Crafted and Produced: The Emergence of the
Mississippi River Hills Geographic Indication

by

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Abstract

Geographic indications are designed to transform a region into a brand identity. This strategy, which regionalizes and consolidates place-based businesses, is a growing and popular method of rural community development. The Mississippi River Hills, located in southeastern Missouri, is a newly designated region. Although the boundary of the region has been defined, the unifying qualities, symbols, and objectives are still unclear. As the association endeavors to translate the region into an easily recognizable, marketable, and reputable product, unifying themes will be selected and developed, neglecting and minimizing others. The creation of a geographic indication is intended to initiate cooperation among members but it also sparks competition as to the region’s identity and brand image. Interviews with the original planners and current members of the MRHA emphasize the difficulties in attempting to create a place-based brand identity for economic gain. This thesis discusses the foundational issues of citizenship, authenticity, and belonging that concern all geographic indications. Specific hurdles to the Mississippi River Hills regarding these issues are also described. Conflicts over the role of the wine industry, the region’s continuity, and the Internet as divider or uniter are central to the problems faced by the Mississippi River Hills Association and the success of its geographic indication.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The ways in which a place is understood and imagined have significant implications for its constituents and their future. What elements, attributes, and behaviors belong within that image versus what is either ignored or said to be unacceptable structure and reinforce a hierarchy of actions and beliefs. Different images of place support different worldviews and power relationships. The reimagining and reformation of power, place image, and place are coconstructive; people are able to redefine place and places are able to redistribute power.

A geographic indication (GI) is a growth strategy designed by academics, community planners, and others to reconstruct a place and the relationships between its place-based products and consumers. Historically, GIs developed as a way to protect producers and consumers of fine French wines from lower-quality imposters. Examples include Champagne in France and Vidalia onions in the United States. A GI transforms a place into a brand by creating a place image of quality, authenticity, and superiority. Establishing a GI is an active and organized method of reimagination and representation with the explicit goal of modifying the place it seeks to reflect. It is a way of identifying what aspects of a place are valuable and then transforming selected attributes into a commodity that can be shared with and purchased by consumers.

A GI can embody and communicate only a limited portion of the place it intends to represent. Attempting to reflect a place’s full complexity would create an image that is too unwieldy. Specification and differentiation are therefore key fundamentals of effective branding. The products, processes, and place images that fall within the promotional and value-adding vision of a successful GI have a competitive edge over those that do not. A
GI’s success, in fact, can lead to the silencing of alternative or opposing place images, economic opportunities, and lifestyles. Stakeholders within a GI often envision a diversity of marketing narratives and regional symbols best supporting their views of place. They seek to elevate some narratives over others, causing internal competition. People who do not compete may see their ideas of place underrepresented or not represented at all. In this way, not belonging to the creative process could result in not belonging in place.

How, why, where, and by whom a GI is created can have serious impacts on how its referent place and place image are selected, designed, and envisioned. The Mississippi River Hills (MRH), a recently designated GI, is a useful case study to explore the various power relations and negotiations involved in the creation and maintenance of this increasingly common marketing process (Figure 1). The MRH is located in southeast Missouri and includes six counties: Jefferson, St. Francois, Ste. Genevieve, Perry, Cape Girardeau, and Scott (Figure 2). The area stretches between St. Louis on the north and the bootheel on the south. All but one county, St. Francois, share an eastern border with the Mississippi River. The variety of ecological environments, commercial enterprises, heritage narratives, and community development goals found within this region have necessitated numerous negotiations as planners

Figure 1. Logo for the Mississippi River Hills Association. Image source: mississippiriverhills.org
have gone about the creation of the GI’s master narrative. In this thesis I explore the processes of place branding and place-making in southeast Missouri including concurrent, oppositional, and supporting narratives.

Statement of Purpose and Research Objectives

I posit three broad questions using the Mississippi River Hills as a platform for discussion: what is a geographic indication, how does one work, and what does it do? The intent is to explore the complex relationships between the seemingly pragmatic solution of a GI to the problem of regional vitality and the elusive yet inextricable issues of imaging, envisioning, place, and power. I study the local strategies for the reformation of value and power, but also look more broadly at these issues as a guide for people who hope to establish elsewhere such a place-based alternative commodity network. This thesis will neither dissect and judge the alleged authenticity of the MRH’s brand image nor measure the GI’s relative success. The purpose is to understand what is happening at this emergent place and others like it.

One reoccurring theme and obstacle of this project is the opacity of the term “geographic indication” itself. Although the name is well-established among scholars of the topic, it is virtually unknown to the general populace, including some individuals who are active participants within one. I repeatedly encountered people in the study area and
elsewhere, for example, who, while fully engaged with the general idea and administration of this marketing strategy, were unfamiliar with its history and terminology. Such a disassociation from established jargon does not necessarily impede a GI’s success, but it is symbolic of the overall lack of continuity and consensus concerning GIs in the United States today. This same ambiguity, of course, allows for the broad restructuring, repurposing, and reimagining that can and does occur within a GI.

The Mississippi River Hills was selected as the case study for several reasons. One is its location in the United States. Currently, GIs are a highly contentious topic of international law because of their implications for trade, intellectual property rights, and agricultural policy. At the global scale, a consensus on their structure and implementation has yet to be reached, causing conflict among competitors. The concept of GIs, which originated in France, has since been transplanted around the world. As the strategy travels, it is altered to fit local restrictions and goals. The use of GIs is growing in the United States, but their implementation is less explored than that of their European counterparts. The MRH represents “the first effort to take advantage of European expertise in this kind of product development, adapting it to the US context” (Barham, 2003a: 3). As a strategy built out of and for European cultures, examining an American example should illuminate the amendments made to a GI’s structure as it is executed internationally, and how these changes relate to problems of global jurisprudence and rural community-based development.

A second rationale for choosing the MRH is that it is a recently designated GI and not yet fully established. Although much planning and organization has gone into its development, its essential elements remain in negotiation. The MRH is still emerging as a
place and place brand. Finally, I selected the MRH because of personal familiarity. This GI is located in my home state, and my background there helped in the comprehension of the MRH’s processes of differentiation, exclusion, and regionalization. In addition, I had conducted a pilot study there in 2009, including attendance at a members’ meeting and board meeting of the GI’s current governing body, the Mississippi River Hills Association (MRHA). Contacts made during this work assured the necessary cooperation of the GI’s participants.

Summary of Research Structure

This thesis is divided into six chapters: introduction, literature review, methods, description of the MRH, discussion, and conclusion. The literature review consists of three parts describing the history and impacts of GIs as well as their relationship with power and place. The methods section outlines my collection and analysis techniques, including the use of naturalistic research, multiple interviewing structures, participant observation, and the selection of themes tackled in the discussion. In chapter four I describe the foundation, development, and current status of the MRH and in chapter five offer an analysis of its problems.

With the information amassed through a literature review and field work in the study area, I selected four broad and interrelated topics around which to formulate my discussion in chapters four and five: what people/organizations created this GI and why?; what is the relationship between local viticulture, viticulturists and the MRH?; who belongs and who does not?; and what role does the concept of authenticity play in the organization’s framework and success? These issues recur throughout my research effort and also apply to other GIs in the United States and abroad. On a larger scale these subjects
of citizenship, belongingness, and authenticity are foundational to a broader narrative of the social implications and power negotiations that result from the emergence of a place brand.
Chapter 2: Geographic Indications

Historically, geographic indications (GIs) were created to protect producers and consumers from imitation food products, but over time they have metamorphosed. GIs are now not only a means for revitalizing economically depressed communities and industries, but also a critical element in a growing debate concerning three tempestuous issues of international law: agricultural policy, international trade, and intellectual property rights.

Before discussing the particulars of my case study, the Mississippi River Hills, a brief history of the global development of GIs is outlined to provide context. I will address their contentious legal aspects as well as their intended economic utility. I then turn to social ramifications, including how decisions are made about what goods, regions, and qualities to highlight and how these designations are managed, supported, and communicated. Each GI and its associated region and citizens has a unique set of hurdles, solutions, and outcomes, of course, but commonalities exist. A GI’s implementation and management can have serious implications for its residents.

Rural Economies and Collective Marketing

In an economy that is increasingly global in scale, small-scale farmers struggle to remain competitive (Ilbery et al., 2005; Renting, 2003). Still, economic opportunities exist for these people because of the deficiencies and problems associated with agroindustrial giants. Public fears over the safety of food, harm to ecosystems due to production and transportation methods, a growing detachment between food producers and consumers, loss of traditional knowledge and techniques, and an increased feeling of placelessness among consumers are increasing (Goodman, 2002; Pratt, 2007). Such concerns have encouraged the development of alternative food networks (AFNs), which revolve around
value-added production processes and issues of quality, sustainability, and territorial/cultural embeddedness (Allen et al., 2003; Pike, 2009). Examples of AFNs include organic produce, community-supported agriculture, various eat-local initiatives such as the 100-mile diet, and the subject of particular concern in this thesis--geographic indications.

All AFNs rely on differentiation and specificity to identify themselves and their value-added production processes. These traits, in theory, induce consumers to pay higher prices for AFN goods than for products from the undifferentiated, mass-produced, agroindustrial giants (Andree et al, 2010). Nearly all AFNs also promote the location of their production as an indication of quality and authenticity (Hinrichs, 2000, 2003; Winter, 2003). By re-embedding agricultural products and techniques into their place of origin, AFNs create a feasible framework for rural development as a substitute for large-scale agroindustrialization (van de Ploeg and Renting, 2000; Goodman, 2004).

