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Against All Odds  
Rural Community in the  
Information Age

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To

*Lee J. Haggerty, Portland State University,  
Joe M. Bohlen (1917-1990), Iowa State University, and  
George M. Beal, Iowa State University*

for teaching us how to look for and understand community

and

*Kenneth P. Wilkinson (1938-1993)  
The Pennsylvania State University*

for encouraging us to  
appreciate and respect community

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## Preface

Can a meaningful sense of community exist within rural towns and villages of the United States as we approach the 21st century? The answer is a resounding yes for at least one rural community in the Pacific Northwest. And the factors that keep community alive in Bremer, Washington, have implications for other places whose citizens are concerned about maintaining community services, identity, and pride.

Bremer is a tiny dot on the official highway map of Washington State. Its 1,000 residents, 500 within the city limits and the remainder scattered across the adjacent countryside, make it too small to count for much in the eyes of casual observers.

Physically there is little to distinguish Bremer and its people from other nearby small farming communities. Yet these residents, and many of the residents of larger towns and cities in the region, recognize that Bremer is somehow different. In a sentence, it defies most of the rules of what a community of a mere thousand people, with virtually no industry other than agriculture and too far from a city to be a bedroom community, should be like. It has a doctor, drugstore, grocery, hardware store, insurance agencies, and other small businesses. The official town population is about the same as it was 50 years ago, in sharp contrast to the decline of many other small communities in the region.

Bremer is also different in ways less visible. It has turned down government grants in favor of solving its own problems. A community club formed subcommittees to do what government grants do for other communities. The town has an annual fair, in which most residents participate, but doesn't advertise it, even while merchants post advertisements for similar events in other communities. A community calendar hangs on a wall in nearly every household, listing birthdays and anniversaries for most residents. The city council accepted a citizen's offer to cut down some old trees, but only after figuring out who planted them and checking with an appropriate relative for "approval." Then it upped the ante by offering gas for the chain saw and use of the city truck to haul away the wood. The bank pays below market rates and people have to stand in line and ask for loans at the window, but people still do business there. The mayor and many others keep track of how much they spend at each of the town's grocery stores,

in order to be fair. One of the grocery stores doesn't sell toothpaste, because that's sold in the drugstore.

Most of all Bremer has a community spirit, an identity defended publicly and privately, and with anger or tears when necessary. The residents, most of whom are descendants or relatives of the original settlers, gauge both their actions and reactions according to what other community members expect of them. Bremer is a tightly knit community of people whose daily actions, both economic and social, take into account a shared identity—that of being Bremerites.

Interest in the Bremer community may at first seem to be only a matter of idle curiosity, justified mostly by intrigue with the unusual. However, our interest is motivated by a deeper, more profound concern. On the one hand there is the success of this small town in maintaining an institutional base of businesses and services and in its ability to solve its own problems, success nearby communities have not achieved. On the other hand there is clear evidence of community pride and spirit that affects the lives of nearly every resident. Are the two connected, and if so, how?

Early in this century, community was considered a sociological concept of primary importance for understanding human behavior. People's lives were often confined mostly to a particular community, and community was an umbrella social group, without which the reasons for people's behavior could not be understood. In the face of technological developments, urbanization, and evolution toward a mass society, knowledgeable sociologists declared the death of community and looked to other sociological concepts for the explanation of human behavior.

In describing and analyzing Bremer, as the 20th century draws to a close, we will revisit the question of whether community really is dead, or whether its death has been overestimated. We will also take a look at the internal dynamics of this community in an effort to understand why it exists. It is a particularly opportune time for asking these questions, as the forces of the mass society recede in favor of the forces of an emerging information age.

Often, as one talks with people in rural communities of the U.S., a concern over the lack of community identity is heard. People sometimes ask what it would take to create a sense of community belonging. In this book we report one community's experience in creating community, and we also probe the provocative questions raised about the cost of the process and the desirability of its consequences.

John C. Allen  
Don A. Dillman

## Acknowledgments

The people of Bremer made this book possible. Individually and collectively they shared their experiences of what it means to live in Bremer. To them we offer our deepest thanks for sitting through long interviews, filling out questionnaires, and teaching us about life in Bremer.

When the senior author and his family moved into the Bremer community in 1984, it was the end of a search for a place to live. Only later, after his driveway had been voluntarily plowed by neighbors, a farmer had taught him how to drive a loaded grain truck down a steep hill by visualizing how a snowball would roll down it, and many other lessons of what it meant to be a resident of Bremer had been learned, did that move turn out to be the beginning of this book.

When the idea of writing the book became known in the Bremer community, people opened up their history, their current lives, and their hopes for the future. Their willingness to do that made this book possible.

A number of social scientists read and commented on early versions of this book: James H. Copp, Olaf F. Larson, Edward O. Moe, James A. Christenson, Kenneth P. Wilkinson, Robert E. Howell, John E. Carlson, Ed Michaelson, Viktor Gecas, John Wardwell, and Lewis Carter. At a critical time in the writing process, Sonja Salamon visited Bremer, participated in a seminar with us, and generously shared the insights of her own extensive research on community in helping us to comprehend the complexities of life in Bremer. Janet Fitchen also visited Bremer, read and reread the manuscript, and provided several years of encouragement and suggestions, more than any authors have a right to expect. Thanks to all of you.

