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## **Social science gleaned from the small town of Oskaloosa, Kan., is now changing cities**

By RICK MONTGOMERY  
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The old research station, like the psychologist who created it, was unassuming in appearance yet pioneering in the most peculiar ways.

Stretching across the second floor of an 1890s bank building, the University of Kansas' Midwest Psychological Field Station closed in 1972 and was all but forgotten. But some new attention is on its founder, the late Roger Barker, for fathering a brand of science called ecological psychology. It confounded many experts of his time but is broadly touted today.

Barker's notions that neighborly surroundings shape behavior have worked their way into calls for schools that feel small and in trendy design principles, a "new urbanism."

His research subjects were the entire population of a small town, especially its children.

Raised mostly in Iowa but schooled at Stanford University, Barker in the late 1940s chose this northeast Kansas hamlet as a living laboratory for charting the most mundane behavior of what he called "free-ranging persons."

By that, he meant humans going about their routines in a habitat unfettered by the noise, traffic and impersonal bustle of big cities and burgeoning suburbs.

"He was a scientist, first and foremost," said Washington, D.C., writer Ariel Sabar, author of "The Outsider: The Life and Times of Roger Barker," a bestselling e-book released earlier this year on Kindle.

But Sabar allowed that no science at the time backed what Barker likely felt in his gut:

"He came to Oskaloosa with the sense that something about that environment was working."

Perhaps the most contested of Barker's conclusions?

"How the places we occupy define us," Sabar said.

That type of thinking, many say, made Barker a visionary.

Ecological psychology examines behavior within the throes of the neighborhoods, buildings and social settings where people spend time. Barker studied human well-being in an environmental context, as other scientists observe wildflowers thriving in a meadow or birds changing course in the winds.

"He definitely left a mark," said Ann Sloan Devlin, a Connecticut College psychologist and author of "What Americans Build and Why," published in 2010.

Around the nation, resort towns and redeveloped urban areas try to mimic the kind of place that Barker thought healthy for children, with homes in walking distance to small retailers and everywhere rimmed with sidewalks.

"More like a small town," said Devlin. "More community."

More Zona Rosa, less Mall of America?

"People now want their shopping malls to have a Main Street," Devlin said.

Unusual studies

In today's Oskaloosa, population 1,100, the natives recall how Barker, wife Louise and KU graduate students from the station above the bank jotted down the little things that made them tick as children.

When local magistrate Dennis Reiling was about 6, researchers escorted him into the basement of a Methodist

church, where toy building blocks awaited.

"They told me, 'We'd like you to reconstruct every building in Oskaloosa just based on your memory,'" Reiling said. "Well, I had no problem doing that. I knew every family in town. I knew where they all lived and the names of their dogs."

Among Barker's more unusual efforts was a 1951 paper he co-wrote under the title "One Boy's Day."

It chronicled 14 hours in the life of a local boy with the pseudonym Raymond Birch. He was 7 when Raymond's parents allowed the Midwest Psychological Field Station to record his every movement, according to Sabar's book:

"7:00. Mrs. Birch said with pleasant casualness, 'Raymond, wake up. ...'

"7:01. Raymond picked up a sock and began tugging and pulling it on his left foot. ...

"7:07. Raymond turned to his dresser and rummaged around among the things on it until he obtained a candy Easter egg" for his dog.

The notations, archived at KU, track Raymond on his walk to school. He finds a baseball bat in the grass and swings it, accidentally striking a flagpole.

"This made a wonderful, hollow noise," researchers wrote, "so he proceeded to hit the flagpole again."

Barker eschewed academic prose and wanted his charges to record any telling, prosaic detail.

Through the 1950s, Oskaloosans grew accustomed to the sight of a child being shadowed by a note-scribbling adult. In published papers, this was the town of "Midwest," in keeping with the scientific practice of shielding the identity of the subjects being examined.

Barker's work differed from other scholarly studies of places such as Muncie, Ind., ("Middletown") and Candor, N.Y., ("Springdale") in at least two ways.

First, it focused less on class and politics and more on the relationships that made kids feel comfortable.