AFN objectives affect rural communities as well as the farms themselves. They hope to reinvigorate the community by adding equity to the products already in production. In theory, a quality regional image will create increased demand for local products and therefore additional entrepreneurial opportunities. Although such a region might be principally agricultural, the AFN’s focus on place in its promotional efforts implies a connection to all aspects of local culture. In this way, not only is the food of a region promoted, but so are recreational possibilities and cottage industries such as traditionally styled furniture or fabrics. In other words, AFNs may also function as alternative commodity networks (ACNs) (Gatrell et al., 2009; Vik, 2010).
Geographic Indications

One method for conveying the value of both agricultural and nonagricultural place-based products and processes is through the creation of a geographic indication (GI). *Geographic indication* is a slippery and opaque term. As the concept has changed over time and moved from place to place, its meaning has changed. Moreover, the term itself is often used in reference to similar, though distinct, legal structures and marketing methods for protecting place-based products and intellectual property. For example, two basic systems of geographic indications, plus a third similar one, are recognized under European Union law: protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI), and traditional specialty guaranteed (TSG). PDOs and PGIs both involve the use of a place name to denote the region from which foodstuff originates. They are distinct in that products of a PDO must have “quality or characteristics of which are essential or exclusively due to a particular geographical environment with its inherent natural and human factors” whereas products of PGIs possess “a specific quality, reputation or other characteristics attributable to that geographical origin” (Larson, 2007: 14). With a PGI any one of the three traits (quality, reputation, or another characteristic) is sufficient for designation but PDOs have a much stronger link between place and quality and require essential, integrated relationships between the two. A TGS does not require a place designation but often involves one. A TGS identifies foodstuff that is recognized for its traditional and distinctive character. Within this framework, a protected geographical indication is a differentiated subcategory within geographic indications, which are multiple and overlapping but also varied. This is merely one instance of the definitional and conceptual flexibility, confusion, and ambiguity of the term.
The global translation, transportation, and transformation of the GI system has resulted in the additional variability in terminology. For the purposes of this thesis, *geographic indication* will be used in its broadest to identify a product’s place of origin, a site where specific qualities are attributable (Raustiala and Munzer, 2007). Common examples of GIs include Porto, Idaho potatoes, Champagne, Parma ham, Chablis, and Vidalia onions. Though primarily used for food products, Swiss watches and Shetland woolen outerwear are examples where the GI concept has been extended to nonfood products. In some countries, such as Azerbaijan and Croatia, GIs are even used in reference to specific services (Thual, 2009).

The term “geographic indication” is sometimes used as a synonym for “label of origin.” However, in this usage, GIs and labels of origin are not synonymous. A label of origin is merely that: a sign or symbol that indicates where an item was produced. A label of origin is therefore a necessary component to a GI, but a GI involves a quality component as well. Consider an American example. Whereas the state of Georgia produces many agricultural goods including pecans, peaches, and onions, the label Vidalia onions is a GI that refers to a specific product grown only in a production zone around the city of Vidalia that is demarcated by state and federal legislation and whose image and brand is administered by a coalition of stakeholders, usually local growers, business owners, and/or government representatives. Additionally, GIs often utilize, but are distinct from, trademarks. GIs associate goods to a specific place as opposed to a specific producer and cannot be owned by individuals or licensed (Raustiala and Munzer, 2007).

Though not a definitional prerequisite for the work I present here, GIs are largely legitimated and differentiated based on their legal structuring. “Geographic indication” is
also a specific legal term. As defined by the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement in Annex1C, article 22 of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement, GIs are:

indications which identify a good as originating in the territory of a [m]ember [country], or a region or locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographical origin.

My term usage mimics the TRIPS definition but departs from it in that it is not a legally defined process with its own administrating body. Therefore, marketing strategies that revolve around associations of place, product, and quality, but are not technically identified as GIs according to the TRIPS Agreement, are still considered GIs within this thesis. This clarification is important in the face of growing international conflict and competition concerning the global management of these entities. Because of the focus on jurisprudence, GIs are increasingly topics and tools of state policy as well as place-based producers.

While the practice of associating certain products with certain places may be ancient, the inclusion of organized and legal management in this process marks the baseline for modern GI development. Because the case study for this thesis, the Mississippi River Hills, is located within a WTO member and was established after the TRIPS Agreement, the historical context I will outline will be the same as that identified as the inspiration and foundation for contemporary international law concerning GIs.
French Wines

The first overture to include GIs as a separate (though not clearly defined) method for protecting intellectual property on a global scale occurred in 1883 at the Paris Convention on the Protection of Intellectual Property. The primary concern was to prevent what attendees considered the unlawful association of a geographical area with a product from which that product did not originate (Thual, 2009). Wine was the primary concern. By 1883, French wine regions such as Bordeaux and Burgundy had achieved great popularity and prestige internationally, with their place-names becoming synonymous with their viticultural products. High selling prices of these popular wines inspired imitations.

Initially, then, GIs were intended to protect producers and consumers from lower-quality imposters rather than to promote undesired products. Vintners of high-quality, high-demand wines were concerned that inferior imitations touting an illegitimate place association would degrade their wine’s image. They demanded laws to institutionalize and protect this beneficial relationship, which they validated through the concept of terroir, which claims that the special quality of an agricultural product is determined by the character of the place from which it comes, and therefore, cannot be accurately reproduced anywhere else (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000).

Although the idea of terroir is born out of a small parcel of land with a similar soil, microclimate, and crops, human and cultural dimensions of food and food production also commonly become part of the concept. In such cases, the environment is claimed to determine not only the qualities of the food grown there, but also the cuisine, agricultural techniques, customs, and idioms that have developed. According to one scholar, “this concept of terroir relates to a time of much less spatial mobility, when change occurred at a
slower pace. … [it] resulted from long occupation of the same area and represented the interplay of human ingenuity and curiosity with the natural givens of place” (Barham, 2003c: 131).

As the foundational and legitimizing principle behind GIs, the variability and flexibility of terroir is reflected in the variety of GIs, the degrees of causality imparted to place, and the ways in which products, processes, and places are believed to be unique, authentic, and valuable. Moreover, as some of the older GIs break from their original products and production techniques (most often to implement more modern technologies and better methods of standardization), the issue and authenticity of terroir can become blurry and uncertain once again (Macedo, 2011).

Patrimonialization has also become an essential part of imaging and constructing GIs. This term “expresses the interest of a coalition of some intellectuals, urban consumers, and agricultural syndicates in protecting rural landscapes, traditional food products, and other central elements of national and regional heritage” (Gade, 2004: 848). It is a way of identifying and protecting valuable artisanal and traditional products or techniques that are threatened with extinction. Within a GI, patrimonialization makes its products and techniques invaluable as cultural heirlooms while terroir makes them impossible to replicate elsewhere. For this equity-increasing mechanism to work, consumers must be willing to invest not only in place-based products, but also in the idea of quality through place association itself. In order for that to occur, a positive causal relationship among products, processes, and places must be established and enforced.
International Trade and Conflicts

During the last several centuries of colonialism, many French and other European-descendant cultures have taken root outside the European continent. There, emigrants began to make and sell their own products, many of which were based on and named after the places and processes from which they originally developed. For those producers, the use of place-names became a way not only to identify the attributes and origins of their production techniques, but also to utilize the prestige with which those names were already associated. But, whether a benignly reminiscent dish or a mass-produced, devious imitation, the European system of GIs is designed to ensure that no other producers can legitimately claim that place-product name if produced outside of that officially designated GI. As the demands for protection of various foodstuffs increased, so too did the establishment of GIs.

In the United States, port wine (Duguid, 2005; Sequeira, 2008) and Parmesan cheese (Heath, 2008) are examples of products made and sold domestically to fulfill demands for their European namesakes where the originals were inaccessible because of high costs or transportation problems. Such manufacturers operated outside of Europe’s jurisdiction, of course, so Portuguese or Italian authorities had few options to stop what they considered to be a misappropriation of title and equity. This global protectionist conflict remains a problem today, and one that grows more heated (Josling, 2006). Jurisdiction is not the only impediment to protection. Differences in the structure, intent, and application of GIs can make them nearly incompatible one with another. The stringent European designs and the laissez-faire American strategy share essential qualities of a GI, but are also vastly different.
Within the French system of the mid-twentieth century, an *Appellation d’Origin Protégée* (protected origin appellation, or AOP) classification is a GI with powerful legal implications. Many other countries, including Italy and Portugal, have based their controlled place-name systems on the French framework (Folkeson, 2005). Although restrictive, this state-sponsored designation provides added power to claims of authenticity and establishes an administrative structure for handling occurrences of fraudulence. An AOP can be attributed to a wide variety of products, and although stakeholders can propose changes, their product, process, and place specifications are rigorously documented and controlled (Barham, 2003c). Any alterations must be accepted by the oversight institution, the *Appellation d'Origine Controlée* (AOC), so as “to assure both their territorial origin and their conformity to precise rules for production and processing that guarantee their ‘typicity,’ or distinctive character” (Barham, 2003c, 128). The AOC system is the oldest, most stringent, and comprehensive of the European labeling systems. It was largely adopted within the European Union’s Protected Geographical Status (PGS) regulation, which came into force in 1992. The European style of managing geographic indications is called *sui generis*.

GI in the United States do not share the same dogmatic legal designations as they do in Europe. Instead, U.S. certification trademarks (CTM) are privately developed and owned and protected under trademark law. The government does not monitor for fraud or misappropriation. GI within the United States also are not scrutinized for veracity or quality, and their only defense against trademark infringement is civil lawsuits (Goldberg, 2001). One important difference between the *sui generis* system and that of the U.S. certification trademarks is that, within the former, a special relationship between a
product’s characteristics and its place of origin must be apparent. In the United States, a product can be labeled with its geographic origin, but the place itself need not guarantee specific qualities (Folkeson, 2005). Because no overarching organizational structure exists for GIs in the United States, no parameters or restrictions exist for their composition. Organizers are the sole determiners, with no established external accountability (Table 1).

| Differences between the *Sui Generis* and the Certification Trademark systems |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Sui Generis Protection**                                    | **Certification Trademark (CTM)**                             |
| - The indication belongs to the State                          | - Owned privately or by the State                             |
| - Administered by the regulating authority                      | - Administered by the owners                                 |
| - Designed to protect identification of place of origin and its quality associations | - Designed to certify quality, characteristics, origin, materials, etc. |
| - Must be protected from date of registration until the conditions for designation no longer hold | - Must be renewed periodically                                |
| - Protection is based on *ex officio* and private actions      | - Protection is based on the actions of the owners            |
| - Inspected by an independent agency                            | - Inspections can be performed by the owner, government, or another third party |

Table 1. Differences between the Sui Generis and the Certification Trademark systems. Source: Correa, 2002

The need for global GI protection has led to supranational summits and legislation such as the recent TRIPS Agreement. As this battle over intellectual property rights, international trade, and agricultural policy rages on, the foundations for their arguments and aftermath are found within each GI. How priorities such as economic gain, food safety, and cultural and ecological sustainability manifest themselves can have serious implications on how an individual GI is structured and managed. In turn, the establishment
of a GI can produce many intentional as well as unintentional effects on the region and its products and producers.

In Gade’s (2004) investigation of the French wine region Cassis, he shows how the process of establishing and developing a GI transforms the territory. Over time, the wine, vineyards, social relations, and daily patterns of life changed. Even the winemakers, those stakeholders directing the progression of the GI, had to change their business practices and lifestyles as a result. In many ways, they had to “suppress part of their individuality and personal freedom in return for optimized profits and enhanced prestige” (865). The integration of multiple stakeholders, each possessing different epistemic realities, into a cooperative unit requires substantial effort and compromise. The result is a reformation of place in concert with the emergence of the place brand.