We also appreciate the support provided by our employers. Robert Haskell at the University of New England and Sam Cordes at the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Nebraska--Lincoln provided strong support to the senior author throughout portions of the writing effort. The Department of Rural Sociology and the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University provided substantial support for data collection activities and for work by the junior author.

Kathy Allen, who lived the Bremer experience as wife, mother, and community member, provided insights into the workings of the



Bremer community that can be found on virtually every page of this book. She also made sure the book got finished, providing the emotional support essential to resolving the inevitable collisions of job hunting, career development, and family responsibilities that accompanied the writing and rewriting.

Tammy Small at Washington State University contributed much to this effort by keeping the writing activities organized and processing the final manuscript. Her attention to detail and marvelous computer and organizational skills have made our work much easier. Excellent editorial assistance from Jane Henicke is also appreciated. Our thanks also go to David Flaherty for the photographs and Kenneth Clark for the graphical illustrations that appear on the pages of this book.

A deliberate effort has been made to protect the identity of the community and the anonymity of people who shared many and sometimes intimate details of life in Bremer. In addition to changing the name of the community, we have sometimes changed dates, locations, and names and positions of people who supplied information, where anonymity seemed especially difficult to protect. Each change of this nature was individually decided. We have also omitted entirely certain items of information that support our eventual conclusions but that we could find no easy way of changing in a way that would protect anonymity while maintaining the integrity of the analysis. These decisions were often difficult and made through joint consideration of potential impact on the lives of individuals and the accuracy of the analysis. Although we frequently consulted with people mentioned above on these issues, we alone accept responsibility for the final decisions as well as any errors of interpretation.

J.C.A.  
D.A.D.

# 1

## Confronting the Inevitable

### The Meeting

It is 6:55 p.m. on a gray Monday in March, well past the State Class B basketball tournament, but spring has yet to make a convincing arrival. In the school building near the edge of town, several of Bremer's six school board members are milling in the long narrow hallway, still wearing jackets. They converse on nothing in particular and stop even that as headlights flash in the window, indicating that yet another car has pulled into the parking lot.

The topic for tonight's special school board meeting is whether Bremer should consolidate its school district with that of Flemington, a town some 18 miles away. The meeting had been called a few days before, with the only announcement being informal phone calls to members. A small turnout is hoped for by the board members. Yet the steady stream of headlights flashing in the window is not unexpected. At 7:05 p.m., without fanfare, the board members wisely decide to move the meeting from the library to the much larger auditorium/gymnasium.

Ironically, attendees at tonight's special school board meeting pass by the obvious problem as they walk the length of the long, flat building that houses all 13 grades of the Bremer school system to enter the auditorium. Hanging on the hallway walls are the pictures of every Bremer high school graduate of the last 79 years. The picture for 1907 shows four graduates, two men standing dressed in high button collars with black coats, and two seated women with their hair piled high on their heads. The 1940 picture includes 31 students. The casualness of their dress contrasts markedly with most of the earlier pictures; women are standing as well as sitting. The picture of the 1960 graduates displays 63 students standing stiffly in straight rows. This

class was the largest ever to graduate from the Bremer high school. The 1986 picture shows only 12 graduates standing side by side displaying their diplomas, the smallest class to graduate from Bremer High since 1923.

Next to the principal's office, near the main double doors to the school, sits a large trophy case overflowing with gold plated figurines of basketball players frozen in the act of shooting. Engraved into the bases of several are the words State B Champions. Large silver footballs sit atop pedestals with similar inscriptions indicating other championships for Bremer. Gold plates on hardwood plaques list the players on the winning teams for each of the championship years. The plaques from later years have the same names as earlier years, such as Snyder, Balkum, and Felder, the only difference being the "Jr." notation. Names on the older trophies are all male. Basketball and volleyball trophies topped by women figurines begin in the early 1980s.

For those not familiar with the winning and losing years for the local teams, the trophy case might appear to contain all of the trophies a small school could garner in over 70 years of competition. But most community residents, including the attendees at tonight's meeting, know that many have been moved to the top shelves in the library "to make room for the new ones." These trophies are not collecting dust but are kept shiny and reflective of the pride this small school takes in its "winners," who often remain in the forefront of community discussion throughout their lives.

By 7:15 p.m. the crowd has grown to over 100 people. Husbands in Bremer Grain Growers baseball caps accompanied by wives, most wearing blouses and slacks, are still entering the gym. The men nod and stop to talk in muffled tones with other men who have already found a seat. Some of the women are carrying manila folders, which they wave at other women in the crowd, who nod and smile approvingly in return. Except for a few nervous visitors near the door, everyone knows everyone else, not just by name but in most cases by life history.

