



## First Impressions Revisited\*

A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The Center For Community Economic Development

Community Visited: Cable, Wisconsin

Date of Visits May 19, 2003 and July 1, 2003

Visits Completed by (community) Town of Mercer

Program Developed by: Professor Andrew B. Lewis  
Community Development Specialist  
Center for Community Economic Development  
University of Wisconsin Extension  
Edited: 9-6-2002



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# **First Impressions Revisited: A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement Final Report**

**Community You Visited:** Cable, Wisconsin

## **Visitation Team Profile:**

### **Will Andresen**

**Age: 42      Gender: M      Occupation: Extension Educator**  
**Address: 300 Taconite Street, Hurley, WI 54534**  
**Phone #: 715-561-2695      E-Mail: will.andresen@ces.uwex.edu**

### **Lynn Richie**

**Age: 57      Gender: F      Occupation: Retired Business Owner/Chamber Board Member**  
**Address: P.O. Box 471, Mercer, WI 54547**  
**Phone #: 715-476-3860      E-Mail: warric@baysat.net**

### **Joan Oinette**

**Age: 65      Gender: F      Occupation: Retired Business Owner/Committee Volunteer**  
**Address: 4816 Catherine Road, Mercer, WI 54534**  
**Phone #: 715-476-3887      E-Mail: None**

### **Kelly Klein**

**Age: \_\_\_\_\_      Gender: M      Occupation: Economic Development Official**  
**Address: 100 Cary Road, Hurley, WI 54534**  
**Phone #: 715-561-2922      E-Mail: ironcountywi@centurytel.net**

### **Lynn Langhoff**

**Age: \_\_\_\_\_      Gender: F      Occupation: Town of Mercer Treasurer**  
**Address: P.O. Box 149, Mercer, WI 54547**  
**Phone #: 715-476-2403      E-Mail: beaversresort@baysat.net**

**Date of visits and time spent:** May 19, 2003 and July 1, 2003, morning through lunch and into the early afternoon.

**Weather on dates of visit:** Weather was dry with seasonal temperatures on both visits.

## **Introduction**

The town of Mercer was very motivated to find a partner to exchange a First Impressions visit with. The Mercer Chamber of Commerce had recently created a downtown development committee who was in the process of developing a strategic plan to determine the direction for the future improvement and development of the downtown. The group felt that a critical element of the strategic planning process was to obtain in-pu from persons outside of the Mercer area about their first reactions to the town.

Five visitors from Mercer traveled to Cable for the exchange. Due to scheduling difficulties, the group made two visits to Cable. The first visit was conducted on May 19<sup>th</sup> while the second visit was made on July 1<sup>st</sup>. There were a few less shops open and a little less landscaping evident on the first visit. Otherwise, the groups' comments were very similar between the two visits. Where the visitors' comments were biased by the early visit, we made sure to make a note of it in the report.

There is no question that the first impression of Cable was positive. Some common themes were identified by several of the visitors. The common positive themes included the cleanliness of the community and the friendliness of the people. The visitors were impressed with a number of ideas that they will be able to bring back to Mercer.

A few items that needed improvement were also noted. Most notably, the group felt the need for Cable to have a more organized and effective signage system. They felt that improved "Welcome to Cable" signage would be a significant improvement. Some also felt that the banners on M could be improved.

The following report follows the First Impressions template provided by the UW-Extension Center for Community Economic Development. Each section begins with a summary of the major themes coming from the visit, followed by the verbatim comments from each of the visitors.

## **Prior to Your Visit**

### ***How easy was it to get information on the community that you are visiting?***

In conducting a web-search, the first item to appear under a "Cable, Wisconsin" search was a link to Trip Advisor which included very little information. Conducting a search for lodging through Travelocity provided a listing of only one lodging establishment, which was not even located in the Cable area. A search through Expedia also revealed no Cable area lodging opportunities. Clearly, using these national search platforms was not appropriate for Cable.