**Place, Branding, and Power**

Geography offers a rich body of literature on place, places, and representation (Basso, 1996; Corner, 1999; Cosgrove, 2008; della Dora, 2009; Massey, 2005). Place images are the ways in which the experiences of place and places are internalized, understood, and communicated. They are what constitute a person’s perceptions and knowledge of a place, but people and their place images are wrought with individualized complexity and multiplicity. A place image is not merely a symbol of a referent place; it is dynamic and relational, constituted also by cultural precepts, personal worldviews, and the volatility and verisimilitude of memory. Therefore, each place connotes and is composed of a vast spectrum of overlapping, contested, conflicting, interrelated, and interacting place images. That some place images become common is reflective of the influence, promotion, and empowerment of certain ideas and images over others.
Place branding is a strategy to propagate a particular place image with specific and controlled connotations for that place. Disneyland and Venice, for example, have been branded as vacation destinations to bolster their tourism-based economies (Lam, 2010; Nally, 2004). GIs also seek to promote selective place images connoting the superiority of the place and, by extension, its place-based products. Branding is not the only way shared place images emerge. Similar encounters with a place (as opposed to its brand) can produce similar place images. The image of Venice as a maze, for example, comes not from tourist brochures, but from the common experience of becoming lost among the curving canals, winding walkways, and baffling bridges. On the other hand, if Venice were primarily navigated by local people born and raised among its streets, it would likely seem less labyrinthine.

A branded place image is intended to inform people about a place and direct their understandings of it before, during, and after any encounters with its referent locale. Each year, throngs of tourists reenact such place images supplied to them through advertising. They flock to Disneyland to partake in fantastical family fun and to Venice for history, decadence, and romance. Like the business owners, marketing agents, and tourism bureaus that promote a branded place image, these tourists also help to entrench the brand, creating and recreating it through their participation in it (Baerenholdt et al., 2004). Such repetition of affirmative performances strengthens the branded place image by fulfilling it in place. In this way, like Cassis, Disneyland, and Venice, a place will be remade to more closely align with its branded image. Because a GI is a branded image that revolves entirely around a place and that place’s image, the two become even more intertwined, and, in some cases, synonymous. As the brand strengthens in popularity and power, the
incentive to participate also increases (Cohen, 1988; Hall, 1994). If people expect a certain experience and are willing to pay to participate, others will move to accommodate their demands.

In Cassis and other wine territories and GIs, consumers who encounter the branded place image are taught to associate, anticipate, and desire the high-quality wine and produce as well as the idyllic vineyards and quaint rural villages affiliated with and portrayed as part of the brand’s place image. According to Gade (2004), consumers and producers of Cassis wine have altered their behavior by participating in the brand image, thereby reaffirming it on the landscape. Wine was present in Cassis before the establishment of its GI. What branding created was a streamlined place image. It commoditized the place itself, allowing for this image to be consumed, an encounter that would also alter consumers’ understanding of and relationships with the place, its products, and its value (Harvey, 2002; Urry, 1995; Kavaratzis, 2005). Consumers altered their relationship with the GI’s principal product, wine, by demanding and purchasing it, by identifying and understanding the wine in a way similar to its branded image. In this process, Cassis viticulturists and vintners worked in cooperation, instead of competition, institutionalizing the region’s boundaries, the wine’s distinctive qualities, and local production practices. As demand for Cassis wine grew, other producers and businesses began to participate in the brand, aligning themselves to the brand’s place image and the consumers’ demands for it by changing their production techniques to fit the GI’s requirements and their retail and service establishments to accommodate visiting wine enthusiasts. In this way, as the branded place image became more widespread and robust, Cassis became more and more like the GI’s image of it and alternative narratives dissipated.
As many place images of Venice, Disneyland, and Cassis exist as there are encounters with these places and their place images. The multitudinous parts and processes of lived experiences, places, and place images work in concert to create, reform, and reconstitute one another. But the successful branding of a place and the increased consumption of that brand’s place image create a dominant narrative. A communal place image emerges detailing and dictating what a place is and how and why it is important. GIs, like other brand images, are created to produce and propagate a particular place image and narrative in order to alter relationships among producers, consumers, places, and products to provide protection and a competitive edge for the GI’s participants. In this way, place images, relationships, and commodity chains are not only reconfigured, they are institutionalized. Those that support a successful GI are able to entrench and substantiate their own priorities and place images, empowering themselves, their business and their ideas of place and success.
Chapter 3: Study Area and Research Method

I conducted research in the Mississippi River Hills (MRH) over a total of four weeks, including three consecutive weeks in the summer of 2010. In order to become familiar with the six-county region (Jefferson, St. Genevieve, St. Francois, Perry, Cape Girardeau, and Scott counties, Missouri), I traveled extensively, collected documents about the MRH and places within it, and interviewed eight key informants and 69 local business owners/operators. I visited all incorporated cities within the six counties and traversed all major roads at least once, beginning with county highways. During these travels I collected most of the needed regional documents and identified and selected business owners/operators for interviews.

Study Area

I include a brief description of the MRH here as a way to help situate my methods. Included is basic demographic information as well as several common images of the area, as outlined by Millie Rahn in her 2004 cultural inventory of the MRH and observed through my fieldwork and interviews. The following section is in no way a complete reflection of the area, but it does provide some context for the choices made during the implementation and development of the MRH GI and the topics covered in chapters four and five of this thesis.

Approximately 130 miles separate the northern and southern tips of the MRH (Figure 3). Perryville, at the center of Perry County, acts as the region’s north-south midpoint. Jefferson County, in the north, is the only county of the six that is not largely rural (Table 2). Located just south of the St. Louis metro area, roadways I-55 and MO-21 connect Jefferson County’s suburbs with the city’s center. In addition, Interstate 55 leads on north to Chicago
and south to Memphis and New Orleans. Commuting and commuter traffic are major parts of the county's planning. The far south and southwest portions of Jefferson County are less densely populated. Development gives way to the forested, rolling hills that inspired the name “Mississippi River Hills.” Such a landscape dominates much of Missouri along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, which converge just north of Jefferson County.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Population per Square Mile</th>
<th>Largest City</th>
<th>Population of Largest City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>218,733</td>
<td>333.1</td>
<td>Arnold</td>
<td>20,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francois</td>
<td>65,359</td>
<td>144.6</td>
<td>Farmington</td>
<td>16,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ste. Genevieve</td>
<td>18,145</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>Ste. Genevieve</td>
<td>4,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>18,971</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>Perryville</td>
<td>8,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Girardeau</td>
<td>75,674</td>
<td>130.8</td>
<td>Cape Girardeau</td>
<td>37,941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>39,191</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>Sikeston</td>
<td>16,318</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Population table for the six counties of the MRH. Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census
The tumultuous relief and thick vegetation of the terrain most common in the six-county region do not easily lend themselves to agroindustrial techniques. In the outskirts of Jefferson County and in all the MRH counties farther south except Scott, most of the land remains forested and produce is grown on small family farms. Common agricultural types include tree farms, orchards, market and truck farms, viticulture, hogs, and cattle.

The Mississippi River (Figure 4) is a strong symbol for the MRH and many of its residents. All but one county, St. Francois, share a border with the river. The Mississippi and its regional waterways dominant the landscape and local culture in three ways: via the past glory of the steamship age along the continent’s primary riverway, via its ongoing barrier to eastern travel, and via flooding. Flood-related lore is found throughout the region. Historic markers, new levees and flood channels, and rebuilt communities commemorate past floods and their high-water marks.

Figure 4. The Mississippi River, point of access in historic downtown Cape Girardeau. The shadow at the left of the picture is from the city’s flood wall. Photo by the author.
Towns like St. Mary, Ste. Genevieve, and Cape Girardeau boast their once-great roles as riverboat hubs, river crossovers, and gateways to the West. Today, river traffic has receded to almost solely commercial barges, and only two bridges cross the Mississippi in the MRH region. The river's declining importance in transportation as well as ongoing flood destruction has stalled or eroded the river cities. In their place, huge manufacturing complexes such as Procter & Gamble in Cape Girardeau County sit at the Mississippi’s edge to use its water for machine processing and its barges for transporting supplies.

St. Francois County, the only county within the MRH that does not share a border with the Mississippi River, has a distinct identity. It, too, holds a history of past glory and decline but instead of river culture, its story is mining. St. Francois County is part of a region commonly referred to as the southeastern lead district or lead belt (Figure 5). The vast majority, about seventy percent, of lead mined in the United States comes from Missouri. In fact, Ste. Genevieve was founded in part as a port for exporting this mineral. Although mining is still big in the area, it has declined significantly because of global competition (Missouri Lead, 2002). To combat this decline, the community is trying to reposition itself toward park tourism.

Figure 5. Sign for the Bonne Terre, Farmington County. Photo by the author.
Place names throughout St. Francois County display the area’s ties with mining and outdoor recreation: Bonne Terre, Leadwood, Park Hills, and Leadington. Businesses in the area are similarly representative, such as Ozark’s Modern Insulation, Leadbelt Stove and Fireplace, River Hills Restaurant, Brookside Manor, and Parkland Flower Girl. State parks are common in the area, too, and include the Missouri Mines State Historic Site (Figure 6), St. Francois, Hawn, and St. Joe. Mark Twain, the state’s largest national forest, is only a short distance to the southwest. In some instances, like the Bonne Terre Mine, past mining areas have been directly converted into recreation destinations. The excavated Bonne Terre Mine is now visited by spelunkers, scuba divers, and other tourists and adventurers.

Figure 6. A defunct lead mine in Park Hills, now home of the Missouri Mines Museum State Historic Site. Photo by the author.

Scott, the southernmost county of the MRH, is also distinctive from the other five counties. A local landmark, the “last hill” at the county’s northern end, marks the beginning of the Mississippi Delta (Figure 7). South of this feature, officially known as Benton Ridge,
the terrain transforms into the flat floodplain of the Mississippi River Embayment. Roadways no longer dip and curve but follow straight lines among as-far-as-the-eye-can-see fields of soybeans and rice. Agroindustrial techniques have straightened waterways, cutting large, parallel channels through land that has been graded to a slight, precision irrigation slope and is worked by GPS-guided machinery. Cotton, although no longer the area’s primary crop, is still an important part of county identity. In addition to the changes in topography and agriculture, the people of Scott County identify themselves as Southerners. Some have drawls, the only ones I heard during my travels in the MRH, and swimming pools are a popular home feature.