As the wall clock ticks past 7:30 p.m., the chairman of the school board, a farmer in a plaid shirt, levi's and cowboy boots, the standard dress of most locals, calls the meeting to order. Known to most of those seated in the gym as Fred Miller's son who married Bill Davis's oldest daughter and lives on Miller Road and farms the Miller place, he begins by explaining that this is an information meeting only. No decisions will be made tonight. He welcomes the small cadre of nervous visitors from Flemington with whom the board has been discussing the possibility of consolidation and who sit together near the door. His introduction results in many of the Bremerites turning their heads to

stare briefly at the "outsiders" with silence and expressions that seem to reflect distaste.

The chairman turns the floor over to another board member who explains what consolidation would mean to Bremer. He tells the citizens that consolidation or cooperation with another school district would increase the number of class offerings to Bremer students and would enable the school to retain its current number of teachers. He also notes that the school district is the largest employer in the community and abruptly ends his remarks. With that brief introduction the floor is opened for discussion.

The first member of the audience to speak is a farmer, whose picture hangs in the hallway and whose athletic trophies remain displayed in the trophy case near the principal's office. He is in his late 30s and dressed in the obligatory boots and jeans and a pullover dress shirt. His credentials of having been a star Bremer basketball player in a community that expects state champions adds credibility to his voice. His opinion is that neither consolidation nor cooperation is needed. Instead, he says, Bremer needs to lobby the state capitol to permit the raising of school-bond levy levels, a reference to a decade-old law that limits how much money schools can raise locally to supplement state funds. His presentation is applauded, providing momentary relief to the tenseness that permeates the room. The next few people to speak are parents of Bremer school children. Their concerns are pointed toward the other district and range from bad teachers to the "undesirable character" of Flemington residents. The applause gets louder with each speaker.

The next speaker, a woman, stands and opens a manila folder. Newspaper clippings fall to the floor. She nervously bends down and picks up the clippings as she begins to speak. She talks very rapidly and her voice cracks from the obvious stress. Flemington is described as a community full of trouble. She reads from one newspaper clipping about a local deputy sheriff who after having been called to serve a warrant on a Flemington resident said that the town has changed for the worse in the last few years. She goes on to read another brief article about a small school in a neighboring state where the students are ranked academically with the best in the nation. She concludes that Bremer doesn't want to be consolidated with Flemington and that the school board should listen to her because she speaks for a lot of her friends. Many women in the crowd nod their heads in agreement as she continues to speak.

The chairman next recognizes the residents from Flemington, who had met previously to select a spokesperson. They have chosen a schoolteacher who has come prepared with diagrams and data that

show the ability of Flemington students to be as good as or better than Bremer students. The crowd interrupts in protest of his comparisons several times until the chairman of the school board stands and shouts his frustration that this is a public meeting and that the least Bremer residents can do is to be polite.

The Flemington teacher strongly counters the argument that the Flemington students are poorly educated and mostly migrants from outside the area. He shows SAT scores and notes where the graduates attend college. This year Flemington graduated one student, but in 1987 six seniors are expected to graduate. The current number of high school students is 21. The Flemington representative talks about the outstanding Flemington graduates, mentioning a congressman, an author, and the new valedictorian, who will be attending an Ivy League school. Bremerite hands begin to wave urgently for recognition and a turn to speak. However, the teacher goes on to explain that Flemington uses a satellite receiving dish to offer advanced college-preparatory classes that they could not otherwise offer, a technology not yet accepted by Bremer. He concludes by saying that his community welcomes the consolidation effort or another version of cooperation.

The crowd is disruptive and the chairman calls for a 15-minute recess for tempers to cool. Small crowds of five to six people stand around the gym talking and gesturing in animated ways. Voices are raised and the gym hums with sounds that override individual voices. When the meeting is called back to order, the faces of the board members express deep concern. Members of the crowd are waving their hands and even manila folders to get the attention of the chair. A young mother is recognized by the chair to speak next. She begins with the fact that she graduated from Bremer and wants her daughter to have the same advantages that she had. She declares her dislike for the Flemington kids and their parents who are "all from the city anyway." Her contention that Flemington residents are from the city is based on a community-wide belief that because of cheap housing, state residents on state or federal assistance programs have relocated to Flemington and changed it for the worse. She finishes with her voice rising and declares that she will not have her kids go to school with welfare kids from Flemington. Her voice breaks and tears flow down her cheeks as she sits down.

The speakers who follow carry on the theme of protest, repeating that Bremer could survive without the kids from the other community and so the board should vote against consolidation or cooperation. At 10:00 p.m. the atmosphere remains heated and the board reschedules another public meeting for two weeks from that night.

The Flemington members who are seated in a group by the door leave quickly and silently. Their cars are out of the parking lot before the first group of Bremerites reaches the outside doors. As the remaining Bremerites walk slowly down the corridor, the pictures above the lockers are once again ignored, as are the trophies and basketballs inscribed by players of winning teams in the enclosed glass case standing sentinel just outside the principal's office.