We had much better luck with direct connections to local businesses and the chamber web-site. Many web-sites for area lodging were easy to find. In addition to a description of their accommodations, we found useful information about the area and links to other useful web-sites. We also found home-pages for snowmobiling and mountain biking. We found the web-site information for the area to be very useful, easy to access and accurate.

The Chamber's web-site was found to be especially useful. It was very attractive and eye-catching. It included a comprehensive listing of attractions, activities, upcoming events and lodging. The links to lodging establishments was excellent. The web-site also included some nice extra features, including a skiing and snowmobile report, a message board and an easy way to request additional information. However, the Visitor's Guide displayed on the web-site only included advertising and lodging, with no display of upcoming events and attractions. The Discover Wisconsin and the Cable Natural History Museum web-sites were also especially well done.

Many of the area business web-sites did not link to the chamber web-site. We would recommend that the chamber request a direct link from all of the business' web-sites to help market the entire area to interested visitors.

The brochures we obtained from the community were attractive and informative. They provided an accurate reflection of what we saw on our visit. The Northwest Wisconsin Cable Area Recreational Map was especially attractive and useful. The Vacation and Visitor Guide was very well-done with useful contact information, activity descriptions and calendar of events. The "Fun in the Forest" slogan seems to work better than the somewhat wordy "Fun, Friends, One Fantastic Forest" slogan. Several other more activity specific brochures were available and well-done. We had no issues with the information that we obtained regarding the community and its attractions and businesses.

## **Past Perceptions**

*What was your perception of the community before this visit? What did you expect to see? Please comment on your knowledge of this community:*

The past perceptions of the Cable community were positive. Most of the visitors were aware of something about Cable or at least the Cable area. No negative comments regarding previous perceptions of the community were noted by the visitors. Here are some of the verbatim comments regarding past perceptions:

"Was aware that Cable was a small, unincorporated community."

"My perception of the town was that it was a small resort area. Knew about Telemark Lodge prior to the visit."

"I have driven by Cable on the way to Hayward. Thought it was a cute small tourist town."

"Was aware that Cable was a small town, but that it had the ability to attract large numbers of visitors through very well-organized and popular non-motorized sporting events and facilities."

"Very positive prior perception of community."

## **The "Five Minute" Impression**

*After taking a five-minute drive through the community, without stopping, the following reactions were noted:*

The visitors felt that the first five minute impression was positive. They witnessed a clean, attractive community that would be worth spending some time in. No negative characteristic of the town was indicated by the group in the first drive-through of the community.



“Noticed that there were generally well-maintained homes, businesses and infrastructure. Appeared as though the town cared about itself.”

“I felt that this was a place that I would like to stop and check out. Interesting looking shops. Café caught my attention.”

“Clean community. Noticed welcome flags and flower pots on light posts.”

## Community Entrances

*The following observations were noted when entering the community from major entrances:*

In general, for all three major entrances, comments were positive regarding the appearance of the community entrances. Negative comments were related to a lack of “Welcome to Cable” signage or that the existing such signage was not easy to find or read. Some negative comments related to the “wordiness” of the banners and the “mix” of different types of banners along M. Otherwise, the entrances to Cable received positive reviews.

*Approached on M, East of Town:*



“Nice store fronts, churches, bank, banners on posts and flower pots.”

“Lack of ‘Welcome to Cable’ signage. Banners were nice. Flower baskets were nice. Chamber easy to identify. Community seemed clean.”

“Good banners. No ‘Welcome’ signs. Streets and street intersections a little complicated from M. Blue Tourist information signs located on both M and 63. More traffic on 63.”

“Green banners easy to see and read. Blue banners too wordy. Did not care for mix of banners.”

“No real identifier that you are in Cable (Welcome Signs). Nice Birkie display.”

“Looked welcoming. Neat community aesthetics. Good street conditions. Well marked highways. Tourist information signs. Did not see any large town welcome signs.”

***Approached on 63, North of Town:***

“No ‘Welcome to Cable’ signage. Tourist information signs were there, but no other community signs.”

“Looked welcoming.”

“Lack of public facilities.”

“No ‘Cable’ sign. But did have tourist information sign.”

