

University of Washington Tacoma

From the Selected Works of Justin Wadland

Winter 2011

Review of "Potluck: Community on the Edge of Wilderness" by Anna Maria Spagna

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/justin_wadland/8/

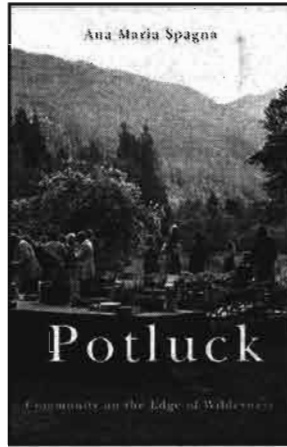
POTLUCK
COMMUNITY ON THE EDGE OF WILDERNESS
Ana Maria Spagna
Oregon State University Press (\$18.95)

by Justin Wadland

Ever notice how people are more likely to say hi on a backwoods trail than on the city sidewalk? And why do folks seem more likely to stop and chat for a while the farther the trail-

head is from an urban center? Ana Maria Spagna knows some of the reasons. In *Potluck: Community on the Edge of Wilderness*, she describes this lesson learned while patrolling Canyonlands National Park: "solitude, for those who shared the affinity for it, could breed companionability."

Spagna, author of two previous books, abides in Stehekin, Washington, a small town tucked into the North Cascades mountain range. Located on the northern end of Lake Chelan, Stehekin is one of the few places in the contiguous United States inaccessible by car: the only options to get there are ferry boat, airplane, pack horse, or a long hike. With an annual population of around a hundred, residents can boast at one of their many potlucks: "Ours is doubtless the largest gathering—of humans at least—for a minimum thirty-mile radius in every direction." The fact that Spagna has made such a place her home shapes the spirit of her new collection of essays.



A few pieces do venture beyond the confines of Stehekin, revisiting times in the author's earlier life when she felt a sense of community: slugging a ball on the seventh grade parish softball team or teaching orphans in Tijuana how to swim. But most essays revolve around the rich, complicated relationships that she and others have established while living together in Stehekin: drinking with the guys at the Friday Night Club, wielding a saw on a trail crew, surviving a hundred year flood, participating in a caucus, attending a funeral. When bears begin to frequent a local orchard, the community extends beyond the human realm. Spagna artfully voices the sacrifices and devotions, conflicts and compromises that nurture the network of relations that form community in the largest sense of the word. But she admits it's not always easy: "I'd like to stay that it's all Amish barn-raising and

square dance fun. But I don't want to romanticize it. Mostly it's just work, and for most of us it's work after work."

Given the academic flavor of the book's subtitle, some readers might expect a little research to have enhanced these essays—a sprinkling of definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* perhaps, along with speculation on how American vernacular transformed the British word *potluck* into its current usage. And what about *potluck's* frequent association with the etymologically unrelated word *potlatch*, which originated in Chinook jargon? Spagna doesn't foray into these territories, but she intimately knows what potluck means from her own experiences beside makeshift meals on folding tables. Combining personal stories, ruminations, and lessons from the author's life, this collection seems concocted out of ingredients she had at hand, and as anyone who cooks knows, this is the hardest kind of dish to prepare. ♦