### The Outcome

Only a week after the public meeting, the Bremer school board met with the school board from Flemington and a cooperation agreement between the two schools was signed. Those in attendance sat quietly as the midday light filtered through the school library window reflecting off the trophies standing above the rows of books. In contrast with the earlier meeting, the conversation was quiet and subdued, although one retired farmer dressed in faded work jeans and boots attempted to lighten the atmosphere with an off-color joke about Democratic politicians.

The cooperative agreement stipulated that each community would keep its elementary school. It was agreed that the junior high school would be situated in Flemington, with students from both Bremer and Flemington attending. A bus schedule was worked out whereby the Bremer junior high students would ride a Bremer school district bus to a point about seven miles on the Bremer side of Flemington and then would be moved to a Flemington bus to continue their journey to the school in Flemington. Both boards decided that it would be best if a teacher from Bremer rode both ways with the school children for the first month "to make the adjustment easier."

The high school, it was agreed, would be in Bremer. The students from Flemington would ride the bus to the exchange point and then would go the rest of the way on the Bremer bus. The high school teachers in Flemington would be given positions in the junior high in Flemington or at the Bremer high school, with some teachers splitting their teaching day between the two schools.

The importance of athletics to both communities was a topic of heated discussion. Both communities wanted to retain their name and mascot. In the end Bremer, because of its larger enrollment, won the right to retain the high school athletics and its original mascot.

A week after the signing, and two weeks following the emotional night meeting in the Bremer gym, the Bremer school board met again with the community members of Bremer. This meeting lacked the

fervor of the previous public meeting. Several board members explained the new contract as an experiment. If it did not work, the schools would be returned to their past organizational structure. One Bremer school board member explained:

We just didn't have a choice. If we didn't do something the state was going to make us get rid of one and a half teachers. We just didn't have the students to justify that many teachers. If we lost the teachers we were going to lose some classes and we really can't afford to get any further behind in our curriculum compared to bigger schools. So we did what we had to do.

The silence of those in attendance signified their resigned acceptance and the meeting was soon adjourned. Once again the audience ignored the pictures and trophies as they dispersed out the doors and into the night.

To an outside observer, the contrast between the trauma of the first meeting and the quiet acquiescence of the second may seem at best impossible. At worst, it might be seen as a sign of protest without commitment, psychological withdrawal, and powerlessness. Nothing could be further from reality.

The seven days in between provided a remarkable illustration of how decisions are made in Bremer. Community leaders, many of whom did not hold elected positions, spent hours in the coffee shop and cafe explaining the options if the school board did not consolidate. The Bremer community acted. During the intense two-week period between meetings, board members each received dozens of telephone calls, and made dozens of others. Community residents stopped their pickup trucks along fields and in farm driveways, where they talked first about the weather and the price of wheat, and then about the schools. The purchase of bags of groceries involved not only the exchange of money for groceries, but the exchange of ideas about the school, and the sharing of concerns. No formal "pro" group formed; no formal "con" group formed. People talked, and the same people listened. By whatever means, the community of Bremerites came to understand the issues and worked through what became defined as the only possible solution. That gray Monday night, on which such intense emotions were expressed and the community seemed on the verge of extended controversy, was well on its way to becoming only a memory.

What causes the expression of intense emotion on behalf of something that the participants themselves call their "community"? How does a school board meeting called a few days before with no general announcement become a forum for protest attended by more than one-tenth of the residents of this place called Bremer? Why does a

proposed cooperative agreement between the schools of Bremer and Flemington, only 18 miles apart, and mostly indistinguishable by physical features, dominant occupation, and ethnic background, evoke such intense emotions? Perhaps most perplexing of all, how can an intense meeting of frustration be followed by a decision that runs counter to the theme of that protest, with the decision itself being followed only a few days later by a meeting of resigned acceptance? In the following chapters we will search for answers to these and other questions about this small rural community.

---

## Locating Bremer: Influences of Space and Time

Like other inland communities of the Pacific Northwest, Bremer is oriented toward the west, the direction from which the first settlers came. Politics, markets, services from metropolitan areas, and even the weather flow from west to east. Thus, to understand Bremer it is useful to start from the west.

Retracing the nearly 400-mile path of the first Bremer settlers, from near Portland, Oregon, to the fertile Palouse hills of far-eastern Washington, reveals much about the Bremer community. A convenient vantage point from which to comprehend the enormous climatic and geological variations along the route is at the 20,000-foot altitude and 275-mile-per-hour speed of the many prop jet aircraft that serve inland cities of Washington and Oregon, taking passengers toward Spokane, some distance north of Bremer. Ironically, flights originating from the Portland airport begin within sight of the giant elevators where barges full of white soft wheat, the main source of Bremer's livelihood, are being transferred to ocean-going ships for export. These barges have just finished stair-stepping their way through the eight giant dams of the Snake-Columbia river system that facilitate ocean-bound barge shipments of what locals have tagged "Palouse Gold."

