

Reflection

Laleah Sinclair

11 June, 2018

Getting to Storuman

The trip to Storuman, Sweden took 19 hours, excluding the overnight spent in Toronto due to plane ticket problems. From Stockholm, there is a flight to Umea, and then a 3.5 hour bus ride to Storuman. The long travel time added to the impression of arriving somewhere rural and remote. The scenery outside the bus window looked nearly identical to driving through northern Ontario: lakes, trees, rocks. The colleague I travelled with, Sam, was missing the views from the bus asleep as he (somehow) had been during every leg of this 19-hour trip. Adding to the impression that not too many people travel to Storuman, a group of women were chatting (sometimes in English, sometimes Swedish) and the bus, and I heard them say that they were going to meet with Dean and “some other crazy guy” from Canada, who I knew to be my supervisor. This meant most of the other people on the bus were travelling to Storuman to attend the same conference Sam and I were attending. We arrived quite late in the evening, around 8 or 9 PM, and it was dark already.

When we got off the bus, Sam was groggy from his long (almost 19 hour) nap, and I suggested we follow the women from a respectful distance, correctly assuming they were headed to the hotel where we would find everyone else involved in Free Range. We soon found Paul and after some dinner set off to find our cabins, which turned out to be somewhat difficult, but we did find them in the end. In our search for the cabins we found the northern lights instead.

Fellow researchers from the Australian universities had arrived before Sam and I, and they welcomed us as well as the Swedish researchers with a homemade dinner. This dinner set the stage for our social lives for the 6 weeks we would spend in Storuman. Sam and I, the only researchers not staying at the dorms, felt it was important to reciprocate and host our own dinner from the cabins, which we did. For the rest of the six weeks, we moved back and forth from the dorms to the cabins cooking, eating, and laughing together.

Life and culture in rural areas

According to the Swedish researchers we worked with and came to know, it is very Swedish to host people at your home for dinner in this way rather than to eat out. In rural Sweden, it certainly makes sense since there are only a few restaurants in small villages. Getting to know and learn from other Free Range scholars that were gathered in Storuman was a huge part of the experience and complimented my academic work and learning.

Learning how people spend their leisure time in rural areas is a potential challenge for those who haven't experienced living rural environments before. I noticed some of my colleagues struggling slightly, with one asking, "why would anyone live here?" early in her stay, and the undergraduate researchers who arrived later saying to Sam and I, with a mix of pity and awe, "you have been here a *long* time". I have experience living rurally, though not in small towns and villages, and not in Sweden. I worked for Ontario Parks in high school and early in my undergraduate career, and the experience of living staff housing in a provincial park was similar in many ways: you live in a cabin (without wifi), and your social life relies on your fellow staff (or in this case, fellow Free Range scholars). I really enjoyed my time in parks and have sought out similar experiences throughout my life. It was an important reminder for me that many people

have not had these experiences and that their experience of Storuman would be different from mine. I imagine their experience as a type of culture shock, an urban/rural cultural divide that enhanced any disconnection occurring for visitors from other countries. Of course, it is also true that rural areas are not often designed for international tourists- even if they may be designed with more local environmental tourism in mind (as in the case of Storuman). It can be difficult to engage in the activities that rural areas offer when you are visiting as an international research student. Popular activities in Storuman might include snowmobiling, ATV-ing, fishing, hunting, boating, and skiing. Each of these things requires access to significant equipment, which may not be possible if you have not planned to spend significant amounts of money. This meant obviously that some colleagues might need more time to adjust, and that depending on an individual's interests and personality they might enjoy living rurally more or less. But it also served as a useful reminder about the broader population and views toward rural areas, how they are seen, understood, and experienced by those who have no experience with them.