***Approached on 63, South of Town:***



“Fire numbers can be seen from both directions. Tourist information sign. Welcome Sign with organizations was somewhat covered by trees. Only saw one large building for sale and the outside was a little run down.”

“Welcome sign visible. Not much retail. Lots of real estate offices.”

“Sprawl, scattered business south of town. Noticed Welcome to Cable sign.”

“Looked welcoming. No falling down buildings, new construction.”

## **Downtown Business Area**

### ***Observations about the general appearance of the downtown area:***

The majority of our time was spent in the downtown area. The visitors had positive impressions of the downtown. While it was agreed that the downtown was small, there were positive impressions regarding its appearance and the type of businesses in the downtown. Some felt that the landscaping was attractive, but that even more landscaping would be an improvement.

Some negative comments were made regarding the view from the chamber of commerce parking lot. Visitors parking in the lot will be looking at the junk in the neighbor’s back yard. Parking next to the museum and library was questioned as being possibly inadequate during the summer months. Few other negative comments regarding the downtown were noted by the group.



“Good appearance of downtown. Lacking lots of flowers, but that may change as soon as Memorial Day arrives” (May 19 visit).

“Nice shops. Small, attractive downtown. Could be even more attractive with more landscaping.”

“Found downtown easily. Good signage for tourist information center.”

“General appearance was of a neat, well-maintained area both business building and most private homes. Missed seeing plants, but may be too early” (May 19 visit).

### ***General Appearance of Buildings, Displays, Signage:***

“Beautiful building fronts and well-signed.”

“Downtown buildings were good. Businesses are centrally located.”

***The Variety of Shopping:***

“Shops were super with a mix of all things.”

“Merchandise variety and quality was very good.”

“Gift shops were excellent.”

“One large store (grocery, hardware, etc). Smaller specialty shops. Not a lot to choose from in restaurants.”

“Did not see very much lodging in the town itself.”

***What kind of customer service did you receive when you entered the retail businesses?***

Excellent customer service was definitely one of the community’s strong points. We found nothing but positive, friendly, helpful people at the shops, restaurants, chamber building and museum. Customer service was a real highlight for our visit.

“People were friendly everywhere we went.”

“Customer service was friendly and informative everywhere. Most everything was open with a few exceptions.”

“Friendly and helpful customer service. Most of the people we talked with were business owners. They showed us their products but were not too pushy. Good hours. If business was closed it was due to the time of year we visited” (May 19 visit).

“Found consistently excellent customer service.”

“Friendly, knowledgeable customer service.”

***Were there any governmental or nonprofit organizational activities that might serve as a magnet for the shopping district?***

The Chamber Information Center, Museum and Library were excellent magnets for the downtown. In our May visit, the Chamber representative told us that the Museum was closed. However, they made arrangements for the Museum Director to come in and open the doors for us. Even though she was volunteering her time with little or no notice, the Museum Director was very helpful and friendly. The Chamber building and Museum were excellent additions to the downtown. We noticed, but did not enter, the public library. The library did not appear as inviting as the other public buildings.



“The museum was a pleasant surprise. It was well done inside and out.”

“Library was a neat looking old log building but was hard to see front of building because of large trees. Not sure of parking area.”

“Museum sign caught my attention but assumed that library was the museum until talked to the chamber representative.”

“Community center, museum and municipal building located downtown.”

***Were there the following public amenities?***

***Pay phones (working with phonebook intact!):***

No Comments.

***Drinking fountains:***

No Comments.

***Benches:***

Having strategically located and well-maintained public benches in the downtown was a real plus. They encouraged people to stay a little longer and offered a friendly gesture to the visitor.

“Benches by bank and a small area by gift store.”

“Several benches that were in good shape.”

***Public restrooms:***

The public restrooms in the Chamber building were convenient and well-maintained.

### ***Appealing landscaping:***

As previously noted, landscaping in the downtown was seen as a positive item. In both visits, some members felt that landscaping could be improved somewhat.



“Landscaping could be improved.”

“Landscaping very nice.”

“Needs more plants around town” (May 19 visit).