The early-spring scene that unfolds below is as dramatic as it is ever changing. Only minutes away from Portland, the Columbia River begins its bisection of the Cascade Mountain Range. Until early in this century, this near-sea-level valley was the only year-round passage to the Inland Northwest and thus the logical route for pioneers in the 1800s. The jagged, snow-covered peak of Mount Hood can be seen rising 11,245 feet on the Oregon side of the river. The more rounded, 12,307-foot Mt. Adams dominates the Washington side of the river. Mt. Adams, generally thought of as the bulky big brother to the nearby and

more perfectly formed Mt. St. Helens (until the violent 1980 eruption, which turned its top 1,000 feet to ash), in tandem with Mt. Hood, are the dominant sentinels that overlook this route to the east.

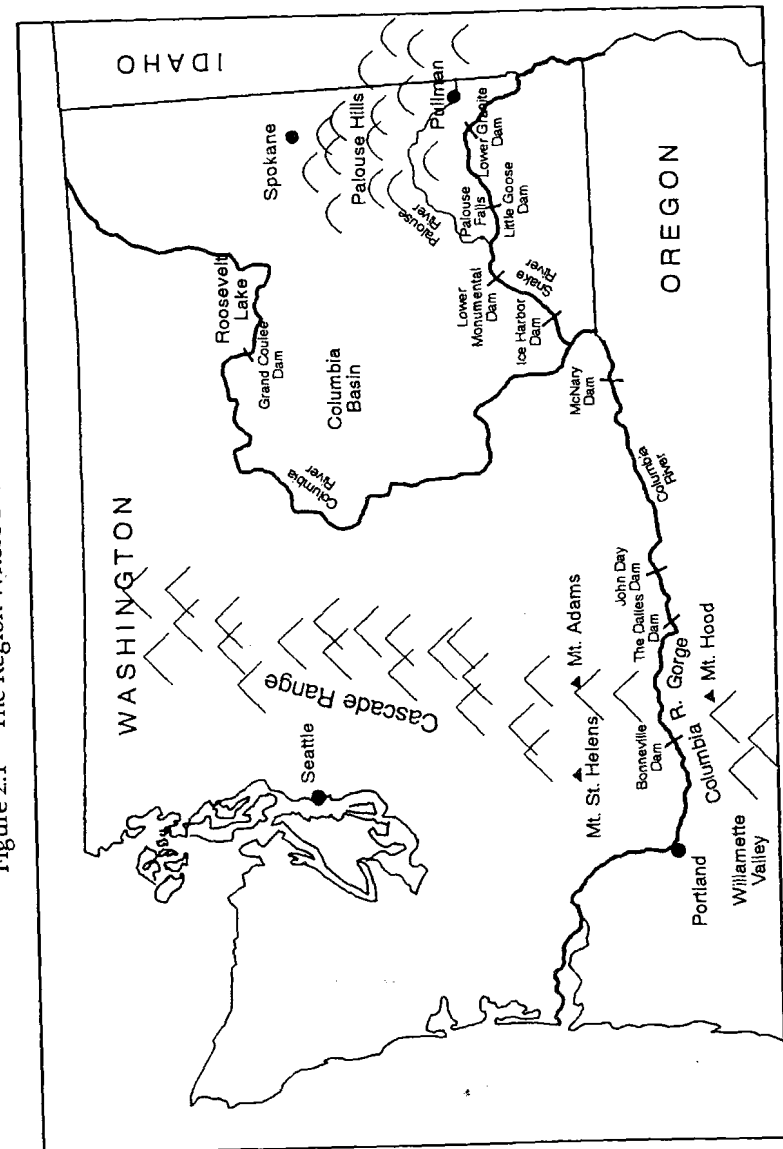
From high above, one's progress through the heart of the Columbia Gorge is most easily measured by the location of the giant dams that extract hydroelectric power and whose locks allow passage of the wheat barges. The alternately wide and narrow ribbons of water connecting the reservoirs of one dam to those of the next exhibit a tranquillity that seems strikingly inconsistent with the Columbia's original free-flowing and wild state, which greeted the wagons of the first Bremer residents a mere 100 years ago.

Between Bonneville and The Dalles, the first and second of these giant concrete dams, one begins to see the contrast between the moist western and drier eastern mountain slopes. The western slopes are densely covered by Douglas fir and other dark green vegetation watered frequently and heavily by storms from the Pacific Ocean. The drier eastern slopes, made that way by the curtain of mountains that drain moisture from Pacific storms before allowing their winds to pass eastward, are more sparsely covered by lighter-colored ponderosa pine and other vegetation more tolerant of cold winters and dry summers. Continuing eastward, the patches of brown earth and rock show up with greater frequency among the trees and give evidence that spring in the Inland Northwest is about to make its annual appearance.

