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ON THE MAP, BUT OFF THE GRID: PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY IN
POLEBRIDGE, MONTANA

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 2009

Thesis

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POLEBRIDGE, MONTANA

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explain the role that authenticity plays in creating a meaningful sense of place in the town of Polebridge, Montana and how this idea is wittingly or unwittingly perpetuated by residents and business owners. The collection of buildings that constitute the town, many of which are hundred-year old originals, exists in a mountainous and relatively isolated part of Montana and must be passed through in order to access Glacier National Park through its northwestern entrance. By analyzing the community and using the ideas of place and authenticity as the way people connect to the town, we can see how important of a factor this is in the formation and marketing of Polebridge's identity and if the town is truly the destination it is portrayed as. The main intent is to determine how authenticity is generally defined for this place by its residents and the challenges that arise in maintaining its image. The conclusion is that Polebridge, MT, based upon the many ways of interpreting authenticity, is truly emblematic of a western outpost that remains apart from the modern world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Section One: Introduction.....	1
Section Two: The Study Area – Polebridge.....	3
Section Three: Place and Authenticity in Polebridge.....	12
The Concept of Place.....	12
The Concept of Authenticity.....	13
Section Four: Polebridge as a Destination.....	19
Section Five: Methods and Data Collection.....	22
Section Six: Results.....	26
Accessibility.....	26
Duality of Tourism.....	28
Image.....	31
Community.....	34
Section Seven: Conclusion.....	37
Literature Cited.....	39
Appendix.....	42

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

When driving up the outside North Fork Road (Montana State Route 486) on the western edge of Glacier National Park on the way to Polebridge, one is forced to slow abruptly from seventy miles per hour to thirty-five as soon as the pavement disappears and the road turns to gravel and dirt. This signals two changes; one is more obvious in the fact that the human presence greatly diminishes and it suddenly becomes more difficult to get where you want to go. The other is subtler – it is a change in one’s mindset and the awareness that you are entering a more wild country, different from the developed cities and towns that were just passed through on the way to the North Fork of the Flathead River. Even though one of the nation’s busiest national parks lies to the east and the relatively large population centers of Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls are to the south, one cannot help but feel like one is driving back in time into a more isolated and primitive world.

It is this feeling that gets to the heart of what it means to truly experience a mountain community that is trying to thrive while at the same time stay true to its long-established identity. On the one hand, there is a desire on the part of business owners to promote Polebridge as a unique tourist destination where people from around the world can get a taste of what it is like to live in a mountain outpost in the “Old West,” but there is also a desire to fend off most of the luxuries and influences of the modern world in order to keep things the way they are; this is the balance between preservation and change that so many places in mountainous areas have to deal with. More specifically,

the concept of authenticity in a touristic setting is a major issue for this community – how it is defined, perpetuated, and experienced by those living there and how they feel this about their particular place.

SECTION TWO

THE STUDY AREA – POLEBRIDGE

Montana’s official state travel website describes Polebridge as a place “nestled between the Continental Divide and the Whitefish Range” that “has no traffic lights, no crowds, no electricity, and no hassles” (Montana Office of Tourism 2014). This conjures up images of an idyllic settlement forgotten by time and hidden away between two of the wildest stretches of country left in Montana – the Livingston Range and the Whitefish Range. It is billed as an escape from the pressures and problems of modern life, where things are slower and simpler. In many ways, there is truth to this and Polebridge really is an anachronistic escape for the people living there; indeed, residents live a life reminiscent of the early homesteaders because they are off the power grid, modern services and conveniences are limited compared to even the smallest nearby town, and a certain self-sufficiency is required to live there year-round.

On the other hand, Polebridge is located just outside of the western boundary of Glacier National Park, which consistently attracts around two million visitors a year, thousands of whom drive to the park’s northwestern corner in the summer. This means that there is a strong seasonal shift in the mood and pace of life; a sudden influx of visitors from the “modern world” occurs, putting pressure on this place. It is during this time, when the ballooning number of visitors and the deep-rooted long-term residents interact, that shared experiences are created, giving meaning to this place in different ways.

This is a small community with a year-round population of five people, located thirty-five miles north of Columbia Falls on the western border of Glacier National Park in the northwest corner of the state of Montana. The collection of cabins that constitute the town stands on the west bank of the North Fork of the Flathead River, which defines the actual park boundary. For centuries, the Kootenai tribe would make annual trips across the valley of the North Fork and what is now the park in order to access the Northern Plains to trade and hunt bison. Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century, like so many other places across the Montana, the allure of mineral wealth and energy exploration prompted interest in the area. When the discovery of oil along the shores of Kintla Lake prompted industrial interest in the area, a wagon road was carved into the landscape on the east side of the North Fork by the Butte Oil Company in 1901 to provide better access. Even though no major energy exploration occurred on this side of the border, the road did allow for the potential of further development and settlement with the area's abundant game, timber, natural open meadows, and access to water being the main attractants (Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center 2010). In 1906, Congress opened up land in the Blackfoot National Forest for homesteading and settlers started to claim 160-acre plots to improve upon. Natural, open meadows along the east side of the North Fork, such as the Sullivan Meadow and Big Prairie Meadow, proved to be extremely attractive for these early pioneers, despite the short growing season and difficult access (Randolph 2009). William Adair established the first mercantile operation in the valley at Sullivan Meadow in 1904, thus making it the commercial and social hub of the entire area. Eventually, Adair built a one-and-a-half story log cabin with a dining

hall and four guest rooms in 1907 to service the forty-four homesteads on the east side of the river and travellers on outfitted trips (Bick 1986).

Despite the fact that homesteads existed in the area, Congress established Glacier National Park in May of 1910 and the settlers who suddenly found themselves living within the newly-created park were “grandfathered in” and retained their small tracts of private land, but were prevented from expanding and suffered from limited access to their holdings. By 1912, a new and much-improved road linked Columbia Falls to the Canadian Border, and the homestead boom shifted to the west side of the river owing to the Park Service’s moratorium on the east side. William Adair, sensing this shift, established a brand new mercantile business with his wife, Jesse, at its present location in 1913, and essentially founded the town the of Polebridge – its namesake being the bridge that spanned the river and allowed access to the park. The same building has stood there ever since it was built a year later in 1914 (Bick 1986). Supplying the numerous homesteads on the west side of the river and catering to tourists travelling to the park became such a lucrative business that by the 1920s, a competing mercantile was operating in town, but could not survive the Great Depression. After World War II, William Adair and his second wife, Emma, sold the mercantile and a series of subsequent owners have operated the business in the same style for decades. It was not until 1994 that the bakery, for which the mercantile is now so famous, was established.