I am accustomed to living outside of cities and find it very soothing to fill my free time with running, reading, and walks. For others who are less accustomed to these areas, I think a sense of "what do I do" confronts them, with no answers bobbing up obviously in their minds. Frankly, I found myself irritated when other visitors seemed unimpressed with Storuman or the experience of being there. Nonetheless, it was important and valuable for me to consider their perspectives, ("why be here," "there's nothing to do here," etc) because these perspectives are held by many people who don't have experience living and working in urban areas. It's also important if you plan on working in an area. I was reminded of a short documentary about Fort St John, in which an Indigenous woman described how offensive and frustrating it was to hear

visiting workers who live the “north and south split” and work in Fort St John call the city a “hell hole,” when they take their livelihood from that city¹. That documentary made me aware of the way that myself and my colleagues at the time, who travelled to Fort St John for work, described the city. One colleague used to say he couldn’t find his way in Fort St John despite having visited numerous times because his brain simply rejected the place, due to its complete ugliness. Watching the short documentary was the first time that I challenged our way of framing that city, and how that would sound to people who lived there.

Within the Free Range program, some people expressed an interest in “sad places,” but are they sad to the people who live there? This is not to make a sweeping statement that no village is sad to its own people. Obviously, the woman in the short documentary had one perspective, but it’s also possible (maybe even likely) that some residents of Fort St John find the city an unpleasant place. Even within the short documentary, the changes and development in Fort St John are acknowledged and criticized.

I grew up in a smaller city than Fort St John that, despite being (or perhaps because it is) an hour and a half from Toronto had small town identity. When I was in high school, some young people wrote and recorded “The Orillia Song,” and posted it on YouTube². It featured stereotypical rednecks cruising around in an ATV and featuring lyrics such as “This kind of town you just got to frown, you know it is so sad. Teenage mummies, redneck dummies, economy is bad... Welcome to Orillia, it is so much fun, Welcome to Orillia, hey ma get the gun!” This is reflective of the image many Orillians held of the city as a backwater place, with a high rate of

¹ Helen Knott in Peace River Rising. Kroetsch, F. & Savard, C. (2017). CBC: Short Docs.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp_zyuo0W2o&t=86s Orillia Song. (2006).

teenage pregnancy, and so on. A city councillor and liaison for culture and heritage called the video fabulous. The two examples here (Fort St John and Orillia) are frequently described as small rural towns but are actually small cities of 20 and 30 thousand respectively.

This topic of rural identities came up in the final set of meetings at the end my visit to Storuman. Someone described a rural town as the 'middle of nowhere' and someone else remarked that the 'middle of nowhere is actually the centre of everywhere' or something similar. For me this captured the two reactions to the idea that a place is in the middle of nowhere: insulted or proud. In Sorsele when I asked the bed and breakfast owner what I might do in town, he declared 'nothing!' and when I said in that case I would walk around town, he said 'see you in three minutes!' with satisfaction. There can be pride in being sufficient enough to live somewhere rural, being creative and outdoorsy enough to stay busy, being social enough to form connections, and so on. In reflecting on this experience, I can acknowledge this sense of pleasure (and perhaps smugness) at enjoying and successfully living in rural areas. This ties closely with rural independence, which is often tied to rural attitudes toward and use of health care (i.e. Campbell et al., 2006 and Rickards, 2011) .

This is also connected to who goes to and who stays in rural areas, and how we approach rural areas as outsiders when we work there, whether as community practitioners or researchers. Reflecting on this also has the potential to inform how we present locations to researchers/students who are visiting, as in the Free Range project. On this topic, I just arrived in Inuvik in what must be its ugliest season (visually). The snow is melted but nothing is green yet- no leaves on trees, no grass. Just mud and dust, the only green coming from the stunted spruces that fill the river delta. I sent a photo to my sister who said, "I see plants but it still looks

barren". My brother-in-law, who has been living here one month said, "the best think about Inuvik is getting out of Inuvik, the town is ugly". My sister-in-law who has been living here a littler over a year said she forgets that Inuvik isn't attractive, or an easy place for new arrivals to be. In small towns everywhere these ideas are playing out and informing our impressions of the places we visit for research.

In Inuvik, I run on the outskirts of the town toward the airport on gravel roads surrounded by spruce bog just off the highway. Just a short jog along the highway, you can run by enormous government satellites, which rotate and adjust without warning and feel as though you are running on the set of the X Files. I ran the hill that leads to the satellites today, running up and down for a little over an hour. Each time disturbing the osprey who has a nest beside the road, and each time feeling guilty for hassling the poor bird. I also felt relieved this particular osprey does not have the courage to dive bomb people, which I have already been told. I have also already been told that it returns every year to this nest, despite the regular hassling involved in having a nest beside a road.