Past John Day, the third dam in this series, the transition is complete. It is here that one is forced to begin comprehending the vastness of the nearly flat drylands that cover much of central Oregon and Washington. Some 200 miles upriver from Portland, just past McNary Dam, the Columbia River turns directly north and enters Washington State. We are now over the nearly treeless northern desert, where rainfall comes mostly during the long gray winters, averaging in some places no more than seven inches per year, a fraction of the amount that gives the coastal region of the Pacific Northwest its year-round cloak of green. Just inside Washington and dominating the view from the air is the confluence of the Snake River with the larger Columbia. It is here that the Columbia turns back westward to the Cascade Mountains, which it will skirt for more than 100 miles before again turning eastward to surround on three sides the central Washington area known as the Columbia Basin.

The basin, once a formidable expanse of sagebrush and rocky terrain, is irrigated by the waters of the Columbia pulled from Roosevelt Lake, behind Grand Coulee, the largest dam of all, and far out of sight to the north. Irrigated fields are now the basin's most prominent feature. Even in this area of southern Washington, near the

Figure 2.1 The Region Where Bremer Is Located



confluence of these two mighty rivers, one can see rectangles fed by canal irrigation and circles fed by water drawn from pivot wells. The water pulled from these wells is in a sense recycled, coming from an aquifer fed by three decades of excess flow from the canal irrigation. Our attention, however, instead of following the Columbia back westward, turns toward the east, where the Snake, true to its name, makes a wiggly half circle eastward toward the Idaho border in its several-hundred-mile journey that will end at the Grand Tetons of Wyoming.

The waters of the Snake alternately narrow and widen in relation to the four dams, closer together than their predecessors, that control the flow of water from the upper regions of the Snake, beyond the Palouse. First comes Ice Harbor, then Lower Monumental, Little Goose, and finally Lower Granite. The name of each dam gives an image of its historical location, if not its function. Their distinctive names withstanding, the dams are functionally redundant, each of them providing for flood control, discharge of water through turbines to make electricity, the passage of the wheat barges through giant locks on their way to Portland's grain terminals, the migration of adult salmon and oceangoing trout (known as steelhead) through surging fish ladders back to their Idaho spawning waters, and the creation of recreational reservoirs.

It is between Lower Monumental and Little Goose that one confronts the first evidence of the Palouse. The view is at first surprising, even shocking. The northern half of the reservoir for a stretch of several miles looks like a chocolate shake yet to be mixed with the sparkling blue and green water along the southern shore. The source of this muddy water, which appears to float like feathers as it mingles quietly with the peacock-colored water of the Lower Monumental Reservoir, is the Palouse River at the end of its 100-mile formative run through the agriculturally rich but erosive hills that comprise the Palouse hills. This early-spring runoff, fed by warm rains on still-frozen hillsides, gives an unmistakable indication of land that is different from the regions already traversed.

Looking northward beyond the 100-foot-high Palouse Falls, which add finality and a chocolate soda appearance to the river's terminus, the dividing line between the Columbia Basin and the Palouse hills becomes evident. The division is in some ways gradual and in others striking: gradual in the vegetative evidence of increased rainfall that will more than double between the area of the milky brown discharge and the Idaho border, striking in the rocky scablands that range from a mile to several miles wide and that sharply divide the flat, farmable drylands of the Columbia Basin from the distinctive hills of the

Palouse. These rocky, sagebrush-covered scablands are a legacy of the great Spokane floods of the Ice Age. Violent ruptures of ice dams that held back water in a giant lake over Montana, because of the volume and speed of the discharge, left deeply etched and permanent scars, visible even from circling NASA spacecraft, so it has been learned. From this altitude, and with the perspective of modern geology, these barren trenches are far more easily understood than they could have been by the Palouse pioneers who traversed these lands slowly and precariously by horse and wagon a brief 100 years ago.

The Palouse itself is less easily comprehended at first. To the pioneers the hills must have seemed a welcome relief from the apprehension created by the rocky, unfarmable scablands that preceded them. Originally covered by prairie grasses, the hills rise abruptly from the edge of the scablands, with immediate evidence of a deep soil that could be easily farmed, even on the hillsides, without fear of implements being damaged by hidden rocks. By contrast, even the steepness of the sidehills must not have seemed a great concern to the first Bremerites. Now, a century later, it is this aspect of the Palouse hills that delineates the sharp contrast with the clear reservoir waters below and exists as a substantial worry to area farmers.

The vantage point from above also helps to clarify the nature and origin of the hills. Shadows from the morning sun make the hills appear much like ripples along the lakeshore. The crest of each of these tightly compacted ripples exhibits a repetitive southeast-to-northwest gradient, organized at first, but given slight irregularity by thousands of years of climatic forces and a mere 100 years of intensive agriculture. The regularity of the ripples seems almost mystical and one wonders if the close-up views of the pioneers gave them an inkling of the repetitive pattern so visible from an aircraft. These hills, known to agronomists as loess deposits, were formed by windblown particles from floodplains of the prehistoric Columbia River deposited here in repetitive dunelike formations. Closer examination suggests gradual southwesterly slopes and more acute northeasterly slopes, which would be farmed with the same equipment to raise similar crops in similar ways, but with different erosive consequences.