The Polebridge Mercantile, the Northern Lights Saloon (William Adair’s original, personal cabin), and the North Fork Hostel (transplanted dude ranch mess hall from Big Prairie) comprise the economic activity of the town, offer the residents places to gather, and provide visitors with the only services available to them.

The Polebridge Mercantile stands at the end of a quarter-mile dirt road directly off the Outside North Fork Road. Signs exclaiming “Dust! is a four-letter word” and “Slow Down, People Breathing,” line the short drive and remind visitors that when the road is dry, their speed does matter and that if their vehicle leaves a cloud of suspended particles of dirt behind, it will be noticed and it will not be appreciated. Visitors are greeted by a two-story, false-fronted, stand-alone structure that could be pulled straight off of the set of Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*. On a twenty degree winter’s day where the fog hugs the snow-covered ground and there is almost no discernable difference between the cold surface and the gray sky, only the very tip of the building’s face may stand out so that people can read the hovering words “POLEBRIDGE MERCANTILE.” Otherwise, on a crisp and clear sunny afternoon in July, the large white letters stand out against the red paint of the building and are further contrasted against a deep blue sky. A United States flag, which is constantly flown, only adds to the historical image of an American “outpost” deep in the wilderness.



Figure 1 - Polebridge Mercantile (Winter)



Figure 2 - Polebridge Mercantile (Summer)

The inside of the mercantile is a long, rectangular space with one wall that separates the bakery/kitchen from the dining and merchandise area. The main counter on the inside of the mercantile showcases the pastries and cookies that are freshly-baked each morning along with locally-made jewelry (beaded necklaces and bracelets and decorated feathers and antlers). A display in the center of the room is set aside for various souvenirs and tourist items including postcards, wall photos, bottle openers, koozies, tote bags, glassware and coffee mugs with the mercantile's logo (the building's façade), and down vests and shirts with the same logos. One wall is completely reserved for supplies one might find at any gas station or small grocery store – brake fluid, engine oil, toothbrushes, toothpaste, bear spray, first aid supplies, canned soup/beans, cooking oil, dried pasta, chips, and so on. In the rear, there is a large dining table that can seat seven

to eight people, one refrigerator stocked with beer (mostly Pacific Northwest and Montana microbrews, along with the standard national macrobrews), milk, juice, soda, and water, and one other refrigerator for premade, cold sandwiches. Just behind the dining table is a brand new Mac desktop computer with access to the internet for a donation fee.

Adorning the original hand-hewn log walls of the mercantile are the personal items of the Adairs, subsequent owners, and various antiques from the area. These include axes, snowshoes, rusted saws, William Adair's saddlebag, a rifle, empty tin cans that once contained spices and tobacco, irons, lanterns, and a six-point elk mount. The Mercantile is open daily for the majority of the year, but only on the weekends from Thanksgiving until mid-April. During the peak summer months of July and August, lines can consist of twenty or more people at a time and take fifteen minutes to get through, although I never heard one complaint about the wait, and individuals and groups usually spend that time asking each other about travel plans.

As for the grounds of the mercantile's property, there are four identical rental cabins that sleep up to four people each, an employee cabin, a large gas generator that hums constantly during the summer daytime, a barn/workshop, two large solar panels in the middle of an open lawn separating the mercantile and rental cabins, William Adair's original ice house (now an employee cabin), a sand volleyball court, a wooden stage for concerts, three outhouses, and William Adair's original cabin which is now the Northern Lights Saloon.

The Northern Lights Saloon was transformed from a rental cabin into a restaurant and bar in 1976. The original 1912 one-room log cabin serves as the main dining area and

bar, while a kitchen and bathrooms were added later although they mimic the original style. There are five small tables in the saloon that can fit a total of about twenty people along with six wooden bar stools along a wooden bar. A large mirror behind the bar reflects the forty or so bottles of liquor and wine, while next to it are usually five local Montana beers on tap and a selection of four or five different cans. On the walls hang various photographs of the surrounding area with Bowman Lake, the Livingston Mountain Range, and Grizzly Bears as the main subjects, along with an elk antler rack. The original log beams supporting the ceiling are decorated with Forest Service firefighting gear, such as three pairs of wooden skis most likely from the 40's. The menu has several staples, such as hamburgers, quesadillas, and steaks, but often features specials such as quinoa salad, local trout, and stuffed tenderloin. Since the saloon is only open from May to September, the majority of seating is actually outside at twelve picnic tables which all seat up to six people; some are clustered beneath a large elm tree, the only one in the valley. Various rusted soda and beer advertisements hang on the walls along with a sign that reads "HIPPIES USE SIDEDOOR, No Exceptions" with an arrow pointing to the back, while another hand-written sign has the slogan, "Northern Lights Saloon: A Montana Phenomena." The saloon does have two flush toilets and sinks for its patrons, which is the only business here providing such facilities.

As with the Mercantile, the busiest months are July and August; weekend nights see every available seat taken and people are forced to park vehicles on the driveway leading into Polebridge rather than in the actual parking lot in front of the saloon and mercantile.



Figure 3 - Northern Lights Saloon

Down the road from the mercantile, the North Fork Hostel occupies a building that was once a large mess hall on the MacFarland Ranch in Big Prairie until it was disassembled, transported by truck, reassembled, and opened in 1979. The hostel provides a communal kitchen with food storage and all necessary utensils, a dining area with a communal table, a shower, very limited access to electricity in order to charge cameras and phones, and Wifi access for about one hour a day. Despite having propane lights, which cannot be used before a guest receives a tutorial, the large windows in the living room offer enough light during the long summer days well into the evening and reminders are posted in almost every room about how to limit energy consumption. Sixteen beds and three stand-alone cabins behind the main building provide room for up to twenty people, but during the busiest months of July and August, couches and spare bunks are utilized to push occupancy to a limit of thirty. The hostel operates from May 1 to October 20, but is open year-round if people make reservations well in advance.

