Festival performances also highlight civic values of innovation, self-reliance, and cooperation.

As mentioned earlier, the two events that highlight Victorian Days are the English high tea and the home tours. Both events are performances of conspicuous display. Both festival performances trade on symbols of wealth and the elite, and both remind festival participants of Waterville's brief moment of affluence. Just as important as these two festival performances is the prominence of the railroad at the festival. During Victorian Days, festival participants are encouraged to tour the Depot Museum and children are encouraged to ride a miniature version of an 1880s steam engine. "The railroad gave birth to Waterville" and in the late nineteenth century was symbolic of community affluence. Railroad were the agency whereby significant commerce occurred and whereby goods were transported to rural areas, and they were the most sophisticated mode of travel. Thus, these very prominent symbols of Victorian Days function to communicate a community of affluence.

Religion also plays a significant part of the Victorian Days. The festival organizing committee holds all their meetings in Waterville Methodist Church. During the festival, this same church is open and visitors are encouraged to view Biblical murals that depict significant religious stories. The local Lutheran Church is also used to serve festival-goers box lunches. Finally, a Victorian-style church service is held each Sunday of the festival. Festival organizers report that over a hundred people attend the service, with many attending in Victorian costume.

Besides performing religious values, Victorian Days also enacts pioneer values of innovation, self-reliance, and cooperation. Innovation is performed in several ways during Victorian Days. For example, festival-goers view how early Kansans cooked, made clothes, and made tools. The "Wheelmen" and their antique bicycles also enact innovation during the Waterville festival. Bicycling was significant during the Victorian era. During this time, bicycling was popular both nationally and internationally;
even Waterville had its own bicycling club. During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, several bicycle innovations occurred, making the bike a more affordable, attractive, and comfortable mode of transportation. The evolution of the bicycle also led to changes in styles of clothing so people could more comfortably ride and to changes in road conditions.34

Self-reliance is another value performed during Victorian Days. Again, the pioneer camps illustrate early Kansas life when settlers had to rely on their own resources and abilities. Likewise, the street performances dramatize frontier good and evil and depict individualism and the importance of relying on oneself. They dramatically perform being able to defend oneself and taking the law into one’s own hands. Festival committee members also use Victorian Days to communicate the importance of self-reliance to another. According to Sandy Harding, during one of the rehearsals for the children’s program at the Game Fork School, a child’s mother frantically exclaimed,

“I just don’t know how I’m going to get my son ready,” she said, “I’m not a seamstress. I can’t make him a pirate’s costume.” And she was just really upset and I said, “Ya’ know, in the era that they’re portraying.” I said, “do you that those mothers had fancy sewing machines and they could run down to Wal-Mart and get the fabric? They had to get in their closets.” I said, “Just get in your closet. Tie a bandana on his head and put a patch on his eye and send him off.” But, it was kind of a learning experience for some of the parents too, the mother, you know. To go back, to step back in time. I thought that was kind of neat.

But the most significant value communicated through the Victorian Days festival is cooperation. It is a value exhibited among members of the organizing committee, Waterville citizens, and various businesses in Waterville. Businesses and landlords turn their buildings over to the Victorian Days festival. A variety of citizens come together to clean and convert downtown buildings into spaces appropriate for the festival. Citizens help one another prepare for the festival by finding and offering furniture and china for the tea and ice cream parlor. They help one another find and secure volunteers for the various festival sites. The committee members do an excellent job of helping one another brainstorm and deal with problems. The entire festival, then, becomes symbolic of cooperation among the committee and community. In fact, very little anger or resentment was expressed in any of the committee meetings that I observed, as well as in our interviews or participant observation. One source of anger that did surface concerned a lack of cooperation by the city officials. When asked at the wrap-up meeting about festival problems, committee members complained that too many children were downtown on skateboards and scooters, riding on sidewalks and streets, zipping in and out of the crowds, and placing festival-goers in danger. The problem was cast as a lack of interest and enforcement by city government, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Sandy: We need some crowd control. We need some cooperation from the town officials that we don’t get. That’s it in a nutshell. Doris actually called, and I don’t know if she called Chuck or Larry. But she called and asked him to come and be on the streets Sunday. Because it was dangerous out there. I mean, in and out of the crowd. If we’d had a busy crowd, somebody would’ve been hurt. I think it is unfortunate that we don’t have any cooperation from our city officials, which we don’t have.

Gay: Yeah, that’s right.

Sandy: And, I don’t know how we get it.

Pam: Well, is that for a lack of asking?

Sandy: Oh no. No. It’s for lack of interest on their part.35

This conversational exchange also illustrates how the values of self-reliance and cooperation are connected. Private citizens first generated the idea of Victorian Days, the organizing committee is completely composed of private citizens, and organizers do not rely on public support from the Waterville city government.

In addition to highlighting community values, civic communions also articulate a community hierarchy. Indeed, Victorian Days is perceived by some in the community as an elitist and restrictive festival. Comments received by both interviews and participant observation indicate that some in Waterville view Victorian Days as the property of an elite group. One committee member referred to the organizational committee as “cliquish,” while another committee member indicated that her family wasn’t truly accepted into Waterville because they did not have “three generations of family buried in the Waterville cemetery.” During an encounter at a Waterville convenience store, citizens said they saw the festival as a way for “some folks to show off.” Members of the festival committee recognize this perspective. One member stated that there are “people that just don’t get excited about it. Maybe because the word Victorian is ... intimidating.
to some people.” Another committee member also recognized the community division and indicated how the committee responds to that division: “There are a few people in town who don’t like [the festival]. They think ‘so and so’ is making money off of it and they wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole. We [on the committee] just proceed as if they didn’t exist.”