Moving into a town where you are connected to people spending significant portions of time there has real benefits in terms of the kind of information you absorb without trying, such as this valuable osprey information. Other useful information absorbed from knowing people: a grizzly bear was seen yesterday on Marine Drive, the only hill in town. This is largely why I was running the hill where I bother the osprey- better to bother a bird than a bear. As I ran on the 1 km section of highway on the route back to the car after my time bothering the bird, a truck pulls over right beside me. Two men are inside. If this were a city, I would be terrified. Here, due to the fact that I am a short, white, brunette woman running, I assume they have mistaken

me for my sister-in-law and know her somehow. In fact, they have just seen a large grizzly bear. They offer me a ride. There is almost no context in a city in which I would get in a truck with two men I've never seen before. I do get in the truck. The men drive me right to the car, even though I offer to run from the base of the next gravel road. They criticize my choice of hobbies and choice of location: "Run closer to town!" "But I heard there was a bear on Marine Dr.?" "Do something else. There are other things to do! Seriously."

My sister-in-law, a serious ultra-runner. She says that this interaction probably captures most of the town's perception of bears. She describes people as bear-averse. I say, I'm sure those men thought I was stupid for doing this. And they certainly will when they see me running in the same location again (which I likely will, though maybe with bear spray). Perhaps this (attitudes towards bears) is another example of the rural/urban cultural divide that can occur within countries.

Arriving in Inuvik is a good experience for me. In many ways arriving in Storuman was easier, and I felt that confidence of being a capable person who knows how to live in and take advantage of living in a rural area. Storuman was beautiful to me, but Inuvik isn't (at least not yet). It's also very cold and it has snowed since I arrived. I knew the food would be expensive, I had read about it, talked about it, and heard about it. I called my partner before coming to ask what I should bring from down south. But on my first trip to a grocery store I was still totally surprised and surreptitiously took a photo of the \$20 cracker barrel marble cheese to send my mother. This is, to me, a great example of how dirt research works. There is knowing information from reading it and there is being confronted with a sad looking \$9 head of cauliflower in the grocery store and changing your dinner plans.

Again, knowing people living here long term is very useful. They discuss the websites where you can order certain food, and mention that every few weeks you can get food from the “fruit man”. This is a man who drives to Inuvik with a load of food, including fresh fruit, from a Costco down south and sells the food more affordably than the grocery store. This entire process still sounds a bit bizarre to me, but I have only been here three days.

Community Connections

I made great connections with my fellow Free Range scholars but think that this information that I am absorbing because I spend all my time with people who are here long term, and are plugged into work networks with people who have been here much longer still, gives me really valuable passive information from a dirt research perspective. Comparatively, in Storuman, a bunch of outsiders clumped together resulting in great bonding for those individuals but a limited sharing of useful local information.

A language barrier was also at play here, with us being in Sweden. Being at the GMC we did have access to people, but as they were all established in their own social circles and there was a network of anglophone outsiders the group formed naturally. There is nothing negative about this, but I do kind of think dirt research is enhanced by spending social time with people from the area and absorbing unrelated information about the area. In the future, it might be possible to draw on this strength when arranging Free Range studies or other international research.

Concluding thoughts

The Free Range experience was overwhelmingly positive for me. I learned a great deal from working with international scholars, both established and students. I hope to continue to

work in rural areas and to apply what I have learned in all future research that I perform, as well as in any social work practice. While I had a significant applied research experience through previous work at the Firelight Group, this more academic research experience has strengthened my theoretical understanding of the research process. The final conference in Storuman was particularly helpful in providing theoretical context to my applied research skills. I believe this will make me a more well-rounded and effective researcher, and be very useful in the upcoming academic year, as well as in my career generally. I am extremely grateful for the experience and education that Free Range has provided me.

Works Cited

Campbell H, Bell M, Finney, M (eds). Country boys: masculinity and rural life. PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.

Rickards, L. (2011). Rural health: problems, prevention and positive outcomes. *Health: Future Leaders*.