Even though anyone entering Glacier National Park from its northwest entrance has to pass by these businesses, they are attractions in their own right and draw tourists who want to experience this place firsthand. The way these businesses are operated (offering the only services in the area on a limited scale) and the way the original buildings are preserved are what make them so valuable to tourists and the people living in the community.



Figure 4 - The North Fork Hostel

SECTION THREE

PLACE AND AUTHENTICITY IN POLEBRIDGE

The Concept of Place

Central to identifying how people feel about living, working, and maintaining what Polebridge is to each individual is its definition as a place. One of the most influential thinkers on the concept of place and how it applies on an individual level was the humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. Moving beyond the abstract concept of space, through which we all unconsciously navigate, a place forms in that space “as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan 1977: 6). In keeping with the notion that space becomes a place after it has been experienced and internalized, was Edward Relph, who took a more phenomenological approach to place, and saw it as possible to separate from pure location, and define places by the experiences and intentions that individuals live out in certain settings. For Relph, places “are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full of meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. They are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centers of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties” (Relph 1976: 141). Polebridge, as a place, is not simply defined by its exact location or the descriptions of its buildings, but rather by the act of humans “being” there (Creswell 2004).

Beyond just being a place, though, this study is concerned with the ideas of identity of spirit, or sense of place – Polebridge’s character. The basic components of identity are a static physical setting, the activities performed in that setting, and the

meanings – human intentions and experiences – that people find within a particular place. When applying this concept to Polebridge, we can consider that the town is in a fixed location and is made up of a set configuration of buildings, the activities there range from the commercial and recreational to actually being individuals' homes, and that the people who live and work there interact and experience the place with others. Despite any changes that occur there, whether they be physical (newly constructed/renovated buildings or better roads) or social (type and number of visitors), this sense of place persists because of a legacy that has been established through time (Relph 1976).

The Concept of Authenticity

As a philosophical concept, the idea of authenticity matured towards the end of the 18th Century as a reaction to modernism's sense of individuality detached from community and natural morals (Taylor 1991). One of the concept's earliest proponents, Swiss-French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, described authenticity as following natural feelings that express one's innermost conscience and self despite constraints put in place by society (Guignon 2004). Further adding to the subjectivity of the idea of authenticity, Danish philosopher Søren Kirkegaard claimed that each human must find his or her own personal truth to live by on a constant road to "becoming" rather than ascribe to the prevailing and objective cultural and social institutions of the time, as Georg Hegel would have asserted (Golomb 1995). Hegel, stated that one's measure of authenticity is inseparable from the prevailing ethos, history, and constructs of society at a specific time since each individual is part of that society whether he or she likes it or

not – to be authentic is to embrace being part of that society and its history rather than completely internalizing one’s own thoughts and feelings (Golomb 1995).

This is where the idea of forming an identity – an authenticity of place – arises. The idea of authenticity and how it is formed, judged, and experienced can be applied to objects and man-made buildings that people inhabit and visit. While Polebridge is definitely not a ghost town, many conclusions can be drawn from Dydia DeLyser’s study on California’s Bodie State Historic Park. Her main argument is that the authenticity of places comprised mostly of buildings from a bygone era is judged at a personal level by visitors and residents alike; people have a preexisting idea of what constitutes authentic and inauthentic when it comes to places that evoke a sense of the past, and they need to experience them to see if they measure up to expectations or not. Her study’s conclusion is that “authenticity is a vehicle through which [visitors] can experience a fantasy past that may never have been,” but at the same time, those experiences and the act of imagining the past are incredibly valuable to making a connection to that place (DeLyser 1999: 626).

When applying this idea to Polebridge, authenticity is actively crafted by residents and business owners or is simply a fact of life or byproduct that naturally appeals to insiders and outsiders alike. Since “identities are formed in dialogue with others, in agreement or struggle with their recognition,” the fact that this place is such a draw for seasonal tourists who interact with the small number of year-round residents creates a dynamic situation where each group is being evaluated by the other and the concept of what is really authentic or not arises (Taylor 1991: 45).

Polebridge provides an ideal setting since many levels of authenticity can be seen and experienced in a specific place. We can consider the place objectively authentic since many original buildings still stand and are actually being utilized; constructively authentic since Polebridge represents what life deep in the mountains “should” be; and existentially authentic since residents and visitors create meanings, bonds, and associations with each other and this place through the act of simply being there and experiencing it (Wang 1999: 351).

When further considering what it means to be an authentic place representing the past or not, much of it is based on the “preservation of cultural traditions and practices that may no longer have a place in everyday life,” meaning that Polebridge’s unique characteristics – existing off the power grid, the self-sufficiency of its residents – only add to its credibility and authenticity (Lacy and Douglass 2002: 6).

Having described authenticity as a mainly subjective, yet consistent concept, the motivations for seeking it out also need to be considered. In general, tourists want to “directly experience and consume diverse past and present cultural landscapes,” and since Polebridge has a clear mix of the past and present, it is a major draw for those seeking an escape from most modern technology, but at the same time temporarily be part of a vibrant community (Chhabra 2003: 703). Elaborating on this idea of living in or escaping to an isolated mountain town is that “modern society creates an alienation that has as its result a longing for experiences that might be labeled ‘authentic,’” thus making Polebridge a prime destination (Olson 2002: 160). On the downside of this, there is the realization that “sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even

to get in with the natives, and, at the same time, they are deprecated for always failing to achieve these goals” (MacCannell 1973: 592).