All six counties have a high proportion of white residents (Table 3). The ethnic heritage of most of the current residents in the MRH is German, as well as much of its cuisine and land-use patterns (Rahn, 2004). However, an older French identity is also strong throughout the region (Figure 8), and the two sometimes overlap. Alongside French colonial historic sites, for example, the Kimmswick Gasthaus in Jefferson County serves German-style food, wine, and beer.
Before the influx of German Lutherans to the MRH region in the middle-nineteenth century, the regional culture was largely French Catholic. The city of Ste. Genevieve, established about 1740, claims to be the first permanent settlement west of the Mississippi (historians claim a range from 1722 to 1750 and the city celebrated its bicentennial in 1935) (Schroeder, 2002). It is home to three of the few remaining *poteaux-en-terre* houses, an early French Colonial construction technique. These buildings also serve as the principal symbol for the region’s French history and heritage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>White Persons</th>
<th>High School Graduates*</th>
<th>Bachelor’s Degree or Higher*</th>
<th>Median Household Income, 2009</th>
<th>Persons Below Poverty Level, 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>96.5%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>$53,939</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ste. Genevieve</td>
<td>97.6%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>$48,963</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francois</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>$38,195</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>97.2%</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>$40,014</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Girardeau</td>
<td>88.7%</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>$44,416</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>$38,008</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>82.8%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>$45,149</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>$50,221</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*percent of persons that are 25 years of age or older, 2005-2009

Table 3. Demographic information on the six counties of the MRH. Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census
In addition to place and family names, historical markers, and tourist sites and museums, the region’s French and German heritages are reinforced partly through the continued presence of Catholic and Lutheran churches. Church schools are common as well, and the large headquarters of the Missouri Lutheran Synod is in nearby St. Louis.

During my fieldwork I was asked by a local informant what struck me most about the region’s landscape, what set it apart from other places to which I had been? My answer was immediate: the number of religious buildings tucked in among the curving roads. Traveling the roadways of the MRH is somewhat problematic, for its rolling, vegetated hills result in blind turn after blind turn. I found myself passing intended destinations and needing to turn around often, a dangerous prospect with the high speed limits and poor visibility. But I quickly came to realize that no matter how sparsely occupied the hills were, there would always be a church in a mile or so to provide safe haven for a U-turn. Some of those lone churches on rarely traveled roads are no longer in use and falling into disrepair. However, my field work suggests that much of the regional community continues to revolve around religion and/or
the common spaces those buildings provide.

Methodology and Positionality

To better situate myself as a researcher, some personal context is necessary (Crang, 2002; Rose, 1997). Exploring such positionality helps to ground my work into the subjective framework from which it springs. First, I am from the state of Missouri, not the MRH itself but the city of Columbia, about 120 miles west of St. Louis. Before this thesis, I had not spent much time in the area (periodically driving through, never spending the night), but was tangentially familiar because of proximity, shared governmental agencies and politics, and instances of within-state migration from the MRH’s more rural areas to the urban and education center of Columbia. Although Columbia is not a river town, I still possess some nostalgia for Mississippi River heritage because of my father. He grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, a Mississippi River town north of the MRH and also the hometown of famed author Mark Twain. Hannibal is a common setting for many of Twain’s stories and also for Pabst family lore and reunions.

I also want to stress that I am neither an advocate nor an opponent of geographic indications. From the beginning to the end of this thesis I have maintained the opinion that GIs are tools that can be and are used for a plethora of reasons and outcomes. I am concerned with what a GI is, how it works, and what it can do, not whether or not a GI should be implemented or if it is inherently good or bad. A single GI can create many outcomes and inspire an equally large number of dynamic and different opinions. Within this thesis, however, I focus on the multiple and relational processes involved in the ongoing creation of a particular GI. As such I employ numerous methods including
participant observation, collecting place images in the form of regional documentations of place, and interviews.

Observations

I participated in and observed numerous MRHA activities including two members’ meetings, a board members’ meeting, and a farm-to-table dinner for donors. In addition, I spent two days shadowing the MRHA’s director and acted as participant observer in creating my own sense of place. A familiarity with the MRH allowed for better communication with interviewees and provided context and insight into important and reoccurring topics such as driving and distance, the role of urban hubs, and specific local landscapes. Without such experience in the situated, everyday tasks of local people, I am certain that my interpretations and discussions would have been significantly less rich and meaningful. Familiarity with and time spent in the MRH also increased my awareness of cultural and physical variation within the region and opportunities to encounter different aspects of the six counties. The types and manner of relationships also became clearer through experience in the region. For example, the placement of Walmarts; the boundaries of neighboring, overlapping, and/or embedded political units; and personal relationships all influenced the flow of people, goods, money, and ideas.

I also became a participant observer in building and communicating a particular, GI-based place image. Participant observation is a research strategy that allows for a high level of familiarity and interaction with a particular community. It involves intensive participation with a group in its natural environment (Hammersley, 2007). Like the MRHA, I was working to build knowledge of and relationships with the MRH. The kind of knowledge I acquired through my research was intended for academic consumption as
opposed to the commercial outlet intended by the MRHA. Regardless of this difference, similar processes worked for information acquisition, analysis, construction, and dissemination. I encountered many of the same obstacles as has the MRHA in exploring, organizing, and discussing place: accessing participants, reframing data for its intended audience, and ensuring accuracy and validity. The choices I made and encountered as a knowledge- and place-maker of the six counties greatly clarified the restrictions and practical considerations present in building a place brand of the MRH.

Documents

Archival documents, which were written for both public consumption and in-house use by the MRHA, Extension offices, and other organizers of the GI, were invaluable in understanding the development of the MRH. These included academic articles written by project participants, ethnographic studies conducted on the region, grant proposals and reports, notes on past interviews and focus groups conducted by previous research teams, organization information (history, mission statements, accounts of past projects), membership lists, and maps.

I also collected documents pertaining to the six counties from local and regional information centers such as municipal buildings, historic sites, University of Missouri-Extension offices, tourism bureaus, chambers of commerce, and gasoline stations. I was collecting documents that were designed to inform people about places encompassed by the MRH. These documents included brochures, maps, magazines, newspapers, flyers, advertisements, information booklets, phone books, and annual reports for cities, chambers, state parks, and historic sites.
Interviews

I utilized two interview structures. The first, semistructured, was used with individuals who are or were influential in the construction of the MRH. Examples include the current director of the Mississippi River Hills Association (MRHA), MRH board members, and University of Missouri researchers involved in the initial proposal to construct this Gt. As key informants to understanding the development of the Mississippi River Hills concept, during the semistructured interviews I asked general questions about the evolution and structure of the GI, their role in its designation, their opinions regarding the MRH, their work, and related topics. A semistructured interview has loosely designed questions and lines of inquiry. For the most part, each interviewee is largely responsible for dictating the trajectory and content of a semistructured interview (Weiss, 1995). I identified key informants through documents related to the MRH such as grant proposals, reports, and brochures for the project, and also through snowball sampling, where other interviewees recommend additional contacts.

The second group of interviewees consisted of people who work and live within the six counties encompassed by the MRH. I sought their opinions on local economic development, the region, regional place images, and the MRH. A structured interview (Appendix A) was administered to sixty-nine small-scale owners and/or operators (O/Os) of local businesses. For the purposes of this thesis, I defined a small-scale business as one that is a privately owned and operated partnership or sole proprietorship with ten or fewer full-time employees and a limited volume of product (no mass production techniques used for final product). This definition, though fuzzy, aligns with the type of businesses that the MRH seeks to have as members and whose economic vitality the MRH seeks to
improve. Only O/Os were interviewed because of their heightened investment in and knowledge of their business, so that they could provide information about themselves as residents as well as their businesses. Questions were designed to obtain information and opinions about the interviewee, his or her place of business, the region, and the GI.

To narrow my sampling population of businesses, I used the same geographic boundaries and scale as the MRH. Within this region, however, I included businesses both inside and outside the stakeholder groups designated by the MRHA (i.e., artisans, food producers, hospitality and tourism, local governments, retailers). The non-MRHA members provided perspective. Service industries, for example, constitute an ample proportion of the regional economy even though the MRH GI is not designed to specifically identify and assist service-based business. I consequently included several service industry O/Os in my interview pool. Small-scale business O/Os were selected because they can speak from experience about similar concerns addressed by the MRH: economic vitality, consumer-producer relationships, and community development and growth. However, I interviewed these people not only for their role as business people, but also as constituents of the six counties. In summary, my sample population for the structured interviews is larger than the MRH’s potential membership population. I wanted as complete a view of the area as possible, including the opinions of people who were not intended to directly benefit from the creation of the GI.

The O/O participants were obtained through stratified convenience sampling. My sample population of O/O was stratified by county and also by stakeholder group. This division was helpful in assuring variety among interview participants. While searching for interviewees to fulfill each strata in equal numbers, I used convenience sampling by
approaching and interviewing those O/Os who were available for unscheduled interviews and easily accessible to me during my travels. In approaching interview volunteers I looked not only for small-scale O/Os, but also for people widespread across the six-county region and from each of the stakeholder groups identified by the MRHA plus those excluded. Though this sample was not designed to be representative, I did want it to be reflective of the variety of local businesses and their O/Os. All interviews were conducted in the interviewee’s natural setting: at their place of business or a business-related outing. I took handwritten notes before and after each interview, each of which lasted about an average of forty minutes in length. Because most interviews were unscheduled, on-the-move, and conducted alongside normal business operations, I used no recording device.

In conjunction with my observations while traveling through the six-county landscape, I would stop at most of the small-scale businesses I encountered. Attempts to schedule interviews before arriving at such places were quickly abandoned because of logistical problems associated with finding, coordinating, and fulfilling time-sensitive plans with a group of people who often do not operate on a predictable schedule. I found that I could complete many more nonscheduled interviews than scheduled ones in the same amount of time. Also, some artisans or farmers cannot be found in phone books or online as commercial entities. The only way I could contact them was by showing up at craft sales or farmers’ markets.

Other problems prohibited some potential interviewees from participation. If a business did not have a locale for interacting with consumers, such as a storefront, or was not on my travel route, its O/Os could not be interviewed. Because I was identifying interviewees at their businesses, if a given operation was closed or the O/O was not
present, I could not complete an interview. In addition, businesses such as restaurants, though open, are inaccessible during certain hours. Finally, in the rare occurrence when I felt unsafe or uneasy about a potential business, I would avoid it. Overall, I feel that the interviews conducted were reflective of the target group. Certainly they provided a variety of economic outlooks, place images, and opinions about the MRH.