### ***Did you have any difficulty finding parking? Could you access multiple services from where you parked?***

Parking was not a problem in either of our visits. However, it appeared as though it could be a problem in heavier traffic days (weekends and holidays) and that there was some potential for traffic safety problems along the curve on M near the Museum.

“Parking was not a problem and we were able to walk most of the downtown.”

“No problems with parking.”

“Parking in general was fine except by library/museum. Only a few spots by Chamber.”

“Parking was easy.”

### **Other Retail Shopping Areas (Big Box Retailers/Shopping Malls)**

The downtown seemed to be the only commercial area in town.

## **Industrial Parks/Commercial Areas**

No visible industrial park or commercial area outside of the downtown. This may or may not be an issue for the local residents in terms of economic development. But from the visitor's perspective, this was not identified as a negative characteristic of the community.

"We saw one larger newer building North of town. Maybe a Cable Company. No sign. Nice looking building" (May 19 visit).

"Could see no defined industrial area/park. Little or no manufacturing in Cable. Seemed to be plenty of room at the edge of town for industrial development."

"Didn't see any industrial areas."

## **Health Care Services**

A common comment was the concern regarding lack of health care services. In our brief visits, we did not see any evidence of local health care services and this was identified as a concern by our group.

"No clinic in town. Hospital a half hour away."

"No clinic. Hayward hospital closest facility."

"No hospitals. No visible clinics."

"Did not see any clinics or health care type businesses. A clinic tied into larger town of Hayward would seem a good idea."

## **Housing**

Comments regarding the existing housing stock were generally positive. The residential neighborhoods seemed well-kept and attractive. The housing market appeared relatively strong, with few houses for sale and a well-maintained housing stock. There did not appear to be any rental housing available, such as apartments or assisted living opportunities. This may be a concern for those purchasing homes for the first time or those needing additional assistance.

"Equally new and older homes. Not too many vacant lots in town. Not a lot of 'For Sale' signs. Chamber has Realty books."

"Didn't see rental units or assisted living."

"Some newer homes. Some older homes in good shape. No rentals. Seemed to be space for new development."

"Did not see 'For Sale' signs. Some homes lacked maintenance."

“A good mix of new/older homes. Most homes well taken care of. Did not note any rental apartments or specific senior housing.”

“No signs of depressed housing market. Two Realty offices. Not an abundance of ‘For Sale’ signs.”

“Mostly single family homes. No evidence of multi-family housing.”

“Well-maintained housing stock. Attractive neighborhoods.”

“Lakefront property is high priced. Not sure of off-lake housing/property values.”

“The town looked neat and tidy. Not depressed.”

## **Schools**

The group commented on the fact that there was no local school at any level and that the closest school facility was nine miles away. The visitors did make positive comments regarding the re-use of the old school and the positive impact of that building on the downtown.

“No schools in Cable. Students go to Drummond.”

“The school was nine miles away in Drummond.”

“No local school.”

## **Faith/Religion**

No Comments.

## **Civic**

*Does it appear as though there are a variety of nonprofit organizations and clubs within the community?*

No Comments.

## **Residents**

The few non-business people we interacted with also seemed to be positive and friendly. The location of the chamber building and the museum were well known by everyone we talked to. Our group did not experience any negative feelings or comments from the residents of the town. There did not appear to be any segment of the population that would feel uncomfortable in Cable.

## **Public Infrastructure**

### ***Streets, Street Signing and Lighting:***

“Signs directing us to tourist information building were plainly in view.”

“Streets and lighting seemed adequate for a small town.”

“Streets were generally in good shape.”

### ***Land Use Planning:***

“Community seemed to have a strong sense of what its niche is.”

### ***Sidewalks:***

“Not many sidewalks, but the ones that were there were in good shape.”

“Sidewalks were in good condition and were easy to get around.”

“One side of M had sidewalks, but the side by the library, Museum and tourist information center did not.”

### ***Public Restrooms:***

“Chamber had public restrooms available that were clean.”

### ***City/Village/Town Hall:***

“Town Hall was located off of the main street. No sign showing their location from the highway.”