Authenticity will not have the same meaning for every resident and visitor – an authentic identity is subjective and constantly changing itself. This provides the assumption that authenticity is not “inherent in an object, forever fixed in time; it is seen as a struggle, a social process, in which competing interests argue for their own interpretation of history” (Bruner 1994: 408). The various interpretations of authenticity also depend heavily on the type of tourists visiting Polebridge and how this place is marketed. For example, National Geographic’s geotourism mapguide for the Crown of the Continent highlights the Polebridge Mercantile and Northern Lights Saloon and describes them as a “favorite haunt of the backcountry set” where visitors can relax like locals in a place “off-the-grid and a long haul from asphalt” (National Geographic Society 2008). It is references such as this that give visitors/outsideers an expectation that they will seek to fulfill by visiting these businesses; it only feeds into a “place myth” that has been created and reified over time (Bosak 2012: 473). This concept of a “place myth” that has been created by non-local actors almost forces a place into “coherence to the imaginings along a certain culturally significant theme,” the theme being that Polebridge is supposed to be an undeveloped “haunt” where people can get a taste of a much slowed-down lifestyle in the middle of nowhere (Davis 2005: 611). Yet this “imagined periphery” for tourists is the “imagined center” for the people who live and work in Polebridge. It means that there are competing definitions of what this place should actually be (Davis 2005: 615). These competing definitions are the result of popular tourist literature and how Polebridge is placed into the category of an old western outpost

– visitors have something to expect as a result and the character of the place is predetermined. On the other hand, the residents there are simply operating businesses and carrying out their day-to-day lives.

Reconciling the periphery and center and catering to tourists/outside is actually what keeps Polebridge in an authentic state since if there is too much change or “modernization,” the place would lose what makes it such a unique spot. When viewing tourism as a ritual in which visitors and hosts play an active part, the town of Polebridge is constantly experienced by first-time and returning visitors and reaffirmed by locals; this is repeated season after season for insiders and outsiders alike and keeps the aura of the place intact (Rickly-Boyd 2012: 271).

There is also a downside to this since the businesses that are such an attraction are in a sense trapped; one set of visitors is so accustomed to the way they operate now, while another set of visitors might have different expectations regarding what should be offered to them upon their first visit. Increased services, such as more flush toilets, better internet access, and more lodging, might placate more consumptive tourists, but at the same time these advancements would offend people who are used to a certain rustic character or those who are seeking it out for the first time. This is the fine line that has to be considered owing to tourism’s ability to restructure entire communities (Reisinger and Steiner 2006).

Yet the very act of visitors interacting with each other and with locals is a key aspect of Polebridge’s character. Since these businesses do indeed lack many of the comforts and conveniences of the “modern world,” there is an opportunity to create shared experiences and learn about a different lifestyle. Employees and locals constantly

answer questions about what it is like to mainly live without readily available electricity and plumbing and the other parts of living “off the grid,” and this is sometimes enough to create a meaningful cultural exchange; they can convey “local values and identity” to visitors simply by going about their daily lives (Gale et al. 2013: 266). This sort of exchange is another way that authenticity applies to tourism in a place like this. The experiences of visitors can become a “catalyst for authentic living,” since they stick with individuals and may change their outlook on what is truly necessary in life rather than being a touristic pause in life, visiting a place like this can change a person on a deeper level (Brown 2013: 184).

SECTION FOUR

POLEBRIDGE AS A DESTINATION

For all the things that set Polebridge apart as an authentic place, the fact that it is located next to a protected area deep in a mountainous setting is also extremely important. Like many other towns in mountainous areas, Polebridge possesses an appeal because the surrounding terrain is incredibly diverse, the access is fairly difficult, the ecosystem (especially the North Fork of the Flathead and Glacier National Park) is relatively untouched and pristine, there is an abundance of recreational opportunities, cultural resources are still intact, and the area is simply aesthetically pleasing (one might say beautiful) thanks to the immensity of the Livingston Range and timber-covered slopes of the Whitefish Range. Also like other mountainous areas, there is a very clear seasonality that drives tourism (Price 1992); the main season is from May until September, with July being the busiest month. The saloon is completely closed during the winter months and the mercantile and hostel operate on a limited basis since treacherous driving conditions exist and the roads into the park are closed to vehicles anyway; seasonal employees and summer residents leave, and only a handful of year-round residents remain.

With this reliance on tourism, residents have to cope with its “inherent destructive nature” since any community is irrevocably changed once outsiders constantly visit it and treat it as an attraction (Nepal 2000: 672). Business owners have to meet the needs of a tourist population in order to earn their own livings and locals who are caught in the

middle benefit from those businesses but also have to deal with the sudden influx of strangers who treat their community as an attraction.

When it comes to how much locals are willing to change their community to accommodate outsiders, values come into play. Usually, people who benefit the most from tourism have a profit-making motive in mind and are willing to acquiesce to the demands of tourists while locals with little or nothing to gain staunchly oppose any changes to the host community (Williams and Lawson 2001). In Polebridge, though, the saloon, mercantile, and hostel basically constitute the community, and most residents either work part-time at one of the establishments or benefit immensely from having supplies so close rather than driving an hour to the closest market.

In this sense, Polebridge acts as a tourist nodal center (Nepal and Chipeniuk 2005). Although it can be argued that towns such as Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls also fit into that category, and are capable of accommodating tourism on a larger scale, Polebridge itself provides a jumping-off point for tourists. The town also provides access to frontcountry experiences, which are cursory nature-based experiences such as driving tours, picnics, car-camping, and day-hiking, and the backcountry, where visitors can seek more challenging experiences such as backpacking and mountaineering.

More than just a base for explorations in nature, the town itself is a cultural attraction, and the place does fit its advertised image – an escape from the modern world and all of its trappings. Part of this image is that Polebridge is a place firmly rooted in the past – the mercantile is one hundred years old and many of the surrounding buildings are originals or were dismantled and moved there from the surrounding homesteads. This interest in the past and the ability to connect to it via original structures and temporarily

giving up modern conveniences points to a “cultural identity crisis” brought about by Western consumer society (Steiner and Reisinger 2006: 301). This is also why the people who live and work in Polebridge are so protective of it, since in “societies divorced from their origins through urbanization and population migration, such senses of pride and place have to be created” (McIntosh and Prentice 1999: 590).

However, there are moments when that image is challenged. For instance, a college student working at the mercantile might loudly play electronic music over the speakers instead of playing a banjo-heavy string band, which would have been a lot more likely to be heard there a hundred years ago. Another example is the generator and solar panels that stand behind the mercantile and provide limited electricity to the building; these intrusions of modern technology mixed with historical relics seem contradictory for people seeking the truest of Old West outpost experiences, but are nonetheless authentic since they are all part of shared experience visitors and locals create when shaping what this place means to them as individuals (Wang 1999).