Finally, directly above the first of the Palouse hills, another type of pattern begins to dominate one's view and our imagination. Divided-slope farming, an erosion-control practice that involves following contour lines to divide large fields into smaller ones so that different crops can be grown on upper and lower slopes, gives the hills a surreal quality. An imaginative mind can identify tops of interconnected hills that have become letters of the alphabet, birds, animals, or simply a

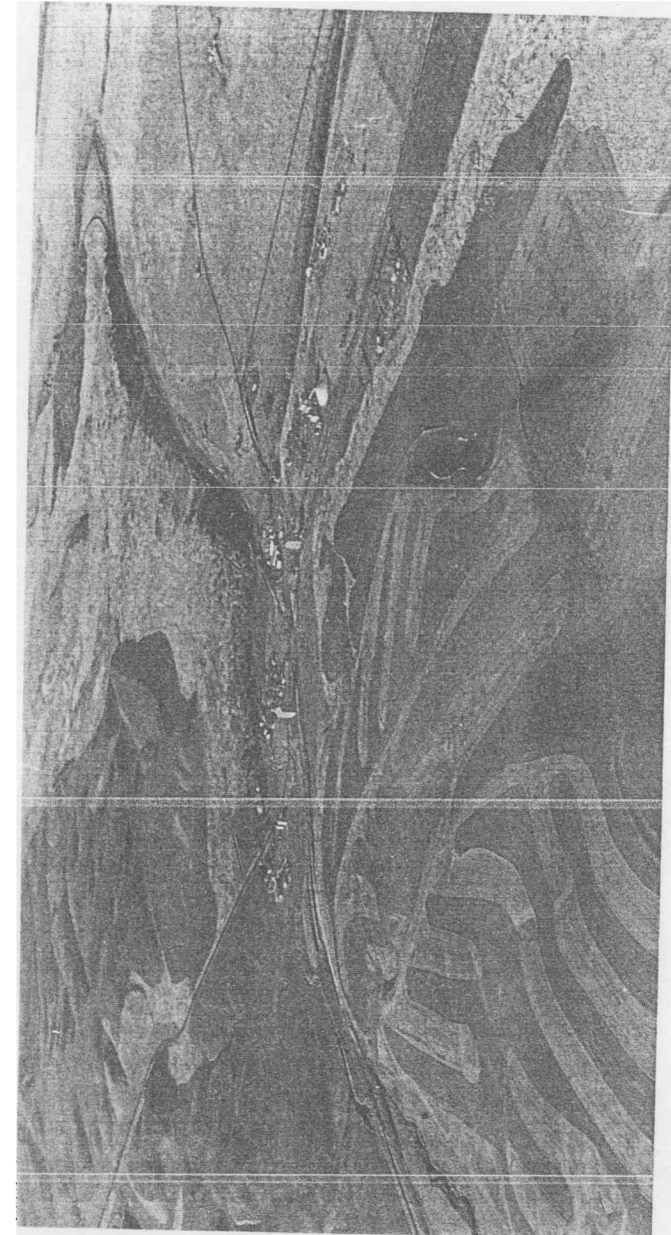


pretty design--each of which encloses 50, 100, or even 200 acres. Only the occasional section lines, which are maintained as farm boundaries, interfere with the artistic images wrought by the combination of nature and human efforts to cope with the erosive consequences of farmers' attempts to make a living. The juxtaposition of river barges, chocolate-colored river water, and artistry of the hilltops does much to convey the characteristics of life in the Palouse hills and the place called Bremer, even before one arrives there.

The Palouse itself, which we can see stretching from the scablands to the now-visible Bitterroot Mountains just across the Idaho border, was named for the Appaloosa horse first domesticated by the Nez Perce' Indians who lived nearby. The hills themselves extend from the Snake River in the south nearly to Spokane, 100 miles to the north, and are some 90 miles in breadth. It is here that the clouds disrupted by their passage over the Cascades begin to reform and a trajectory of increasing rainfall becomes clear. Historic records show an annual average rainfall of 14 inches on the western edge, and 26 inches along the eastern edge. Few population centers are immediately evident.

For a person familiar with the checkerboard geometry of midwestern agriculture, the pattern from the air seems at first confusing. With few exceptions, roads follow the sometimes-narrow valleys between hills, and towns tend to be located where tiny streams come together to form the many small tributaries of the Palouse and other small rivers. The largest of these towns is Pullman, location of the state's land grant university. Originally named Three Forks simply because three small streams came together to form the south fork of the Palouse River, it lies within eight miles of the Idaho border.

Some two dozen smaller communities dot the Palouse landscape, appropriately distributed across the entire region to serve nearby farmers. Bremer is one of these small towns. From the air there is little to distinguish it from any other small community. No mountains, plateaus, rivers, or other physical boundaries isolate it. Yet, as we shall see, Bremer is more than a geographic spot on the map. It consists of about 1,000 people within 12-15 miles of the Bremer town center, most of whom identify themselves proudly, emotionally, and sometimes defiantly as Bremerites. It is a voluntary, protected distinction that separates them from all other residents of the Palouse hills.