Another issue that creates an elitist perception is the admission cost of the festival. The most celebrated events—the high tea and the home tours—are accessible only by purchasing $20 tickets for admission. While people in most urban areas would perceive this cost as minimal, some locals view this expense as excessive. One festival-goer commented, “I’ve always wanted to attend Victorian Days, but it’s so expensive. I never would’ve come, but I had a ticket given to me this year.” Another visitor to Victorian Days commented, “I thought [Victorian Days] was fun. I thought it was a little spendy, but I thought they knew what they were doing.”

A final source of community division comes from the focus of the festival. There is community-wide perception that Victorian Days is a festival for women. This is a widespread perception held both by those on the committee and among the townspeople. The perception is fueled in many ways. All the festival’s key players are women. In all the meetings I attended over a two-year period, I saw three men. Each attended only one meeting. During one meeting where the committee was searching for volunteer help, someone suggested asking some men and another woman sarcastically responded, “finding men helpers, that’s like looking for hen’s teeth.” A local man agreed, conceding that male volunteers were “a group that hasn’t previously been involved.”

In most ways, the festival is constructed toward female interests. The major festival events are geared toward women; for example, the high tea, the Victorian home tours, and the tea shop. As one male indicated, “you’ve got a group of guys who aren’t interested in the tea, they’re not interested in the tea shop, they’re not interested in those kind of things.”

Additionally, all advertising for Victorian Days—from signage to brochures to publicity fliers—is printed in pink. At one committee meeting, the woman in charge of the Victorian tea shop related how she had to “take the ‘man look’ away” from the local Masonic Hall. Much of the talk during committee meetings is related to the costumes and the sewing of the costumes. During the festival weekend, nearly every woman working with the festival is dressed in Victorian costume.

Festival conversation also reinforces traditional gender roles. A female tourist to the Alan Minge Victorian home reported that it was clear the home’s owner was a man because “that mirror in the bathroom had obviously not been cleaned recently—probably not for a couple of weeks!” Much discussion also revolved around male responses to the high tea. Men reportedly looked “dazed and bewildered” by the variety of food and drink choices. In one conversation, women reported that some men “looked stunned” by the variety and diversity of food offered during the tea and that these men simply ignored foods they didn’t recognize. A female committee member labeled this a “typical male response.”

Festival organizers recognize this gender disparity and have moved to attract more men to the event. They added the saloon and the street shootouts. The railroad display also tended to be a male attraction. As a committee member pointed out, “I think [the railroad] added a lot for the men because you could see them all talking, ya’ know, visiting about it, ya’ know, looking at it, examining it. So that was a good drawing card for gentlemen, I think.”

Conclusions

Community festivals like Victorian Days function as civic communion. These festivals are transitory yet intense moments in the community when the town performs civic history, values, and hierarchy. Festival performances are sociocultural texts celebrating important community symbols. By examining the performance of community festivals, scholars may gain insight into a community and view a powerful way in which the community is organized.

It is clear that Victorian Days in Waterville is meant to serve a civic purpose. In a 1999 interview, LueAnn Roepke stated that “the festival was created to give back to the community.” In fact, over the life of the festival, the organizing committee has raised and donated over $50,000 to community projects in Waterville. It has also used this cash as seed money to attract outside grants and bequests from private citizens to maintain and renovate historical Waterville sites. Further, the festival is viewed as a vehicle for unifying the community. The festival is a moment when the town celebrates important community history, people, and symbols. Through the performance of the festival, Victorian Days reminds citizens and outsiders of Waterville’s railroad
history, its brief period of economic affluence, and its prairie roots. The festival also positively performs an affluence lifestyle and celebrates the role of women in this rural community.

Despite some dissenting community voices, the majority of Waterville citizens—both organizing committee members and outsiders—view Victorian Days as an event that brings the town together. Sandy Harding provides, a most powerful and articulate voice on this issue. In the following narrative, she explains her job—organizing an after-festival party which anyone who helped with Victorian Days can attend—and the overall value of Victorian Days.

I guess our main job was the after-party. What can I say when you get over a hundred people to show up. I thought it was a big tribute to this community. I said, no matter what we made or how many people bought tickets, I think that Victorian Days does something for the Waterville community that is above and beyond any monetary value that we ever gain from it. You looked around the room (the after-party) and you had people from all walks of life in our community gathered together for one cause, having a good time, and to me, that was worth anything and everything we all did together. It was good. I think the value to our community is just above and beyond any work we do, any money we make. I think it unites the Waterville Community.10

Finally, community festivals such as Victorian Days function to create and reinforce a public community identity. Victorian Days serves to promote Waterville as a rural community on the prairie, founded in the history of railroads and cattle, but also a community of style, grace, and charm. Both community insiders and outsiders indicate that Waterville is recognized through Victorian Days. SueAnn Roepeke, for example, argues that Victorian Days “gives us name recognition for a small town.”41 Sandy Harding echoes this sentiment but also avers that Victorian Days “sets us up to be an example and leader to all surrounding towns and counties... When you say Waterville, people sit up and take notice. We are a model to a lot of communities."

Through Victorian Days, Waterville citizens briefly, but intensely, come together in an attempt to retain and remind citizens of vestiges of the town’s affluent prairie past. Through the performance of this community festival, the community reminds citizens and visitors of important civic histories, hierarchies, values, and cultural symbols. Through the organization and production of Victorian Days, Waterville projects a public image to both its citizens and neighboring people and communities.

NOTES

12. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 34.
Part IV

Nation Building