SECTION FIVE

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

Before the onset of this study, I gained familiarity with the community of Polebridge through several personal trips to this part of Glacier National Park and through various University of Montana field courses for which I served as a teaching assistant. This early exposure introduced me to the owners, employees, and residents of the town at various different times of the year and gave me a cursory understanding of what life there was like from an outsider's perspective. From early July to late September of 2013, I made four visits lasting five days each to Polebridge, and maintained that pattern in July and August of 2014. I spent a week in late January of 2014 and January of 2015 in Polebridge as well. My accommodations in Polebridge ranged from camping in front of the mercantile to renting a bed in the hostel and staying in the mercantile's rental cabins. This time in the field allowed me to observe from afar and participate in the daily activities that occurred in the hostel, mercantile, and saloon. The experiences included communal meals, evening concerts, time spent with visitors and employees at the saloon, unloading merchandise, and access to employee housing. The act of visiting periodically, but at the same time gaining access to the daily business operations and private social functions of owners and employees, gave me an insight to Polebridge that most visitors rarely get.

Data were collected via several ethnographic methods, such as field observations, recording notes, and informal conversations. Four qualitative interviews were conducted based on techniques outlined by Warren and Karner (2011). The questions I developed

aimed at uncovering the possible benefits and drawbacks of living in Polebridge, comparisons to surrounding communities such as Columbia Falls, and what changes residents and the business owners would make to the area. To address the idea of sense of place and authenticity, questions broaching values and experiences were also included (See Appendix). Semi-structured interviews were the best choice for a study of this nature since the goal was to gather experiences and interpretations of an informant's everyday world, allowing him or her to convey his or her situation and perspective in his or her own words (Kvale 2007).

Since the population of Polebridge is so small, I employed theoretical, or direct, sampling, in order to have the input of the people most invested in the place; the only criterion was that each must spend more than six months out of the year living in Polebridge. Two participants were female and two were male with ages ranging from twenty-nine to seventy-one and none were Montana natives. Respondent A (male, fifty years old) has been a permanent resident in Polebridge since 2002 and operates one of the three businesses in the community. Respondent B (female, twenty-nine) has been in Polebridge since 2009 and also owns/operates of the businesses. Respondent C (male, seventy-one) has been in Polebridge permanently since 1980 and founded one of the businesses in the community only to sell it in 2007 and retire there. Respondent D (female, twenty-nine) has been in Polebridge since 2010 and is an employee at two businesses in the community and is a winter caretaker for one of them. The purpose of the project, a description of what participation entailed, and the voluntary nature of, and confidentiality of, participation was explained before written consent was retrieved from

each interviewee. I conducted and recorded interviews in various settings in Polebridge and left each respondent with a written copy of the study overview and consent form.

The next step involved listening to each interview several times to familiarize myself with the enthusiasm, or lack thereof, that accompanied each line of questioning. For instance, the way a respondent casually lists daily chores that must be completed, versus explaining a connection to a place he or she deems inherently beautiful, adds a certain weight to statements that a researcher needs to take into account. After transcribing each interview and rereading them, common subjects and similar responses became apparent.

By keeping in mind the overall concept of sense of place and how that fits into one's perception of authenticity, responses to questions revealed specific themes that could potentially link to what makes Polebridge a place to these individuals and how that place is authentic or not. To parse these out, I used the process of open coding to identify the themes in an organized manner. Open coding, as an initial data analysis technique, involves identifying analytic patterns and themes by essentially highlighting and extracting data that can connect with each other to address the main research question, which is how residents define and maintain Polebridge's image as an authentic place. (Warren and Karner, 218). The final stage of analysis involved the interpretation of the common themes and how they connected each individual's unique perspective on Polebridge to create a more generalized presentation of this place.

I purposefully limited the number of respondents in order to gain insight from the people who have been living in Polebridge the longest and who are responsible for operating the businesses there. In a sense, these are the true "caretakers" of Polebridge

and the choices they make when it comes to operating the mercantile, saloon, and hostel reverberate through the community; they are essentially responsible for crafting Polebridge's image and therefore its character. These choices include operating hours/seasons, overall appearance of structures, and amenities such as electricity, in-door plumbing, and access to the Internet.

Rather than completely immersing myself in the community full-time and seeking employment at one of the businesses, I attempted to remain somewhere between the role of insider and outsider. My time in Polebridge allowed me to experience a certain level of engagement with the community or what Relph would call "empathetic insideness" (Relph 1976: 54). By befriending community members, participating in daily life there, and trying to understand how residents felt about their particular place, I could see how their opinions reinforced my own perspective on Polebridge – what this place meant to me not only as a research site, but as a place where I could essentially cut myself off from the world for a few days at a time along with them. Engaging with this place on that level was important to this study since it let me catch a glimpse of how the residents I interviewed truly valued Polebridge, its isolation, and its sense of community.

On the other hand, I could not achieve Relph's "existential insideness" since I had to look at Polebridge as objectively and self-consciously as possible and relay how this place is experienced by its residents. In other words, I could only reconcile the respondents' views on their community with the various definitions of authenticity.

Tourist behavior and input from seasonal employees is mainly based on field observations as I was concerned with how year-round residents in Polebridge define and describe their own place in their own words.

SECTION SIX

RESULTS

Based on the respondents' replies in this study, there is a strong idea of what Polebridge is as a place and a desire to engage with that identity and perpetuate it in the face of a growing tourist industry and a more high profile image. That sense is deeply rooted in a place where individuals appreciate how unique their lifestyle is and authentic it is compared to what is perceived as the outside world. This place and lifestyle are defined in several different ways: accessibility, the duality of tourism, image, and a strong sense of community.

