WINEDALE IS STILL “A WORK IN PROGRESS.”
The social makeup of the surrounding area continues to change as workers and small farmers give way to middle-class urbanites. The vision of Winedale as a historical museum continues to evolve as well, as we look at new and previously neglected aspects of the social and cultural history of the site and its region. In the new century, Winedale prompts us to ask new questions about the buildings, their furnishings, and the daily lives of the people who lived and worked in them.

The area surrounding Winedale is still changing. The total population declined steadily throughout the 20th century, especially during the Depression and World War II. Since the 1960s, small family farmers practicing row crop agriculture have sold out to urbanites seeking rural retreats. Gentrification by city dwellers has reduced the ethnically diverse farming population of long residence. Lured by the historic lands of the old Austin Colony, newcomers have converted the fields to pasture for cattle raising. In their stewardship of the land, they have restored the ecology and given the countryside a park-like appearance, complete with white fences, broad pastures, and livestock. By the 1970s, weekend and absentee landowners became so prevalent in the surrounding counties that Winedale began to offer seminars to address their needs.

As social and economic changes continue in the surrounding area, the vision of Winedale as a public history museum and place of learning continues to evolve as well. Today, public culture—including the representation of the Winedale story—must reflect the diversity of our social history. As the materials on these exhibit panels suggest, we are examining new and previously neglected aspects of social life in the area, including the lives of minority groups, women, children, and laborers.

What was daily life like for farm boys and girls on the southern prairies of Texas in 1920? What changes had occurred by 1940? By 2000?

The study of public culture must also reach beyond ethnicity, gender, and class to embrace larger themes common to the experience of many groups. Such themes include the immigrant experience, the transformation of family life, and the search for identity in a new setting.

What was it like to be a middle-class, German-American farm woman in Winedale, Texas, in the 1880s? How did German immigrants maintain their cultural identity in their new role as Texans and Americans?

NEW APPROACHES
Courses at the University of Texas have explored new avenues of interpretation for Winedale that employ some of these concepts. Student proposals have ranged from web-based, multi-dimensional tours of the historic structures to imaginative thematic exhibits, one of which, for example, links quilt patterns to gardening in an exploration of women’s work. Another focuses on the many different communities—workers, families, students, worshippers, etc.—that interact simultaneously in the Winedale area. Such student projects offer opportunities for new exhibits and programs in Winedale’s continuing evolution.

Our identity is a product of our personal and collective memory, and landscapes and built environments embody our social memories because they provide the framework for our lives. This is what social historians mean by “the power of place.”