Second, Barker's family settled into Oskaloosa as a permanent home. Roger and Louise continued to live there until their deaths, Roger's in 1990 at age 87 and Louise's in 2009 at 102.

Although Roger Barker's early observations earned him high honors in psychology and sociology, in time the Ivy League types he refused to emulate would question his objectivity and methodology.

Small vs. big

Resident Beverly Elkinton, lunching last week at a corner variety shop, recalled being released from grade school in the 1950s to visit the second-floor research station.

"They showed me some pictures. That's about it," she said. "When I came home and told my mother, she didn't even know. ...

"Back then, I guess they didn't really need permission from parents."

Louise Barker in 1963 told The Kansas City Star the town was picked to study partly because it was "small enough that children are freer to move through the community and are more tolerated than in larger cities."

If Roger Barker harbored a small-town bias, his team's findings nonetheless grabbed the notice of foundations and universities on both coasts, said KU social scientist Chris Crandall.

"When comparing children in Oskaloosa to those in a larger city, his idea of a large city was Lawrence," about 20 miles south, said Crandall. "Even in a place like Lawrence, everybody didn't know everybody else. In Oskaloosa, they pretty much did."

Surveying both sets of kids, Barker hit upon a revelation: The small-town youngsters knew more total people than did kids in Lawrence, even though its population was 50 times bigger.

A similar phenomenon struck Barker when he compared Oskaloosa's schools with larger ones. A critic of Kansas school consolidations of the 1960s, Barker co-wrote a paper with associate Paul Gump that concluded small-school settings offered more social involvement than what researchers found in larger schools.

School plays in small towns required participation from the bulk of the student body. In larger schools, all but the couple dozen needed could opt out.

In small schools, pupils reported high satisfaction playing in sports. In larger schools, kids said they most liked watching games.

“Psychologically,” Crandall said, “it’s better to be doing than watching.”

The field station also advanced theories about “behavior settings,” maybe Barker’s most lasting legacy.

He observed that people’s behavior would change depending on the physical structures and social settings around them.

The idea defied scholarly wisdom that behavior was dictated by an individual’s personality, be it innate or learned, and not by where someone happened to be standing.

But Oskaloosa resident Richard Streater, a longtime friend of the Barkers, said behavior-settings theory made sense.

“I worked at the auto parts store and can tell you that customers there acted different from how the same people acted when at the bank.”

Theories used

Biographer Sabar said the bright path that Roger Barker thought he was carving would “fade to oblivion” after he retired, partly because of the decline of small towns.

The 1970s and ’80s were rough. No longer reflective of American life, rural communities began to be depicted on the news and in pop culture as hopeless and backward, bastions of racism and anti-Semitism.

Residents followed jobs to bigger cities.

Today, those cities are utilizing Barker’s theories of behavior settings, Sabar contends.

Offices are made to feel homier, with pets roaming and a foosball table on the side. Sabar said studies on recovery rates at hospitals have prompted them to plant trees and design open spaces outside patients’ windows.

“Would they give Barker credit for it? Probably not,” said Sabar. “But it all comes from ideas he emphasized.”

Life in Oskaloosa isn’t quite as simple as in the “good average town” the Barkers documented, longtimers say.

More parents now commute to Topeka or Lawrence.

“They’ll hop in a car and go elsewhere” to entertain the children, said Jack Krebs, who has worked in Oskaloosa schools for 40 years and knew the Barker family well.

Census data show a steady drop in the percent of Oskaloosans under age 18.

“And all the kids have their Internet,” making them less apt to go outside and mingle with neighbors, Krebs said.

But unlike many towns, Oskaloosa has hung on to a K-12 school.

Roger Barker would be proud.

And Raymond, the lad featured in “One Boy’s Day”?

His family moved away a few years later.

Raymond’s real name is Gary Morgan, now a retired utility worker in Pennsylvania.

When Sabar tracked him down, Morgan told the author he didn’t understand the point of researchers scrutinizing his day:

“What is it going to tell them that I was standing there chewing on my fingernails?”

He said, “When I moved from Oskaloosa, I lost track of everyone ... and didn’t try to keep in touch. I moved on.”

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