Accessibility

The first component of sense of place for Polebridge is accessibility. Accessibility, or the lack of it to be more accurate, is what has kept Polebridge the way it is for so long. Even in its resource-extraction and homesteading era, difficulty in accessing the area precluded major industrial development. Over the past decades, one of the most debated issues regarding access to this place has been the possible paving of the Outside North Fork Road. This issue has local people more or less split down the middle since the difficulty of accessing the area is part of the appeal of living there and since it actually keeps visitation numbers down compared to other areas of Glacier National Park. In contrast to the heavily developed corridor leading to West Glacier, the road to Polebridge discourages many visitors, especially ones in large recreational vehicles, from making the trip since the wash boarding effect is common in dry weather and ice and

snow in winter months make travel treacherous if not impossible. Even though residents rely on the road to leave Polebridge periodically for groceries and other supplies (usually once a week in the summer and every other week in the winter) and business owners rely on customers travelling to the town, the road's condition is mainly seen by the respondents as a control. When asked if there were any changes that he would like to make to Polebridge, one respondent had this to say about access:

Well, just because I'm seeing it getting busier and busier. And I think a rough road, it just keeps, you know, it keeps a lot of people out that are really not necessarily wanting to be here. Or not necessarily coming here to experience the North Fork. You know, they might drive up to Bowman, they might drive up to Kintla, but they won't take the time to go and hike and really explore the area. Whereas, if you have a rougher road, people are likely to spend a little time and really want to be here. You'd get them more likely to come up and stay.
(Respondent A, 3)

The quality of the road is seen as the determining factor for visitors and outsiders and whether or not they earned a chance to get to Polebridge and this part of Glacier National Park. Travelling the road creates a shared experience that people go through before they even get to the town and reflects the type of people willing to travel here. According to another respondent:

it kind of weeds out a lot of the unlikelys and it brings a certain kind of tourist up here and I respect that and appreciate that and I feel like there's a certain kind of respect and, I don't know, intention behind people that come up here.
(Respondent D, 6)

Keeping Polebridge a well-earned reward for the right kind of visitor even seems to take priority over business in a place like this. When asked about possible changes she would like to see here, another respondent commented:

...you know the history of this place and accessibility is kind of what is going to influence what this place is and for example right now, they just paved a section

just south of us, which is pretty dreamy. It's so nice when you're driving and you're not bouncing over the ice heaves and into the potholes and it's great for right now and I'm seeing lots of small Priuses eking their way up here, you know, and so it's great that this place is accessible because people deserve to see it, you know, it's beautiful. But I feel like in prior years, it took a little more effort to get to find this place, which made it that much more special and, you know, people really deserved to experience it because it was a lot of work getting here and so I would not like to see road improvements although they're nice on our vehicles. I think that the road's too nice right now as it is and as a business owner, that sounds silly because our numbers really do reflect the accessibility. (Respondent B, 3)

Witnessing this firsthand, I recorded:

Only half of the road is unpaved and besides the two punctured tires I saw today, any person driving reasonably should have no problem making a quick trip for a nice dinner and pastry...(Field Observation 3)

This idea of accessibility directly ties into one of Edward Relph's components of what gives a place its identity – the static physical location. By nature of its relative isolation, Polebridge does appear as an outpost cut off from the rest of civilization, thus adding to the sense of place respondents have. While Polebridge is accessible for almost any vehicle, it does take a certain level of motivation to make it there according to the responses shown.

Duality of Tourism

The second component of sense of place for Polebridge is the duality of tourism. Polebridge has already been discussed as a tourist destination, but this study seeks to identify how residents there feel about living in such a place and dealing with so many outside visitors during certain times of the year. The strong seasonality of tourism activities in Polebridge is key. For instance, in July of 2014, 6,211 vehicles entered the park at the Polebridge entrance compared to 183 in December of that same year (NPS

2015); all of these vehicles had to pass right by the front doors of the Polebridge Mercantile and the Northern Lights Saloon. This extreme swing from a torrent to a slow trickle illustrates the reliance that the businesses here have on the summer tourist season, but also explains some of the frustration that comes with it. When asked about what it is like to live next to one of the entrances to Glacier National Park, I received this response:

It was probably the smartest thing anyone could do from an economic standpoint, you know, that people are gonna' pass through here because it's at the edge of a national park and a really beautiful one at that. So I guess in that sense, being able to run a business in that circumstance makes it possible. (Respondent B, 8)

When trying to describe the day-to-day life in Polebridge, another respondent replied:

and there's hundreds of people that come through and there's, like, new people everyday that come back that know us from years before that want to pop back and chat, there's all the locals, and then there's hundreds of tourists, so it's just like this nonstop energy that, you know – crazy busy. (Respondent D, 5)

These two selections point to the economic connection that businesses here have to the park and that they thrive when more and more visitors make the drive through Polebridge, but being that people usually stop at the town first, it still serves the function of an outpost – a resupply center for weary travellers. Again, on what it is like to be located so close to an entrance to Glacier National Park:

so we're still serving that purpose of being a general store and then anyone who signs on to work here, including myself, you're an ambassador for the place – you're a kiosk, you're giving information all day about the area and kind of just making people feel welcome to explore it. (Respondent B, 2)

This describes the symbiotic relationship between the businesses here, which act as stand-in rangers for the park, and the park itself, which draws people and fuels the town's economy. As I observed, employees also try to benefit from the booming tourism season by accepting odd jobs for visitors to the park:

It's \$100 to shuttle people to Kintla, \$80 for their own vehicle, \$40 to Ford put-in, and the staff here usually tries to accommodate people, but technically, it is illegal. Two people are asking if they could get a shuttle to Kintla, but I think [Employee] turned them down since it is wear-and-tear on a car and [Employee] doesn't want to do the drive at night. (Field Observation 8)

Based on responses and observations, there is a financial motive to cater to tourists and their desires, but at the same time, the mass of tourists passing through, shopping, sleeping, and dining in Polebridge during the summer season presents challenges for the people living and working there. When responding to what it is like to live next to one of Glacier's entrances, there was this response:

It's a double-edged sword. You know, on certain days, I'm just, like, so stoked for these people. I see these tourists and they're taking pictures and they're driving really slow on the road and they're asking a million questions and I'm, like, stoked about it and I'm happy they're here and I feel happy from them that they're seeing this for the first time. And there's other days where they drive me crazy. You know, just the sheer number of people and the, I don't know, I get like, I don't know, this sounds terrible. (*Employee – Walkin' in your cabin, taking pictures of your set-up*) Yeah, I don't know, people kind of treat you like a zoo animal sometimes. You know, like, "You live here? Ohhhh." And you know, they mean well and it's – I usually can have a pretty good attitude about it, but you know, at the end of the summer and at the end of the big season and especially – I mean, just the numbers in this park alone. (Respondent D, 5)

Not specifically addressing Polebridge's location near an entrance to the park, but when referencing what changes she would personally like to see, this was another response regarding outside visitors:

Because we haul all our garbage and it's hard not to get frustrated at people who want to throw that one little bag of garbage that they had in their car in our garbage before they drive back into town. You know, just informing people of the lifestyle is our biggest challenge because it's so unique and different and it takes so much work. (Respondent B, 3)

By treating Polebridge as a novelty and by not understanding the day-to-day effort that comes with living and operating businesses, tourists remain on the periphery and this is not lost on the respondents; visitors come face-to-face with the “place myth” they might have been expecting, but behaviors do not match the reality on the ground. As a component of place identity, tourism is the main activity in Polebridge and is what keeps the businesses alive; it’s part of the sense of place.

