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An artist decided to document the knowledge and skills of Danville, Ill.

The result is a charmingly random, curiously compelling encyclopedia of the inner life of a small, struggling American

By Emily Nunn
Tribune staff reporter

April 23, 2004

Who the heck cares what the people in Danville, Ill., think?

It's just a hardscrabble town of 34,000 people, really, and sorely short on prestige. Take a drive down the streets -- past the trailer park, the Possum Trot Supper Club, the Pentecostal Church of the Almighty God and the Little Nugget Trading Post -- and just try to picture what it was like in the days before the manufacturing jobs left for good. Or, harder still, what it might have been like when Abraham Lincoln had a law practice here.

Actors Gene Hackman and Dick Van Dyke and singer Bobby Short grew up in Danville, but odds are you're not going to see them hanging around at Spanky's Banquet Hall. So who has time to listen to a bunch of people who aren't even famous?

Well, Anna Callahan, for one.

She's such a good listener that you might put her in the same league as the pachyderm protagonist of "Horton Hears a Who!," that great socioanthropological examination of the importance of community, by Dr. Seuss.

Whereas Horton tuned into the tiny voices of imperiled Whoville ("We are here!") when no one else could or would, Callahan listened to Danville. Then, the 29-year-old artist and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign master of fine arts candidate published the Danville Community Encyclopedia (2003), which -- aside from notice in the February issue of Harper's magazine -- has remained a relatively unknown reference book.

But it's not your typical A to Z collection.

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After placing an ad in Danville's daily newspaper, the Commercial-News ("I am an artist working with the Danville Public Library to put together a record of knowledge and skills of Danville citizens"), Callahan installed herself in a private study room in the library, turned on her tape recorder and listened and listened and listened -- two days a week, every week, from October 2002 to February 2003.

Some showed up eager to participate, but Callahan also had to pursue patrons browsing the stacks. "I would tell them that I was sure they knew something," she says, when they claimed to have nothing to contribute. "Because every person I've talked to knows more than they think they know."

The next thing she knew, they were talking about their interests and passions and peeves and concerns as if they had been waiting all their lives for someone to ask.

They talked about . . .

Airmail: "Oh, I was fascinated because did you know that the first official U.S. airmail was in 1859? See, long before the Wright Brothers flew. And it went up in a balloon and flew out of Lafayette, Ind. -- was supposed to go to New York. The winds that day were wrong, and it went to Crawfordsville. . . ." -- Mary Blair Immel

Bait: "Everybody has got their favorite [catfish bait] but there are a tremendous number of things that people use from Ivory soap to hot dogs to chicken liver. . ." -- Gary A. Jones

Earth: "Do not blow up bombs and stuff like that, don't dump a whole batch of toxic stuff into the water, don't pollute the air so that it is not breathable. . ." -- Virginia Lee Smith

Multidimensional Theory: "There are a lot of theologians now who are saying the basic Protestant Christian view of heaven being up and hell being down and earth being in the middle is actually a representation of multidimensionalism, where the spirit world would be a dimension that exists a lot like a cloth laid over earth. . . ." -- Charles W. Brubaker II

Sponges: ". . . they do not have a backbone. They have no stomach, no organs, no mouth. They have nothing." -- Kendria Williams

Thanksgiving: "I guess the Pilgrims killed the Indians on Thanksgiving Day after they had the feast. Abraham Lincoln, he just like made up the whole story about the Pilgrims became friends and helping each other. . . ." -- Mario Sanico

They talked about torpedoes and violins and predestination and Bruce Lee and zoning and alternative medicine and the Korean War. They talked about friendship and scarecrows and wrestling and pagan rituals. They talked about Buckminster Fuller and pinhole cameras and Osama bin Laden and steel-grip gloves and quilting. And on and on.

The 191 pages of the Danville Community Encyclopedia are embellished with illustrations drawn by the contributors (a ghost, a crankshaft, a submarine, a bunch of pointillism dots, a map of Pakistan), and when you buy one of the 250 extant editions (Callahan spent about \$4,000 of her own money on the project, and 250 books were all she could afford to print), you also get a CD with excerpts and a companion set of A to Z bookmarks.

Compelling document

It may not be the most useful encyclopedia in terms of term papers, but it is a charmingly random, curiously compelling document of the inner life of a small American town.

On a recent gray afternoon, Callahan was sitting in a car in the parking lot outside the modern brown-brick Danville Public Library (in which the original edition of the encyclopedia is on permanent display). It's directly behind the Vermilion County War Museum, a gorgeous old Carnegie Building that was originally the library's home, and which now serves as a relic of the town's former grace.