Key informants, MRHA members, and O/Os proved to be not mutually exclusive groups. For a few participants, I conducted both structured and semistructured interviews. Interviewees exhibited a spectrum of familiarity with and participation in the MRH. Unlike the key informants, many O/Os were entirely unaware of the creation of the MRH. Others were familiar, but after initially participating, had opted out. Interview questions encompassed an interviewee’s participation in and opinions about the MRH, but I was not often able to ask about Gls more generally. Even if an O/O was very familiar with the MRH, the term “geographic indication” usually was foreign. I finally decided to avoid the broader topic of Gls with these people when it became clear that I would have to first teach an interviewee about the phrase before they could provide an opinion.
Chapter 4: Creating the Mississippi River Hills

A GI attempts to transform a region into a brand identity and thereby increase profitability. Community planners saw parts of Missouri as ripe for such activity, particularly areas close to large cities that also had large numbers of market and truck farms (Barham, 2002). Their recently formed GI, the Mississippi River Hills (MRH), is also one of the pioneering attempts to implement this marketing strategy in the United States. Its promise and problems deserve study.

The officially designated MRH region is clear on a map (Figure 2). It runs south along the Mississippi River from the St. Louis area nearly to the Missouri bootheel and encompasses six Missouri counties: Jefferson, Ste. Genevieve, St. Francois, Perry, Cape Girardeau, and Scott. Such precision is illusory in a way, however. Although the geographic boundary has been defined, the region’s unifying qualities, symbols, and objectives are still unclear. Not only is continuity lacking among the members of the GI’s current governing body, the Mississippi River Hills Association (MRHA), but also physical and cultural features that distinguish these counties from the surrounding area.

Originally designed in 2005, the delineation of the MRH has already undergone several changes including its name (originally Mississippi Hills) (Barham, 2004). Whereas the GI model in Europe was devised to encapsulate preexisting, cohesive, and homogenous communities along ecological and cultural lines, this certainly has not been the case in Missouri. The present formulation of the MRH was initially based on ecology and regional viticulture (Barham, 2003a), but the region was soon redesigned along preexisting political and administrative boundaries. Association constituency and membership requirements have been similarly fluid.
As MRHA officials endeavor to translate the region into an easily recognizable, marketable, and reputable producer, unifying themes must be selected and developed, a process that necessarily neglects and minimizes other activities. What regional images are chosen would necessarily affect, both positively and negatively, the diverse assortment of local businesses. This chapter investigates the ongoing construction of the MRH and the competitive and cooperative relationships involved, both internal and external to the region.

The Missouri Regional Cuisines Project

The groundwork for the MRH was organized at the state level by the Missouri Regional Cuisines Project (MRCP) (Barham, 2002). This parent organization, first established in 2003, is based in the University of Missouri’s Institute for Continental Climate Viticulture and Enology and operates in partnership with the Wine & Grape Board and AgriMissouri of the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the Missouri Division of Tourism, and the Missouri Department of Conservation. The MRCP’s purpose was to be on the promotion of Missouri wine and agricultural products, a charge that included the identification of distinct ecological regions and the establishment of geographic indications within Missouri (Figure 10). According to the MRCP website, the

Figure 10. Logo for the Missouri Regional Cuisines Project. Image source: extension.missouri.edu/cuisines/
project’s primary goal is to expand the economic development of unstable, rural regions. A secondary goal, and also the mechanism for securing economic vitality, is the promotion and preservation of local agriculture, cottage industries, and cultural traditions (Missouri Regional Cuisines Project, n.d.).

Year One goals of the MRCP were outlined in its initial proposal to the Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program, submitted in 2002 by Jim Anderson of the Missouri Grape & Wine Program and Dr. Elizabeth Barham with the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia, the project’s primary investigator and director. The project would lay “the research and organizational groundwork for promoting Missouri wine and associated high quality, value-added specialty food items by promoting regional identity and linking it with agri-tourism” (Barham, 2002: 2). The first steps included an assessment of the economic impact of wine in Missouri, an examination of regions that could be used as the basis for a GI, and the selection of the pilot region. To complete this work, a community of experts was created, including persons from the Missouri Folk Arts Program, the Missouri Resource Assessment Partnership, and the Southwest Missouri State Fruit Experiment Station. Once a pilot region was selected, committed regional stakeholders would be asked to spearhead the design and “implementation of a model rural development projected based on enhancing regional identity, producer cooperation, production of high quality value-added specialty foods, and integration with state and local agri-tourism efforts” (Barham, 2002: 2).

In preparation for proposing the first Missouri GI, a report on the state’s wines was completed in 2003 by the University of Missouri Department of Rural Sociology in conjunction with the MRCP (Barham, 2003a). This report suggested that a linking of wine
and agritourism via regional identity marketing could assure the vitality of the state’s wine industry as well as support other rural development goals. This wine-base regionalization strategy, soon endorsed by other state-wide planners, led to the MRH being identified as a potentially viable area for the first GI because of its similar ecology and pre-established viticulture.

The original Mississippi River Hills GI was constructed around a loosely defined ecological zone. This rationale mimics the concept of terroir, which claims that an area's unique ecological makeup, in concert with place-based cultural traditions, can result in specialized and distinctive products. The area identified began just east of St. Louis and ran south along the east and west banks of the Mississippi River, and contained several counties in both Illinois and Missouri. In Figure 11, the shaded (in Missouri) and dotted (in Illinois) areas outline a region of similar geology, soils, vegetation, and topography. It approximates the boundaries of the United States Environmental Protection Agency's Interior River Lowland
River Hills Ecoregion while also incorporating some of the more specific subcategories of the Missouri Ecological Classification System's landtype associations (Missouri Interagency Ecological Classification Systems Project, n.d.).

Visually, the designated landscape is one of rolling, forested, river bluffs and hills. It is a transition zone between northern loess and till-covered plains and the rockier soils of the more rugged Ozark Highlands to the southwest. Loess is plentiful in the uplands whereas alluvium covers the river valleys. Because of the region’s steep slopes, rock outcrops are frequent but deep soils mantle the valleys and ridges (Figure 12). Land cover varies but is primarily hardwood forests, row crops, and pasture (Griffith, 2008). The up-and-down topography is particularly appealing to viticulturists for its ability to circulate air and drain away excess water (Reineke, 2006).

An ecologically defined MRH never got beyond the planning stages. Because of political constraints and to take advantage of prior administrative structure within the

Figure 12. Typical MRH landscape in Perry County. Photo by the author.
University of Missouri-Extension, the territory first was scaled down to only that portion of the ecological zone within Missouri. Then, to better coordinate the GI’s borders with pre-existing political boundaries, the area was extended inland to include the entire land area of the six constituent counties, not only those parts that share a similar ecology (Barham, 2005).

Making the new GI conform to county boundaries was rationalized because Extension offices, envisioned by the planners as a primary hub for support and information, are also organized on a county level. Still, the exclusion of similar land in Illinois and the inclusion of dissimilar parts of Missouri hurt the GI’s physical integrity and its ability to use terroir as a justification for unification and enhanced quality. Additionally, many embedded and overlapping government and development offices exist in the region, most of which split the MRH. As I discuss later, the region’s ecological variety as well as its multiple partitioning have produced problems for the MRHA. At any rate, once the planners had demarcated this ecologically and politically based zone, they surveyed the cultural makeup of the region as part of Year Two, the next stage of the GI's development (Barham, 2003a).

Year Two, as outlined by the MRCP’s second proposal for funding from the Missouri Grape & Wine Program (Barham, 2003a) had five overarching goals. One was to solidify the group of regional stakeholders previously identified and to reinforce it with outside professionals to train and assist in the project's implementation. The remaining goals were to develop quality-control programs for winery operators, to assess the economic impact of other wine and nonwine agritourism activities in the region, to inventory the cultural heritage of the area to help build the GI’s regional identity narrative, and to begin to
position regional stakeholders for administering the GI independent of state personnel and agencies.

In 2004, the MRCP asked Millie Rahn, a folklorist who specializes in linking foodways and regional economic development, to perform a cultural inventory on the region (Rahn, 2004). As outlined in the grant proposal preceding Rahn’s inventory, this cultural survey was to focus on “such things as specialty products produced in the region that are sold, or could be sold, in regional winery gift shops (specialty cheeses, meats, jams and jellies, etc.); regional heirloom fruits and vegetables still in production, or that could be produced; [and] local cultural cuisines and specialty dishes” (Barham, 2003a: 3). Clearly, from its beginning, the plan was to build the GI around wine. But beyond this theme, Rahn’s survey also yielded a broad mixture of heritage narratives, productions techniques, and local products in the region, some of which could be utilized by a newly designed GI.

Organizers approached wine-makers directly to attend informational meetings about the project. Other potential regional stakeholders (governmental, non-profit, and private) were also invited (Barham, 2002). After evaluation of interest and willingness to participate in the project, a group of committed persons and organizations emerged. In Year Three, the design and control of the GI began to shift from the state experts and agencies that initiated it to this group of regional stakeholders. These stakeholders would eventually become the Mississippi River Hills Association (MRHA).

With the potential for success of a Missouri GI explored and confirmed and its foundation built, the project’s third and final year of funding from the Missouri Grape & Wine Program reoriented the focus to establishing and solidifying the GI itself. Two principal priorities emerged (Barham, 2004). First was to strengthen the support and
organization of the GI so it could survive an administrative shift from state-run to community-based. Project leaders compiled lists of interested and potential participants, and from these identified four primary stakeholders groups that could be targeted for building regional leadership: wine-makers, market farmers, hospitality industries, and economic development and government groups. The second priority for Year Three was to establish and solidify the GI itself, to make it known and visible. This process included developing a trademarked logo (Figure 1), a website, and a brand image. It also involved hosting regular public meetings and disseminating brochures, newsletters, and maps. In 2005, by way of its first marketing blitz, the MRH was born.

From its conception, the MRH was intended to become a self-sustaining, self-governing GI. Year Three began the leadership shift. The MRCP provided access to regional development experts, community planners, and entrepreneurs in applying for financial support from the University of Missouri’s Extension Community Economic and Entrepreneurial Development program (ExCEED) (Barham, 2004). The ExCEED grant applications were approved and during the years of their support, project responsibilities were slowly shifted to such regional stakeholders. ExCEED had broad experience working with rural communities and community-based planners (Gulick, 2009). This was a critical step, because county Extension Offices were well positioned to organize and maintain the GI’s administrative structure.