With hour-long traffic jams and limited parking along Going-to-the-Sun Road, places like the North Fork, where Polebridge is located, have the potential to see more and more visitors since there is less pressure and crowding at the moment. Respondent A even says that is what visitors can do if they “want to have the road experience; it’s Going-to-the-Sun Road and other easy accessible parts of the park” (3). This overcrowding will ultimately put pressure on the National Park Service to accommodate the growing number of tourists driving into the park, but as it stands now, management strategies for the area seek to limit numbers in any way possible, and the park’s website makes it clear that services are very limited (NPS 2013).

Image

The third component of sense of place for Polebridge is its image. With all of the benefits and frustrations that come with being a tourist attraction, the respondents were keenly aware of how the community is portrayed and mainly agree with that portrayal. Yet this portrayal is based upon the lifestyle the respondents live and the limitations that the location puts on them. When asked to describe Polebridge to someone who has never visited, there was this response:

it's just a lot slower than most, you know it's more laid back than most places are, you know. Yeah, it's just a little more back to the basics, even back in time a little bit. This place is more rustic. You know you still find propane lights, and outhouses, and stuff that people, you know, a lot of people don't even know what that is anymore. (Respondent A, 3)

This notion of being “back in time” and somewhat cut off from modern society is one of the key aspects of life here and is a major appeal for the respondents. The self-sufficiency of the town adds to the idea of being separate from anywhere else:

the electricity ends where the pavement ends, so we live off the grid and we have to generate all of our own electricity, which is pretty cool because if the world ended, we wouldn't really know it until we couldn't haul diesel to fill our generator anymore. And if it wasn't sunny, our solar panels wouldn't work so, we would eventually notice when the world ended, but it would take a little longer. (Respondent B, 4)

This example of being so far removed from the world is on the extreme end, but the sentiment is clear. In former years, t-shirts with mushroom clouds and the slogan “Montanans for Immediate Nuclear War” were a satirical item of merchandise that visitors could purchase; they were a tongue-in-cheek effort to get the point across that if the rest of the world disappear, the people in Polebridge wouldn't necessarily mind, and that they would be better off than most in that situation.

The willingness to be so cut off and to have a more difficult lifestyle by choice adds to the image of Polebridge, but there are examples that counter that narrative. For all the effort in maintaining the place as one where people can experience the wilderness and live a more rustic way of life, there are modern intrusions that challenge that image.

Respondent B remarked that the more amenities one has, the more it “doesn't feel like Polebridge. It really doesn't. We have a T.V., we have cable, we have the internet” (6).

Lamenting these modern comforts, one respondent remarked:

that was one of the biggest frustrations of being here is that we were coming to live an off the grid, intentional lifestyle, but when you have a commercial operation, you gotta' leave those dreams out the window. (Respondent B, 5)

These realities are mainly behind the scenes, though. For the public, the only luxuries available are limited internet access, the opportunity to charge small electronics, and flush toilets three months out of the year for saloon patrons. Just providing these limited services betrays the image of rustic, isolated living, but they are almost a prerequisite for any business operation in modern America, especially when tourists are involved. During an informal conversation with one seasonal mechanic/caretaker on what he thinks about how Polebridge is experienced by visitors, I recorded:

In his words, people come up here looking for different things in life and sometimes this place meets their needs/ideas and sometimes they can't handle it. He's surprised about the number of people who visit the townsite with the idea that this is part of the park and they can get the same services they would anywhere else – flush toilets, trash disposal, all the information they need. But in fact, there is no electricity, no plumbing, so he's seen people taken aback and disappointed with what they find. (Field Observation 11)

This disappointment with how rustic Polebridge can be and how unprepared some outsiders are when it comes to experiencing the place even for one afternoon fits with other responses concerning the community's off-the-grid image.

When asked about how he would describe Polebridge and how it is portrayed to someone who has never been there, there was one response critical of Polebridge's rustic image:

Well, when I read something about it almost anywhere, there's always an exaggeration – calling it an outpost of civilization or something like that. Well, it kind of is, but it's quite a stretch. That's just reading stuff. And usually there's some, a lot of stretching going on in the story. Exaggerations. But even given all that, it's still a great place to live. (Respondent C, 5)

Still, these exaggerations are what make this place so appealing; the modern conveniences that respondents have, and to a certain point are almost embarrassed to have, are necessary to conduct business, but are not entirely visible to the outsider. When revisiting the third component of place identity – the meanings that people assign to a place based on interactions and experiences – this image is perpetuated and Polebridge is given meaning as a result.

Community

The fourth component of sense of place for Polebridge is its sense of community. Since there is such a small population living in Polebridge for the majority of the year, close bonds and connections form between the people there, and are separate from the outside influence of the booming tourism season. Besides from accepting and accommodating a wide range of visitors who assign their own meanings to this place, respondents had much to say about what their community means to them despite different personal backgrounds, political affiliations, and views on the future of Polebridge. Touching on this diverse community, final comments during one business owner's interview included:

lots of opinions, lots of, yeah lots of beliefs, lots of opinions and they're so varied that you would think no one would be friends. And maybe "friends" is the wrong word, but the fact that we all live here together – we're all united because we love it and even though our opinions of how we want to see progress or what improvements could be done or anything like that or what should be done with this place if anything at all...we all help each other change our tires and put on our chains and I think that that's also something that's unique about living here is just that we're forced to be human. (Respondent B, 9)

Commenting on the rattle from the mercantile's generator and the noise pollution that exists when living next to such a business, one respondent admitted that even though there may be differences in the ideal (quiet) way of living:

People up here are different, though. They're more relaxed, more accepting. They're still your neighbor even if they're totally anti-environmentalist or environmentalist. They kind of disregard that mostly. Which is, I think that's a big plus. (Respondent C, 4)

The connection that the respondents have with each other is not just based on tolerance and a willingness to work together in order to make the most of what they have, but it is firmly based in place and lifestyle – the landscape and appreciation of it and the similar lifestyle choices are the common uniting factors. One employee had this to say about what brings this community together:

It's very rustic living and very intentional and everyone's here for different reasons, but they're all here because this is how they want to live and it's simple and it's clean and it makes for an instant connection. I think that's why this community is so close because we're very different, very eclectic – the age range, the life – economically, socially, everything. We could not be more different, but we all have this common, like, unspoken thing where it's like, "Well you're here and if you're here, there are things that we share." And it's just this really cool connection and it makes it seem a little more like family, I guess. (Respondent D, 4)

Apart from being a tourist destination based on the idea of wilderness experiences and rustic living, this is also the respondents' home – a place into which unselfconscious effort has been put in order to make it his or her own. This is where Relph's idea of existential insideness can be revisited – that "*this* place is where you belong" (Relph 1976: 55). Respondent A even touched directly on this theme by saying:

where I grew up you were very much judged on who you were as where you came from, your education, all this stuff. And for me, the wonderful thing about coming to the North Fork twenty-two years ago, it doesn't matter what education you had

or what people thought, you were just accepted for who you are. And for me, that was a very liberating thing, and for me this is almost what it would call my American Dream. It's not to make it rich or make it big or whatever, but actually to be accepted for who you are. (Respondent A, 8).

This idea of belonging and living a life true to one's self while at the same time being accepted for it is central to Rousseau's definition of authenticity.

There is still a looming concern on the part of respondents that more visitors and more people buying property will have negative effects in the future. As respondent C had to say:

Yeah, it's slowly, incrementally changed since I moved here. A few more people here, a few more people there. It's not like every place else, but it's still increased over those thirty some years. (Respondent C, 2)

This increasing pressure, although slow, is seen as a threat to the status quo and the very character of Polebridge and therefore everything that has made this place an authentic community for the respondents. The longevity of Polebridge's community also arose as a concern when one respondent was asked about changes she would like to see:

I'd like to see more young people. It'd be really nice to kind of have a community that's gonna' grow together instead of a retirement community. (Respondent B, 7)

Respondent B is referring to peers her age only being present seasonally – in her experience, they do not establish themselves there permanently as do the older business owners and property owners spread out along the North Fork of the Flathead.

Still as one Polebridge musician and saloon-employee put it, summarizing his beliefs on how eclectic and accepting the community is:

Montana is the number one spot in the country for social drop-outs and Polebridge is the number one place in Montana for social drop-outs. (Field Observation 11)

SECTION 7

CONCLUSION

Polebridge has always been an authentic mountain outpost; it has been since the day it was established and continues to operate as such. Returning to Wang's three types of authenticity – objective, constructive, and existential – Polebridge once again needs to be analyzed in terms of how it is still authentic today. The original, genuine buildings remain although many have been repurposed. The mercantile building is still a general store, but now doubles as a bakery and merchandise outlet where visitors purchase necessary goods along with souvenirs. An original homestead, which once served as the private space for the Adairs, is now a saloon and restaurant open to the public for relaxation and entertainment. A dude ranch mess hall, which once fed cattlemen and outfitters, now serves as a hostel where weary backpackers and travelers enjoy soft beds and other comforts. So the residents and visitors are constantly exposed to objective authenticity.

In another sense, the way these original buildings and objects have been utilized shows how Polebridge is constructively authentic. For instance, the tools displayed on the walls of the mercantile no longer serve their original function; they are now mementos representing the past and giving visitors a taste of what life used to be like. But the difficulty in access, the rustic image that the residents perpetuate, and the media portrayals of Polebridge all fit the mold of what life here should be like off the grid and surrounded by mountains.

It is this existential authenticity that contributes to Polebridge's contemporary meaning. The people who live in Polebridge are responsible for maintaining what the place means to them, but "every individual may assign selfconsciously or unselfconsciously an identity to particular places [and] these identities are nevertheless combined intersubjectively to form a common identity" (Relph 1976: 45). So Polebridge's identity, and its sense of place as felt by insiders and outsiders, is therefore the product of these two groups interacting.

This study has defined Polebridge as a place with a static location, activities, and meanings, all of which combine to give it a sense of place that endures despite its popularity among tourists and residents' efforts to accommodate them. The challenges of maintaining and sharing this place are many, and access to information via the internet is only increasing Polebridge's popularity. On the one hand, the positives from a business aspect are undeniable; visitors can now rent cabins online, place custom baking orders that will be ready in two hours, and order merchandise that will be delivered directly to their home. Instead of making the trip to Polebridge, people now even have the option of visiting a satellite bakery in downtown Whitefish. This exposure and expansion detracts from how the respondents viewed the authentic experience of being in place and enjoying a self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world.

On the other hand, for those living and working in Polebridge and for those willing to make the sometimes arduous journey into the mountains, the place is still there; it remains as it once was despite the changes made to it and despite the encroachment of our modern world. Polebridge will always be an escape in one sense or the other and its meaning will always be authentic for those who find themselves there.

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APPENDIX

Resident Interview Guide

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

1. Please tell me how you came to be in Polebridge.

Prompt: Where you grew up, how long you've been here, why you came here, and anything else you'd like to share.

2. How often do you leave town?

Probe: For what purpose?

Probe: How do you feel about the surrounding communities?

3. Did you construct your home or was it here prior to your arrival?

Probe: How do you generate power?

Probe: Where does your food mainly come from?

4. What is day-to-day life like in Polebridge?

Prompt: Are there any changes you would make to the town?

5. How do you feel about living next to one of the entrances to Glacier National Park?

Probe: Do you enter the park often?

Probe: What is it like to live in a tourist destination?

Probe: How do you feel about the number of visitors that enter Polebridge during this time of year?

6. What do you like most about living in Polebridge?

Probe: What do you like least?

7. How would you describe Polebridge to someone who has never been here?

8. Is there anything else you would like to add?