"... the hills rise abruptly from the edge of the scablands, with immediate evidence of a deep soil that could be easily farmed, even on hillsides, without fear of implements being damaged by hidden rocks."



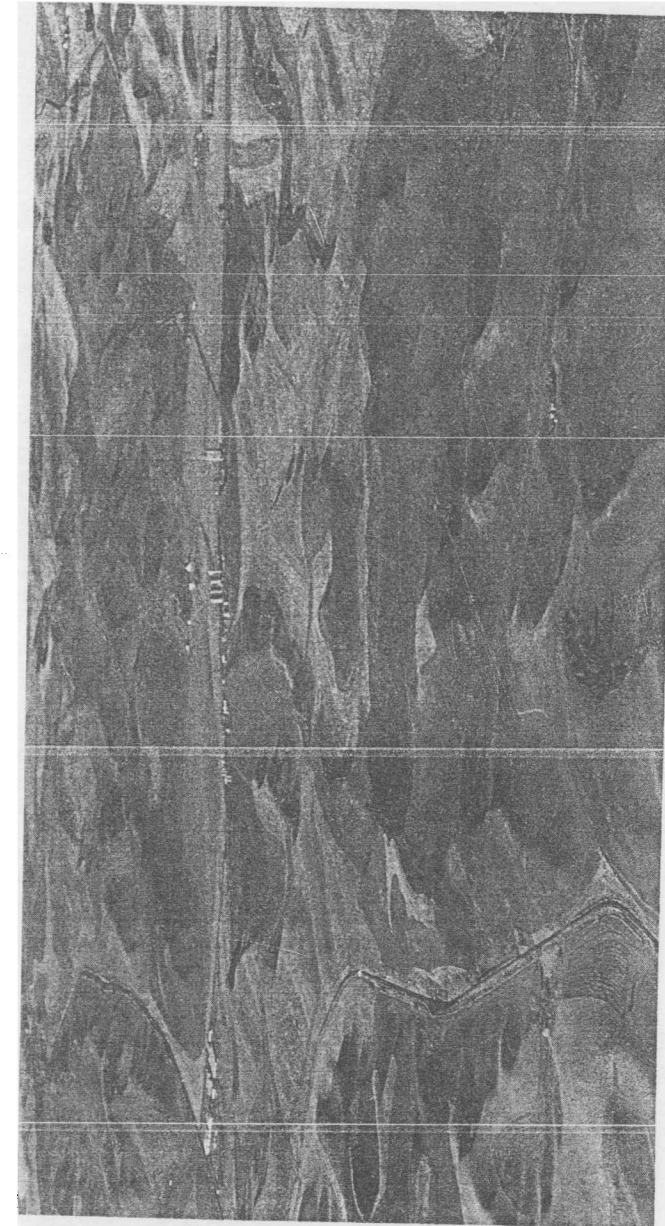
### The Beginning

The wagon trains of the late 1800s transported thousands of settlers from the Midwest and East to the Pacific Northwest. They traveled the difficult Oregon Trail to the Columbia River before moving on to Portland, Oregon, west of the Cascade Mountains. As the settlers reached Oregon's fertile Willamette Valley they found that the many trees and persistent rain were not particularly good for the traditional growing of small grains. It was then that the dissatisfied new settlers began investigating unsettled land available in the Palouse Plain, in far eastern Washington nearly 400 miles to the northeast.

Prior to 1880, the range-cattle industry had occupied the area, but the "bitter winter of 1880-81 resulted in the financial ruin of many cattlemen" (Scheurman and Trafzer, 1985, p. 137). Grain marketing had been stalled by lack of a railroad. However, the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1883 facilitated the transporting of grain to eastern markets. The new railroad connection plus the fact that many of the new immigrants' relatives were dissatisfied with their homes in the Midwest, where many had relocated from the Volga region in Russia, provided the impetus for the settling of the Palouse Plain. One prospective migrant to the Palouse describes their midwestern existence:

Our houses consist of "Dug outs" and "Sod houses." Our people are all discouraged and homesick, but too far to go back to Russia, and we want to see . . . the Territory we have heard so much of its great yielding wheat fields and wonderful Fruit Country. (Scheurman and Trafzer, 1985, p. 134)

Finding a place to build their communities was a careful, deliberate action. The Oregon Improvement Company had previously been given over 150,000 acres of land to assist in the settling of the area. The new migrants sent out scouts to the Palouse, where the improvement company was selling land for \$5 to \$10 per acre on a six-year installment plan at 7 percent interest (Bryan, 1936, p. 144). They found that it was less expensive to homestead than to buy the land from the improvement company, although the land owned by the improvement company was carefully selected (alternate sections of 14 townships). The selection of sites by the improvement company influenced the settlement patterns in the Palouse region. The company staked out large tents for the newcomers in the new communities in the Palouse and sent fliers around the world encouraging settlers to relocate to the Palouse.



"For a person familiar with the checkerboard geometry of midwestern agriculture, the pattern from the air seems, at first, confusing."