Still under the guidance of the MRCP but primarily led by the county Extension Offices (particularly Letitia Johnson at Ste. Genevieve) and regional stakeholders, the ExCEED initiative accomplished several objectives over its two years of funding from 2006 through 2008 (Barham, 2005). One was the formation of a not-for-profit organization, the
MRHA, to act as the regional structure of organization. Another was funding for a part-time coordinator, who was charged with helping the MRHA transition away from a government-run project. Eventually, this person would act as the director of the independently administered members’ association. ExCEED money also underwrote entrepreneurship programs to support business owners, the MRH’s stakeholders, and potential GI members and regional entrepreneurs. Additionally, the marketing plan for the MRH continued to be developed and implemented.

The MRHA was founded officially in 2007 and the administrative shift completed in 2009, four years after the pilot region had been initially identified. Although a necessary development, the shift to independence has not been easy. MRHA board members feel that they lost a great deal of momentum during the administrative restructuring and a number of past board members have left the organization. Some critics have gone so far as to say that continuing to develop the MRH as a GI will be an unsuccessful venture. The following section describes the current status of the initiative.

The Mississippi River Hills Association

The MRHA is currently a members’ organization headed by a paid coordinator and an unpaid board of directors. Lisa Palmer, the coordinator, was hired in 2007 on a part-time basis to organize events, coordinate among members, secure ongoing funding, and lead marketing initiatives. The board of directors is responsible for creating group policy. It consists of twelve elected individuals, with at least one from each county and from each stakeholder group. Membership in the MRHA is divided into three categories: individual, business/organization, and friends of the region. Per year, membership dues for these are 35, 75, and 25 dollars, respectively. Individual and business/organization members must
fit into at least one of the designated stakeholder groups and be located completely or primarily within the six counties. Only these members are allowed to vote on MRHA initiatives and utilize the MRHA’s brand image. A friend of the region is any other person or institution not eligible for individual or business/organization membership but still supportive of the MRHA. Advertised benefits to individual and business/organization memberships include use of the MRH’s trademarked logo; access to the MRHA’s business network; opportunities to purchase ad space, booth space, and workshop admittance at reduced costs; member-to-member discounts; and increased visibility and access to new markets through association (Palmer, 2008).

County Extension offices, primarily the one in Ste. Genevieve, provide office space, technical assistance, support, and educational programs to the MRHA and its stakeholders. The cities of Ste. Genevieve (also the residence of the MRHA coordinator) and Perryville (the north-south midway point of the MRH) serve as common meeting points for the group.

Originally, participation in and representation by the MRH was free to regional businesses. Organizers wanted to stimulate interest and excitement in the program and showcase the advantages of cooperative regional development. This was a laudable goal. As a free-to-members, fully funded, and expertly run organization, the GI would have had real potential, and it started that way. Consider a map produced by the GI in 2005. Entitled Discovering the Mississippi River Hills, it included information on many regionally based agricultural, artisanal, hospitality, outdoor recreation, restaurant, or wine businesses in the area as well as on any historic sites, museums, and visitor centers that wished to participate. These listings, all published at no cost to members, numbered about two hundred. Five years later things had changed. Now the MRHA was self-organized and
funded internally. When it made a new map it charged for listings, with a discounter price for MRHA members. The new map included only forty-two businesses, six of which were nonmembers of MRHA. The lesson is clear. Now that the GI is administered through the MRHA, which needs to find ways to support and finance itself, nominal membership dues and other fees are needed. Such fees, however, reduce the willingness of local businesses to participate.

Many potential stakeholders are not interested enough in the idea of the MRH GI to invest in its future through membership. Several key hindrances are apparent. Most prominently, the organization cannot seem to find an equilibrium between, on the one hand, formulating an exclusive, unified image and, one the other, being inclusive of and attractive to enough regional stakeholders to accumulate a critical mass of participants. Currently, the only prerequisites for membership in the MRHA and the use of its GI are payment of a membership fee, location completely or primarily within one of the region’s six counties, and involvement in one or more of the six stakeholder groups. No quality, product, or process requirements exist and the large variety encapsulated by the stakeholder groups offers an expansive representation of the region. Such multiplicity also can be seen to obscure the association’s priorities, possible benefits, and intended actions. Critics say it makes the MRH and its image less focused and prestigious.

The lack of unity in the MRHA today is reflected in the low rates of participation. Only sixty active members existed in 2010, and only forty-eight in April 2011 (Palmer, 2011). This is far from the critical mass needed for long-term success, especially since only seven wine-related businesses are now represented. Why the struggle to secure participants? What happened to wine?
Chapter 5: Identify or Die

The future of the MRHA and the MRH GI is uncertain. Other than its geographic boundary, few restrictions or specifications exist as to its image and membership requirements. This is problematic because the success of any GI strategy is dependent on differentiation and specialization. Even more basic problems are apparent in the MRHA’s small number of members and its low rate of recognition. Of the 69 interviews I conducted (all residents of the MRH), 33 had never heard of the MRHA. Before the MRHA can be judged by consumers as a value-adding image, a recognizable image needs to be created and disseminated. Who and what belongs to the MRH? In the following sections I discuss logistical hurdles for the MRHA and outline two of the more prominent and contested parts of the GI’s identity: wine and regional cohesion and unity.

What Region? A GI Divided

When asked to identify his or her regional community, not one of the 69 business owners interviewed named specifically the six counties of the MRH. The only instances in which these six units were grouped together was when people listed their regional community as the entire southeast portion of the state, all of Missouri, or an even larger area including parts of Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Mostly, interviewees divided up the six counties were (Figure 13). The most common entities identified were the city of St. Louis, Cape Girardeau County, and the Mississippi River, and at least one of these boundaries was included in almost every response. Many people identified a region with Cape Girardeau as the southern boundary (thereby excluding Scott County) but opinion split on whether or not the northern boundary included or excluded St. Louis, effectively dividing Jefferson County. St. Francois County, too, inspired little consensus. It was
included with the river counties and excluded from them with about the same frequency.

Other people identified St. Francois County as the focal point of its own region—the lead belt. The area between the cities of Ste. Genevieve, Perryville, and Farmington (St. Francois Co.) was demarcated several times, a region that coincides with the location of most of the area’s wineries. Whenever Scott County was included in a regional depiction smaller than all of southeast Missouri, it was either paired with Cape Girardeau County or identified as the northern boundary of the bootheel.

Many overlapping and variable regionalizing forces in the area help to divide and unite different places within the MRH. Public and private agencies that organize at the county scale, such as Extension offices, are among the most common. Other governmental entities, such as judicial circuits, congressional districts, and health services agencies, also typically follow county lines but often lump several together (Figure 14). The location of certain
businesses, such as Super Walmarts, shopping malls, and McDonald’s restaurants serve as destinations around which other, more functional communities revolve. Still other units exist via the impact of telephone service providers and the communities included and excluded in their accompanying phonebooks. Six such books cover parts of the MRH, at once dividing the area but also including other parts of Missouri and Illinois. Phonebooks are important in this area since they provide the only exhaustive resources of local businesses, residents, and services.

The many divisions of the region perceived by residents hurt the potential for success of the MRHA. Any GI scheme requires a recognizable and meaningful branded place image so that place-based products can be effectively advertised to consumers and the association’s commercial benefits easily communicated to potential members. When people do not see the GI as a cohesive region, the potency of its message of superiority and desirability is weakened. Producers within the MRHA’s six counties clearly see the GI’s boundaries as inauthentic. Counterintuitively, several of them specifically told me this was a major reason for their willingness to participate in the organization and work to strengthen the organization’s image.

Residents of the six counties are not the only people who do not readily identify the MRH area as a defined region. Anecdotally, in casual discussions with people from the Missouir-Kansas area about my thesis work, very few had a sense of the characteristics or location of the region I was studying. I found that the best way to convey the MRH’s location to them was by describing what it is not. In these discussions, the MRH became an ambiguous area west of the Mississippi River, east of the Ozarks, and in between
Figure 14: Examples of regional divisions in Missouri.
St. Louis and the bootheel. Each of these four bordering places inspired an identifiable place image; the MRH was merely the place in between.

Still, the place image of the MRHA does follow regional perceptions in some ways, even though the organization's geographic boundaries do not. The suburban landscape of Jefferson County and Scott County's agroindustrialization are both largely absent from the brand images typically advertised by the MRHA: a rural, hilly terrain dotted with market farms and vineyards. These two places are largely differentiated by local residents as separate from the rest of the MRH. Lisa Palmer, the coordinator of the MRHA, believes that the inclusion of Jefferson County was beneficial to the GI because of its close proximity to St. Louis, the MRH's most desired and targeted market (Palmer interview, 2010). The MRHA could use Jefferson County to interact directly with consumers in St. Louis. Current member and ex MRHA board member, Kate Martin, goes even further in this regard and would like to see more of St. Louis included within the GI in order to “ride on their coattails” (Martin interview, 2010). This gateway concept could possibly work elsewhere too. St. Francois County, for example, attracts about 350,000 visitors annually to its St. Francois State Park and other forested tracts (Blum interview, 2010).

When I asked local people to provide a brief description of their self-defined region, as if explaining it to a person who had never been there, 20 of the 69 interviewees mentioned their quaint, rural towns. “Agricultural”, “friendly”, and “beautiful” were terms also frequently named along with the area’s many waterways. Interestingly, the attraction most touted by the MRH—wine—was included as a prominent regional feature by only four interviewees. This, of course, is another problem for the association.
Wine

When the Mississippi River Hills GI first was conceptualized, its organizers wanted to imitate the European concept of terroir and its focus on wine. This early decision and the ways in which local wine-makers have chosen to interact with the MRHA have greatly affected the development of the GI, its image, and the participation of nonwine stakeholders. For various reasons, fewer and fewer viticulturists have chosen to participate in the MRHA over time and to invest in the GI’s image and mission. As a result, the most active members of the MRHA are nonwine stakeholders and so a gap exists between the GI’s image and its reality. Some current nonwine members of the MRHA now complain openly that the organization is tethered to an industry that is not committed to the GI or to its success. They see potential benefits from an association with wine, an up-and-coming, lucrative agritourism industry, but do not want to be sidelined by it. On the other hand, wineries feel that the MRH currently is not potent enough to have a significant, positive impact on their businesses and choose to focus their resources instead on individual marketing or through the Missouri Wine & Grape Board and similar agencies that are focused on viticulture. For them, the potential success of the GI is being superseded and deluded by its nonwine stakeholders.