"Danville is really poor," said Callahan, who has a Zen-like demeanor, slow smile and, unlike Horton of Whoville, a lithe frame and a pixie haircut. "I was going to do a piece about how all the jobs left. But I was also hoping to dispel the myth -- Danville is known as poor working class, not very educated. I didn't want to contribute to that."

On the drive out to Green Meadows, a federally subsidized housing complex where one of her contributors works, Callahan talked about the lifelong sense of isolation that led her into the listening business.

Growing up the daughter of a physician (her brother and sister are now doctors too), in Gainesville, Ga., her life was overprotected.

"Gainesville was a pretty racially divided city, so I only knew people like myself," she says. "Even in college, I still felt no connection to anything except my own art group or the professors or the people in my classes."

She majored in illustration and English as an undergrad, and her master's degree is in painting, but her art would eventually take on a sociological-anthropological bent. (Another of her recent projects, for example, is "On the Bus," in which she rode the five bus lines in Urbana-Champaign asking strangers, "What are you looking forward to?" and, "What are you not looking forward to?" Their answers appeared on placards in the buses and could be heard in the bus terminal.)

"It's really hard to get to know people outside your own world, unless you make a concerted effort," Callahan says.

"But if you talk to someone randomly on the bus, they're just going to think you're crazy. If you have this project, then you have an excuse to talk to them."

But is it art? That's a question Callahan has been asked more than once, as well as: How is this an encyclopedia? And: Who cares what these people think?

"I had a Fulbright interview, which I didn't get, and there was an art historian there who hates the encyclopedia," she said. "He said it wasn't art and that it was just graphic design."

"There was also an anthropologist on the committee who said, 'This is not anthropology! This is wrong.' He said something like, 'What's the point of this? No one's going to come to it for knowledge. Nobody's going to believe what's in here.'"

Callahan hesitated for a minute. "He said no one was going to take it seriously."

Which was true of at least one person, a certain public radio host in Chicago usually known for an interest in everyday people.

"I sent one to Ira Glass. I love [his show 'This American Life']. He said he liked it, but he he thought the entries need to be more . . . exciting."

But Callahan resisted the urge to manipulate for effect. "All my professors wanted me to insert more of a dark side to everything and . . . they wanted it to sound more academic and critical."

Instead, she printed the words of her contributors mostly verbatim -- "so you hear them talking," she says.

"By taking liberties with their words," she points out, "it [would have been] more about me and what I think is interesting and worthy."

The encyclopedia didn't win Callahan a Fulbright, or get her on NPR, and copies aren't selling like hot cakes (Quimby's stocks it, and it's available on Callahan's Web site -- www.anna-callahan.com).

Assessment off the mark

But that Fulbright panelist was wrong to say no one was going to take it seriously.

In a low-lying apartment-turned-office at the Green Meadows housing complex in Danville, resident-services coordinator Gloria Thompson-Brown keeps a copy of the encyclopedia on her desk, with the entries that she contributed -- on "Activism" and "Public Housing" -- highlighted in yellow. At 63, she is a large woman with an imposing presence who has dedicated her life to community service and her church.

She likes to show the encyclopedia to residents who drop by the office/community room to watch television or let their children play with the toys that clutter the room.

"It's been uplifting to them," Thompson-Brown says. "Most people who live in federally subsidized housing are made to feel undignified. I think this book is something that Danville needed. And the reason I say that is because there are so many people in the community that are overlooked. Forgotten."

The book also means a lot to Thompson-Brown on a personal level. "It's history," she says. "Regardless of how many years I'm here and how many years I'm not here this will always be a part of Danville and I'm in there and that's the way I look at it. I am a part of this community. This is proof."

Back at the library, another contributor, 19-year-old Charles W. Brubaker II, said that he sees his entries as "sort of a snapshot of who I was at a certain time, and the things that were really important to me at that moment."

Brubaker, who is tall and stocky, soft-spoken but hyperarticulate, dropped out of high school and later earned his GED. He recently lost his job inspecting parts for steering assemblies. He comes to the library a lot -- a whole lot -- and happened to be there over a year ago, on a day when Callahan was in the building. She approached him and his father, who is also in the encyclopedia ("Ballet," "Boilers," "Car Engines"), and simply said, "So, whattaya know?" according to Brubaker.