“Newer Town Hall.”

### ***Police/Fire Protection/Emergency Medical Services Facilities:***

“Seemed to be County-wide services.”

“County services for police.”

“Medical services out of town.”

“Seemed up to date, but small.”

### ***Public Parking:***

“Good public parking.”

“May need more public parking in summer.”

“Public parking seemed to be OK. But we visited during off-season time” (May 19 visit).

***Library:***



“Very friendly looking log building, but was closed on day of visit” (May 19 visit).

“Attractive, unique building. A little hidden from view. Not sure what it was at first.”

“Did not see a public library.”

“Small, older building. Well-kept on the outside.”

***Landscaping/Street Trees:***

“Landscaping was good.”

“Very nice landscaping. Flowers in hangers and near benches.”

“Trees cover some less than appealing areas of town - good use of trees. More landscaping needed in some places.”

“Lots of trees and green areas.”

***Pay Phones, Drinking Fountains, Benches, Other Misc.:***

“Benches in downtown area.”

“Nice benches in downtown.”

**Recreation/Tourism**

***Is the community well known for any particular attraction or event? Do they have a community slogan that capitalizes on that asset?***

The community has done a good job of capitalizes on the Birkebeiner, as all of our visitors were aware of this event. The visitors were less aware of the Fat Tire Festival. Some comments were made regarding the awareness of nearby resorts and lakes. Again, a comment was made about the town's slogan not including some of the major area events.

“Telemark Resort close by and the Birkebeiner.”

“American Birkebeiner.”

“Ski Races.”

“Mountain Bike Race.”

“Telemark and Lakewoods.”

“Snowmobiling.”

“Close to Hayward.”

“Lakes.”

“Birkie.”

“Birkie.”

“Fat Tire Festival – could market this more.”

“Slogan does not use events. Slogan is long and hard to remember.”

***Comment on the availability and selection of overnight accommodations:***

“Resorts are located outside of town. One small motel in town.”

“Telemark Lodge was very lovely. Saw a lovely looking Bed and Breakfast.”

“There are plenty of all accommodations choices in all price ranges.”

“Seemed to have little in town. Resorts nearby.”

***Did you see any indication of significant events taking place in the community that would be of interest to both visitors and residents?***

“Nice listing of events located in chamber building.”

“Birkebeiner.”

“Signs posted on board outside of Chamber and inside on bulletin board.”

“Fishing tournament.”

“Birkie.”

“Bike races.”

“Museum has educational seminars all summer.”

“Good calendar of events. Lots happening in community.”

***Are there any significant natural features that have the potential of drawing people to the community?***

“Lakes, rivers and forests.”

“Lakes. Skiing in winter.”

“Lakes. Rivers. Scenic views.”

***Are there any significant man-made attractions?***

“Natural History Museum.”

“Museum was a great surprise – a delightful place with a friendly, enthusiastic head-person.”

“Nature Museum.”

“Museums.”

“Golf courses.”

“Pools at Lake Woods and Telemark.”

“Non-motorized trails.”

***Is there an obvious visitor’s center, chamber of commerce office, Main Street office, or other facility that serves the needs of visitors? Please comment on the staff, facilities, signage, visibility, etc.***

Our group indicated only positive comments regarding the visitor’s center, its convenient location and its staff. This building and organization is a true asset to the community.

“Chamber building – nice building. Very visible from roadway.”

“Chamber had good signage.”

“Chamber has a wide variety of brochures.”

“Staff was very helpful and knowledgeable.”

“Wide variety of brochures from surrounding areas and counties.”

“Tourist information center – good signage and nice building (except for mess out back and this is where visitors park so it may be a first impression).”

“Staff was very helpful – answered questions. Made call to museum and even though it was closed they opened especially for us.”

“Chamber building was very attractive with good parking. Easy to find.”

“Excellent, friendly staff.”

“Nice brochure selection. Not just promoting Cable area, but whole region – which is good.”

***Are there any restaurants, specialty shops or attractions that would bring you back to this community in the near future?***

“Cranberry Gift Shop.”