Fifty wineries and 178 commercial grape growers existed in Missouri in 2005. The retail revenue from these wines was estimated at over $43 million that year, in addition to people spending $758,000 annually on wine-related tourism (The Economic Impact of Wine and Grapes on the Missouri Economy, 2007). Historically, Missouri wine took root in the 1850s following a massive influx of German immigrants (Gerlach, 1986). As with the rest of the United States, commercial wineries were shut down during Prohibition, but
flourished again beginning in the 1960s (Barham, 2003b). The most recognizable and oldest wine regions in the state, the Augusta (St. Charles Co.) and Hermann (Gasconade Co.) regions, are located along the Missouri River in the eastern half of the state. They are part of what is popularly referred to as “Missouri’s Rhineland” and are located just to the northwest of the MRH. Success in the Rhineland area led to thoughts of additional wine-making possibilities and to the creation of the Missouri Wine & Grape Board (funded with a twelve-cent-per-gallon tax on wine sales). This group, which provided financial assistance to establish the MRH, coordinates Missouri wine marketing and public relations as well as sponsoring the Institute for Continental Climate Viticulture & Enology. As of 2011, the state’s winery total had grown to over one hundred, eighteen of which are located within the six counties of the MRH (Missouri Wine & Grape Board, n.d.). Six of these MRH wineries, including Chaumette Vineyards and Winery (Figure 8), are located in Ste. Genevieve County; four in St. Francois; three in Cape Girardeau; two each in Jefferson and Perry, and one in Scott.

Missouri wineries have worked together to increase tourism. Some of the larger and more proactive ones in the MRH area sponsor the Route du Vin, for example, one of four wine trails in the state. This trail was organized before the creation of the MRHA, and now the two entities work together to promote one another. Still, the Route du Vin is “Ste. Genevieve Missouri’s Wine Trail,” not the MRH’s wine trail. Much like in the Hermann and Augusta regions, the popularity of wine in combination with close proximity to St. Louis make this cluster of wineries appealing to tourists. Many visual examples on the landscape document the area’s wine tourism, in particular, billboards advertising the various companies and tasting rooms along Interstate 55, the primary roadway into the MRH from
St. Louis.

The high traffic of tourists as well as the region’s desire to accommodate them were similarly displayed during the road construction I experienced in the summer of 2009. Interstate 55, as well as some of its exits and intersecting county roads, were being renovated, causing detours. To ease the chaos, large electric highway signs had been erected, but in addition to displaying general messages about closings, detours, and congestion, they also provided specific directions for travelers to reach area wineries. No other businesses were similarly addressed.

The wineries in the MRH display a wide variety of business practices and relationships with their local area. Crown Ridge, the largest of these establishments by far, is in Ste. Genevieve County and consists not only of a winery and vineyards, but also several restaurants, a market garden, ranch, golf course, brewery, distillery, bed and breakfast, and a tiger sanctuary (Putnam interview, 2010). The Crown Ridge compound, in fact, spreads over several noncontiguous tracts. Although some of their food and grapes are grown onsite, much is flown in, including a large proportion of their wine grapes from California. Many of the people running neighboring businesses see Crown Ridge in competition with them, as opposed to cooperation. Crown Ridge has been developed as an independent destination in isolation from its surroundings.

In contrast with Crown Ridge, Chaumette, another local winery, cooperates greatly with other local businesses and producers. Though smaller, Chaumette also has a restaurant, hotel accommodations, and a spa. Its owners, Hank and Jackie Johnson, and head chef, Adam Lambay, are committed to patronizing other local producers and supply most of the winery’s and restaurant’s needs from nearby growers (Palmer interview,
2010). Chaumette’s chef is a vocal advocate and participant in locally grown and slow-food movements. He also volunteers his skills and expertise to the MRHA by serving as chef for farm-to-table dinners (Figure 15). Local foodstuffs and crafts from regional artisans are sold in the winery’s tasting room. Other wineries found in the MRH, including St. Francois in St. Francois County and Hemman in Perry County, are much smaller. Only a handful of people, often family, oversee their vineyards, wine-making and tasting rooms, and other endeavors. Often such enterprises are run right out of private homes, located among their vines.

Conflict exists among wine-makers as to whether or not their product should be the foundation of the GI and/or the basis of the MRHA’s organizational and marketing structure. While many nonwine stakeholders in the MRHA wonder if wine should be central, tangential, or forgotten for their group, many wine-makers ask the parallel
question of should the MRH be central, tangential, or forgotten to them?

Diane Wilson, owner of the Center for the Arts in Ste. Genevieve, was very aware of the perceived advantages the area’s wine and its tourism had for her business—getting people in the area and in her door. In actuality, however, she saw very few of the tourists’ dollars (as well as government grants and development initiatives) trickling down to nonwine businesses such as hers. In her view, the wine industry was overshadowing other businesses and pulling customers away from the city’s streets and into large, all-inclusive compounds such as Crown Ridge. Although her city lies at the heart of the area’s French heritage and possesses many historic attractions, Wilson lamented that “some people don’t even know Ste. Gen except for wineries” (Wilson interview, 2010).

Many potential nonwine stakeholders felt that the MRHA organization was not for them. Some saw it as catering too much to wine while others perceived it (incorrectly) as not even open to other types of businesses. Gene Peters, a farmer who sells produce at farmers’ markets around Cape Girardeau County, was typical in this regard. He was familiar with the MRHA, had attended several meetings, but had declined membership. Even as a friend and colleague of Octavia Scharenburg, a grower of hydroponic vegetables and an MRHA board member, he saw the MRHA as good for wineries but not so great for others or himself (Peters interview, 2010).

Laura Oliver, manager of Cave Winery in Ste. Genevieve County, is an MRHA member who also worked with the MRCP when its organizers and researchers first arrived in the area (Oliver interview, 2010). She, along with Peters, agreed that the GI seemed to concentrate on wine, and on Ste. Genevieve County wineries in particular. She thought that the organization was good for wineries but maybe not for other businesses. Even though
she felt that the MRHA’s image aligned with her own business, she also believed it currently was not having much of an impact. Few of her costumers were familiar with the GI, she said. Wine tourism was increasing, but mostly because the area’s bigger wineries had implemented large, independent advertising campaigns from which smaller wineries were also benefiting. Oliver is still supportive of the MRHA and wants the GI to succeed, but believes it is still too small and in need of a great deal more work, work that she feels unable to take on herself.

Although a few wineries maintain their memberships in the MRHA, nonwine stakeholders tend to feel abandoned or betrayed by the region’s wine industry. Frank Keen, a farmer outside of Farmington who sells at the city’s farmers’ market, was once an active participant in the MRH. He remains a member but has distanced himself from the organization and no longer attends meetings. Like many, he feels that the MRHA caters to wineries, which are undeserving of the organization’s efforts and attention. “When the grant money ran out, wineries didn’t step up. [It] made a lot of people angry and disappointed” (Keen interview, 2010).

In contrast to those who see the MRHA as clearly wine-oriented, Andrew Hutson, the manager of Twin Oaks Vineyard and Winery in St. Francois County, felt that the GI, much to its detriment, did not have a strong identity. He attended the first informational and organizational meetings conducted by the MRCP and recalled belonging to the MRHA at one point, but was unsure of the winery’s current membership status. He felt that the MRH used to be more focused on viticulture and consequently enjoyed a more potent image and patron base. Now it had become too diluted. He cited the MRHA’s recent excitement over Baetje Farms and their primary product, goat’s milk cheese, as an example.
Hutson felt that the MRHA was more focused on “Amish cheese than money-making” (Hutson interview, 2010).

Hutson was one of the few people outside of the MRHA’s coordinator and board of directors to specifically address the organization’s lack of quality requirements. As the GI is presently constituted, he could not see how it would be able to guarantee the high quality of products or heighten the perceived quality of the region. Things are complicated in this regard, however. The MRHA’s recent focus on Baetje Farms was in recognition of their having just received first place in an international cheese competition. Perhaps Hutson put it best when he cited the same concern as did Oliver from Cave Winery—that the GI is just too young and too unstable for people to invest in fully. He saw it as “more like a pet project than a real demand” (Hutson interview, 2010).

Dorothy Hemman, owner of Hemman Winery in Perry County, is one of the few wine-makers who has been with the MRH project since the beginning and continues to be a full supporter and active participant. She thought that the GI has the capability to help and include many businesses—not just wine. However, she was disappointed in the lack of regional interest and investment and fearful that the project may fail (Hemman interview, 2010). Similarly, Linda Williams, owner of Windrush Farms in St. Francois County, had high hopes for the GI. She described the MRH’s image as “an agrarian vision,” and believes that it has great potential to help all kinds of agricultural producers and “can’t understand why people don’t participate” (Williams interview, 2010).

Scott County’s MRHA board member, Garth Fuchs with the Sikeston/Miner Chamber of Commerce, is also unconcerned by whatever the role is for wine in the MRHA. Even though Scott County has the fewest wineries and by far the most cultivated land and
agroindustrialization in the region, she believes that there is no need for conflict over wine as a central image of the MRHA. Fuchs says that, so long as people are working and working together, the MRHA can be mutually beneficial for all involved. But working and working together seem to be persistent problems for the organization. The wait-and-see attitude of many potential and current members, especially in the wine industry, means that people who could commit to the GI, make the MRH’s image their own, are abstaining. Some people think that, even though the variety of participants and diffuse image of the MRHA is a problem, it may not be the group’s primary concern. The pervasiveness of partial-investment might be an even greater burden. Kate Martin, editor of Perryville’s newspaper the Republic-Monitor, sums up the issue of halfhearted participation well. “This is the show-me state;” people will participate in an already successful GI, but they will not work toward its initial success (Martin interview, 2010).

Connectivity

How can an organization like the MRHA, which is dependent on members who have limited resources and little to no spare time, succeed? In an attempt to remain fair and accommodate everyone, the location of association meetings is rotated throughout all six counties. Still, travel time for most attendees can easily exceed an hour each way. The use of modern communication technologies, specifically the Internet, could potentially help to overcome the dual problems of distances between MRHA members and between the MRH and its potential consumers. However, Internet access and knowhow is very uneven throughout the region. The MRHA is increasingly reliant on the Internet. In some ways this is helpful, but in other ways it is creating another divide among stakeholders between those with Internet connectivity and those without.
Many areas within the MRH lack easy access to the Internet. In small towns as well as purely rural areas, any connection more than dial-up is cost prohibitive, largely because of a lack of necessary infrastructure. Dial-up Internet is fairly ineffective. Most websites contain so much data that the slow download speeds of a dial-up connection make the process of navigation unbearably slow and arduous. Moreover, many local people remain uninterested and/or inexperienced and unskilled in computers, the Internet, and other information technologies.