"I'm not sure she knew what she was getting into," he says. His entries include "Piers Anthony," "Osama bin Laden," "Foreign Policy," "Halloween," "Iraq," "the Military," "Multidimensional Theory," "Paganism" and "Spirits." ("It was close to Halloween," he says of the last two.)

The value of the encyclopedia, Brubaker says, "is kind of hard to express. . . . The entire point of community is that people with varied backgrounds and varied views live in the same place, and share their lives with each other. . . . There can be a wealth of knowledge and wisdom and life experience in the guy who lives next door, but you might not know about it.

`More to people'

"You see people and you judge them on what you see, the part of them you know, no matter how casual a relationship that is. And I think if nothing else the encyclopedia . . . just reminds you that there's a whole lot more to people than you might ever see. It reflects the dignity and worth of people in a way that I think is really pretty profound."

He added: "I hope I don't look at myself in a few years and say, `Wow, I was really dumb.'"

Mike Boedicker, 36, the audiovisual librarian at the library, who expounded on "Filmmakers," "Making Movies," "Screenplays" and "World War I," agrees that the encyclopedia "shows there's a lot more to this town than you think." He, for example, is in the middle of finishing up the editing on a film he was shooting at the time using local actors.

"Working [in the Danville Public Library] you get to meet a lot of the more interesting people; they come in with various requests and you realize it's sort of like [the television show] `Northern Exposure' in a way -- like the small town in Alaska that had very unique people, who were articulate and eccentric and smart."

As a librarian, Boedicker can also be trusted, no matter what the critics claim, to say what, exactly, Anna Callahan's book is.

"Well, it's an encyclopedia, really, because it's an A to Z categorized collection of information about varied topics," he says. "Not that that's the definition of an encyclopedia. Cyclopedia is probably the correct term."

The final sentence of Callahan's introduction to the Danville encyclopedia, however, seems best at describing its plain value.

This encyclopedia is a record of the people living in Danville, Illinois at this time.

In other words: "We are here."

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What they know

Two excerpts from the Danville Community Encyclopedia (above, right). Audio versions of the entries are available on the CD that comes with the book.

Respect

If someone's talking you want to pay attention to him, hear what they have to say, then when they're done talking you can talk. Or like if the teacher's talking at North Ridge you have to be quiet, because it's important to hear what they say and, like if we have a concert coming up, my chorus teacher, she'll tell me and I have to listen real carefully. I have to know when it is, what time to go and what to wear.

And like respect, you could also be kind enough to like talk over your problems and not throw spitballs or paper airplanes at the teacher. Like one of my friends did 'cause she don't like Miss Hopper, my math teacher, so she started throwing paper balls at her. I stopped it, I told her "If you don't stop throwing I'm going to hit you" -- 'cause I was only messing. But I said, you know, "I won't really hit you, just stop," she's like "Okay." She's like my little sister to me.

-- Jessica Pichon

Hair Styling

Extensions could be from braids or getting hair interlocking with hair. So if you want a longer extension, say if you wanted a braid look, they can just take your hair like that and add extensions into the hair by the gluing method or sewing method. You sew hair along the tracks of the braid. I just take a needle and thread. Take the hair, it's a bent needle, not a sharp needle. Take the bent needle (left), almost shaped like a "U" with an eye in it. And you sew like you'd sew anything else. You have to use glue on top of, in between the hair parts. You have to glue hair on top of the hair. You part the hair where you want the hair placed. Then you glue the hair on top of the hair. Then you go whatever style you want. You want your natural hair to blend with the other hair. So you have to comb it to make sure the hair covers the tracks. That way it looks natural. It doesn't look like, "Aw he's got something stuck on his head." A lot of artists do it. Like you'll see Christina Aguilera wear that long hair, then short.

-- Odell Wesley

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Battery-operated Navy submarines

Submarines: The one I was on was a fleet-type, a Navy. It wasn't able to run the engines. It had to be on batteries when you were submerged. They had deck guns on them and things like that. They could only go down for a certain period of time.

The second boat that I was on was what they call a guppy snorkel and it had a pipe that came up to the top of the submarine and had a valve up there and it would be drawing the air in to run the engines.

But it had to be high enough up and it was protected in different ways, had three or four different ways so that, for example, if a big wave washed over it, it would automatically shut it off.

They [Nuclear Submarines] can make their own air. They can make their own water.

The way they do that is they take it out of the ocean. It's so ingenious that they can -- you can drink the water.

I mean it's better than water you'd have at home and the same way with the air.

-- Jack Goodner

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