“Café, friendly with good food.”

“The Museum.”

## **Using your Senses**

***What did the community taste like? Was there any specialty food item, bakery, restaurant, or candy store that you will remember?***

“We ate at a very small café – friendly staff and good food but did not note any fancier (lady’s lunch) places to eat in town.”

“Nothing specific in town. Could have good taste outside of town.”

***What did the community smell like?***

“No bad smells. It smells of wet North Woods – good.”

“Flowers. No industry odor.”

“No offensive smells.”

“There were no bad smells. Seemed to be plenty of landscaping and flowers.”

***What sounds did you hear?***

“Quiet town. No industry. Little traffic.”

“Quiet – little traffic and noise.”

“Traffic.”

“Generally a quiet town.”

***Did you have any experiences that impacted the way the community feels?***

“Warm, friendly shopkeepers.”

“Would feel very safe. Helpful people so you know you would be welcomed back.”

“No negatives.”

“Nothing negative. It seemed to be a safe place.”

**Wrap-Up**

***What are the 5 most positive things that you observed about the community?***

All five visitors created their own list of positive features about the Cable community. There were two major themes regarding the community: The town is clean and its people are friendly.

1. Clean and Attractive
2. Positive, friendly people
3. Public places are attractive
4. Nice downtown
5. Nice residential neighborhoods

1. Clean
2. Landscaping
3. Natural history museum
4. Quiet
5. Small

1. Cleanliness
2. Store Fronts
3. Friendly Store Workers
4. Memorial with Flags

1. Good signs to Tourist Information Center
2. Quaint looking – neat buildings
3. Friendly – helpful people
4. Want to return to visit gift shop, plus visit those closed on visit
5. Museum – my favorite place in town

1. Neat looking benches and a place to sit
2. Friendly
3. Enthusiastic owners of shops
4. A place I would like to return to
5. New Construction
6. Lots of greenery

***What are the five biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community?***

Again, each visitor came up with their own list of challenges, but some common issues were identified, such as the distant location of services and the small number of businesses available.

1. School located out of town
2. Few restaurant choices
3. Economic development may be an issue for locals
4. Not quite enough shops, things to do, to attract visitors to town unless they are there for some other reason
5. Is there enough for kids to do?

1. Only services industries
2. Major retail is 17 miles away
3. Medical services 17 miles away
4. Things for kids to do
5. Services for the elderly

1. No medical services in town

1. Not enough businesses to fill needs of locals and tourists
2. Are there enough well-paying jobs?
3. More restaurants and bakery needed
4. Keeping Telemark and Lakewoods going to encourage more people to visit area
5. Lack of snow for winter recreation

1. The signage of “Cable”
2. Cluttered looking
3. Otherwise, had no negative feelings

***What will you remember most about this community six months from now (positive or negative)?***

Two common themes emerged regarding what the visitors would remember most from their visit to Cable: Friendly people and the museum. Here are the comments from the visitors:

“The Friendliness.”

“Cute Shops.”

“Natural History Museum.”

“The Museum.”

“Nice, friendly, small town.”

***Describe ONE idea that you will borrow for use in your own business/community and describe how you will start to implement it within the next 72 hours!***

A number of ideas that could be brought home to Mercer were identified during the visits. Not all of the ideas could be implemented within 72 hours, but they were significant enough for the visitors to identify as positive ideas that they would like to try at home:

“Nice re-use of empty school building.”

“Blue information signs.”

“Marketing the county with a card that directs you to call or visit a web-site.”

“Blue information signs.”

**Final Conclusions:**

Two major positive features of the community identified by the group were its neat and attractive appearance and its friendly people. A few items identified by the group as needing attention include:

1. Creation of “Welcome to Cable” signage.
2. Encourage local businesses to “link” with Chamber web-site.
3. Clean up (or at least block view of) junk in yard next to Information Center.

Overall, the visits were very positive and enjoyable. The community of Cable seems to be working together very well. The chamber building and staff, the museum building and staff and the excellent customer service we found throughout the community were just a few of the highlights from our two visits.