Dave Flori, a resident of suburban Jefferson County, has easy access to high-speed Internet but no computer experience. As the owner and sole employee of his chainsaw art business, Tree Frog Carving and Milling, he desired to have an online presence, an additional point of contact with customers, but computer illiteracy prevented this achievement (Flori interview, 2010). He also commented on the difficulty of identifying community support such as government grants and similar resources without Internet access. Flori was one of sixteen interviewees who had heard of the MRHA but knew very little about it. He had seen the logo once at a farmers’ market, had gained a vague idea that it could apply to his business as well, but had then been unable to learn more.

Like Flori, Joe Blum, the park superintendent at the St. Francois State Park, felt that a better and greater online presence could help improve the appeal of the park, boost attendance, and raise overall tourism to the region (Blum interview, 2010). He recognized that many of the area’s potential visitors and customers were researching possible routes and destinations based on information found on the Internet. Most overnight visitors to the park are not local, so the best way for them to acquire information about the area attractions and resources is online.
On the other hand, some business owners, such as Leroy Grifford and Terry Jacobson, feel that the Internet would not help them connect their businesses with customers. Grifford is the owner and grower of Tristar Nursery in Ste. Genevieve County. His customers are mostly local and he has no plans to expand into other markets (Grifford interview, 2010). Jacobson, the owner of PJ Grocery and Deli in St. Francois County, caters mostly to local people as well. His customers from out of town are mostly residents of St. Louis who are passing through during weekend trips to the Ozarks. Instead of a website, Jacobson would like to see a flashing yellow traffic light installed at the intersection around which PJ’s, a gas station, and an all-purpose store are situated. This light would bring in more of those out-of-towners (Jacobson interview, 2010).

Because of the problems with in-home connectivity, locations that have public Internet access are important community gathering spots. Officials at many of these “hot spots,” such as public schools and libraries, have blocked access to sites that they see as having no educational value or are otherwise judged as a low priority for their equipment use. Often, social networking sites are included in those that are blocked. Ironically, however, such networking sites could provide the best, most cost-effective, and easiest way for business people with limited computer experience to tout their goods and services online. Networking sites are designed to be easy to navigate and update, and are free. Libraries should perhaps think about revising their policies. For the present, however, the only nearby place for many rural residents that has free-access to wireless, high-speed Internet is a McDonald’s restaurant.

Not everyone has the same level and expectations of Internet connectivity. Several of the business owners I interviewed mentioned their lack of connectivity, poor knowledge
of the Internet and online communities, and inability to use computer hardware and software. They also recognized that this deficiency was hurting their ability to connect with customers. Disparity of Internet usage also exists within the administration of the MRHA. The MRHA, the MRCP before it, and the Extension offices that have worked with the project from its inception all are run by people for whom online communication is commonplace and often the norm. In the same way that consumers may have fewer opportunities to encounter and communicate with businesses, organizations like the MRHA, which operate largely online, inadvertently further exclude many people they would like to help.

Getting potential members who have limited-to-no Internet access to work with and integrate with the MRHA is problematic. Conversely, if the MRHA can overcome this hurdle and successfully access and communicate with these businesses, then the organization can aid in the establishment of their online presence. Through the MRHA’s website, online newsletters, blog, and other online media, the group works to improve the online presences of all members as well as the GI. For those businesses wishing to improve their connectivity but unable to accomplish it themselves, the MRHA can be an important resource for providing online information.

The MRHA was designed with the basic foundations and structure to become a valuable tool for community development. However, without a community, and without a critical mass of committed participants, the organization cannot survive. Several key problems prevent the MRHA and the MRH GI from taking root and gaining the necessary support. First, little consensus exists as to regional boundaries and representative images of the area. This disagreement hurts the perceived authenticity of the MRHA’s branded
place image. If the MRH image is not recognizable or seen to be accurate, then people will be less likely to participate in the GI either through MRHA membership or the purchasing of its products. The wine industry as the foundation and primary symbol of the MRH is particularly contentious.

Second, as a community-based organization, the MRHA’s current or potential stakeholders must be able to communicate with and participate in the organization’s affairs. Modern communication technologies, specifically the Internet, have the capacity to ease the networking hurdle associated with distance. However, when such connectivity is uneven or missing, the use of the Internet as the primary method of communication acts to further alienate potential members and those businesses that could benefit most from participation in the MRHA.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

For a GI to succeed, its place and associated place-based products must possess authenticity within a system of belonging. Heterogeneous and contradictory images of places, such as those found within the MRH, necessarily compete for a prevailing image and negotiations must ensue if any consistent baseline is to develop. Without an acceptance and belief in an authentic portrayal of place, any GI and its branded products will not be accepted. For GIs to overcome the destabilizing forces negatively affecting small-scale agriculture and cottage industries, they must imbue value not only into their products, place, and processes, but also into the GI system within which those qualities are identified. A consumer must be willing and able to imagine that a place, explicitly defined, exists and that the qualities affiliated with it are true. The MRH, first conceptualized in 2003, has tried to do such things, but has yet to make any significant impact on the minds and consumption patterns of people within and outside its borders.

If and how the GI strategy can successful transplant itself from Europe into the cultural, financial, and legal structure of American places has yet to be determined. Several factors have played important roles in how the GI has developed in this country including three that I have discussed at length in this thesis: the diversity encompassed within the MRH, the role of the wine industry, and the problems and potential of Internet connectivity. These three components clearly elucidate the conceptual foundations of all GIs: belonging, authenticity, and citizenship.

The question of citizenship is an ongoing conundrum that is stifling the success of the MRH. Who and what should define the GI and its brand image? Citizens of the MRH, those people and agencies that take part in its construction, evolution, and maintenance,
are not only the organization’s members. Past planners, present nonparticipants, and the imagined desires of potential customers all play a role in the MRH’s structure, purpose, and vision. In what ways should it be protectionist, like its European predecessors, and in what ways should it be promotional? As a protective strategy, GIs must necessarily represent a cohesive, cooperative group that seeks to preserve specific products and/or production techniques within their place of production.

In the case of the MRH, its intended group of principal stakeholders, wine-makers, have proved to be not particularly cohesive or cooperative. Instead of creating a group of unified businesses that increase their competitiveness and profits, the MRH has spawned a new forum that fosters internal competition among a wide variety of stakeholders. Regional businesses that participate in the MRHA compete to elevate and institutionalize their vision of the organization, the region, and its economic initiatives. The most heated negotiations and tenuous relationships center on the wine industry. Strongly oppositional opinions exist as to the current roles and future of wine in the MRHA.

As a promotional strategy, the demands and perceptions of potential customers become a powerful factor in defining a GI. If the indication’s sole or primary purpose is to increase the desirability and profitability of its products, then its brand image must correspond to the demands of consumers, regardless of whether or not that image aligns with the desires of producers. Although GIs are meant to embrace and enhance the local culture and economy, they also sell to markets outside of the region. To do so successfully, their products must have specific appeal to buyers located farther away. The image that the territory needs to develop, therefore, is not wholly based on a community-driven sense of place. External-oriented strategies of commoditization must be considered as well. The
formulation of the MRH GI and its symbolic representation has so far been a complex
creation of compromise and contestation. As the MRHA takes further action to solidify
commercial opportunities, it has yet to be seen what image of the region will develop and
how, in turn, the region itself will transform.

A correspondence among a place, a person’s image of that place, and its branded
image is necessary for the affirmation of a GI and for it to be seen as authentic. Andrew
Hutson, manager of Twin Oaks Vineyard and Winery and a critic of the MRHA’s
promotional success, told me that the organization “creates demand then pushes supply.”
He believes that, instead, one should “start from the grape up.” First make a product
consumers want to buy and then improve upon the ways of getting it to them. The MRHA
has the difficult task of accessing, managing, and compromising among its many citizens.
So far its successes have been few, with hardly any points of agreement and even less
enthusiasm.

Though not specifically named, one feature struck me during this study as the very
heart of both the MRH and American GIs as a whole: transforming one’s passion into one’s
income. Linda William’s of Windrush Farms, for example, told me that she had a “money
job” and a “passion job” (Williams interview, 2010). The farm was her passion, but in order
to pay the bills, she also worked full-time at a nearby library. She believed that the farm
eventually could support her and her family, but the first few years on the farm would be
difficult. She hoped that the MRHA could help this transition and lessen her workload by
providing much needed advertising and retail opportunities. Dorothy Hemman of Hemman
Winery has succeeded in making the transition that Williams envisions. She described her
winery as a “hobby that grew into a business” (Hemman interview, 2010).
For many of the small business owners I encountered, their entrepreneurship was inspired more by passion than any perceived market opening. Their quality of life was at least partially dependent on the manner in which they earned their incomes. Dave Flori, owner of Tree Frog Carving and Milling, explained that his occupational move into chainsaw art came via the realization that “richness in life is being able to do what you want” (Flori interview, 2010). Can passion be a production technique? Can the expressed goal of a GI be to preserve the ability to financially support oneself with a lifestyle about which one is passionate? Is this a feasible basis around which a place can unite and transform its economic environment? If not, then the MRHA must identify some other rallying point, one that attracts a critical mass of motivated participants and is deemed authentic and valuable to both stakeholders and consumers.

If and when the MRH takes root, it will be interesting to see how the six counties change as a result. Opportunities for future research here and on other iterations of GIs in America are plentiful. Within the MRH GI specifically, for example, one could usefully study the customer base for local stakeholders. Is their fixation on consumers from St. Louis warranted and their best option? What about people closer to home? Also, if the MRHA started implementing quality controls, how would that change the face of the organization? What if the MRHA failed—what, if any, would be its lasting impressions?
Appendix A

Individual Interview

Date: Location:

Identity Politics within a Geographic Indication: The Mississippi River Hills (MRH)
University of Kansas, Department of Geography, Emily Pabst

Name:

Place of Business (POB): Name, location, description, size

Stakeholder group (MRHA): Artisan, Hosp & Tour, Local Gov, Producers, Retail, Wine/Vine

Occupation/position: Duration:

POB locally owned? POB consumer of local goods?

Primary market: Local? Regional? In/Ex of MRH?

What do you think are the greatest challenges to your POB?

What would improve the economic outlook of your POB? Yourself? The region?

Home Address: Years at residence:

Family history in the region?

What do you consider to be your local community? Why?

What do you consider to be your regional community? Why?

What are the essential characteristics of the region? Do they represent your POB? You?

Do you think that is a widely held perception within the region? Beyond the region?

What is your level of participation in the MRHA? Your POB's?

What do you think of the MRH?

Have you observed any changes in your POB? The region?
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