

CULTURE AND VALUES OF RURAL COMMUNITIES¹

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Juxtaposition of the words "culture" and "values" in the title of this paper ought to imply to the reader far more than is suggested by their simple grammatical proximity and association by means of the conjunction. Moreover, to place these concepts in the context of the "rural community" immediately gives an ecological locus which conveys a sense of distinctiveness from and, perhaps, contrast to the counterpart, urban localities. It would appear to be useful, therefore, to begin with some definitions of the terms to be employed here.

Definitions

The modifier, "rural," is used to designate characteristics of physical areas as well as attributes of people. In using the word we refer to some combinations of three different substantive aspects: ecological, occupational, and sociocultural. In the first instance, the reference is to areas with low population density, settlements of small absolute size, and communities of persons who are relatively isolated from other segments of society. Occupationally, rural refers to involvement in extractive type industries.

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Agriculture is, of course, the most widespread such industry in rural America, although mining, forestry, and fishing may also be included. Socioculturally, rural connotes a predominance of personal, face-to-face social relationships with similar, known others, and a comparative slowness to change the cultural heritage.

"Culture" is an inclusive concept. For social scientists, it is the complex set of learned and shared beliefs, customs, skills, habits, traditions, and knowledge common to the members of a society, i.e., the "social heritage" of a society.

"Values" are a composite of the infrastructural beliefs and attitudes of that heritage which guide a society. Professor Robin Williams, in his famous book, American Society, elaborated values as "conceptions of desirable states of affairs that are utilized in selective conduct as criteria for preference or choice or as justifications for proposed or actual behavior." (1970, p. 438)

It must be obvious, therefore, that the choices of terms for the title or topic in this article are by no means casual and accidental. Values are a part of culture, evolved out of the events and experiences in the life of specific societies. Hence, it ought not to seem strange that rural cultures and values should differ somewhat from those characteristic of urbanites. In short, we accept the premise of those who assert that, where you live, and what you do for a living, affects how you think about life.

Developments

From where do our cultures and values, as Americans, come? What are our roots? How did we get to be the kinds of people that we are? We noted

above that culture and values evolve out of living. To what can we attribute the lifestyles and world views that characterize us? Let us consider, briefly, some aspects of the history of this nation.

The People Who Came to America

One does not need to be much of a historian to know that our forebears were immigrants. At various times over the past several hundred years, shiploads of people from virtually every corner of the earth have made their way to these shores. In Pennsylvania, we trace our family trees largely through Europeans who left their homelands there. The migration streams are not infrequently cited wherein the English came early on into William Penn's "Quaker City" and settled the southeastern original counties of the Commonwealth. Scotch-Irish came into the Wyoming Valley, the Northwest, and up through the river systems into what is now Pittsburgh and environs. Germanic peoples disembarked in Philadelphia, but quickly moved through the city to establish themselves in the hinterland valleys on scattered farmsteads surrounding villages which served their economic and social needs. Other Europeans came in the heyday of the mines, the railroads, and the factories. All of these immigrants have left their marks upon us in the names of our municipalities, the architecture of our churches, or even more subtly, on the customs and traditions we continue to observe.

Our forebears were an intrepid lot. They braved the rigors of ocean travel to get here, often by steerage, with little more understanding of what lay in store for them than that it offered a fresh start, a new beginning. They were undaunted by the unknown as they fearlessly faced the future and courageously put their few belongings together to settle the frontier!

It was primarily impatience that drove them: the desire to own something, to carve out a place all of their own doing, and to eat the fruits of their own labors.

But all of that masks another characteristic that is all too often lost to our thinking in our deep desire to exhibit the awe and esteem with which we hold these ancestors of ours. We must add to the list of attributes just cited that, for the most part, these forefathers and mothers of ours were from the disfranchised masses of European societies; few of them were of the elites of nobility. As common people, not many of those who settled Penn's Woods had had to make decisions regarding the opening of new lands, the organization and operation of markets, the capitalization of business ventures, or any of the thousand and one other tasks essential to building on solid foundations for a successful future. In their impatience and ignorance, they cut down forests of hardwoods that had taken centuries/millenia to grow; fields were laid bare for the rains and winds to wreak their destructive forces by erosion; the mineral resources were removed as rapidly as techniques would allow; and the mountains of tailings lay exposed to the elements to penetrate and leach out their residual minerals and chemicals to pollute our waters. If it were possible to roll back the clock of time, would we not want to alter the "development" of frontier Penn's Woods? Consider what this Commonwealth and other areas in the New World were like when these forebears of ours first settled.

The Lands They Found

Coming out of the continent of Europe with its rather fragmented national territories, the Americas had to have impressed these settlers with

their vastness. Stretching from ocean to ocean, there must have been a sense of endless expanse waiting to be claimed and cultivated. Moreover, the variations offered must have been almost unbelievable: in terrain, climate, flora, and fauna. There was virtually something for everyone, regardless of the type of person or taste for life. And there lay the land, in all of its verdancy: lush, green, live, growing! For the most part, it was virgin land: unclaimed, unexploited, and unpolluted.

To complete the picture of roots, at least one further detail must be added.

The Times Through Which They Lived

Caught up in the excitement of who they were and what they had found, these early Americans adapted readily. Through trial and error, amidst satisfaction and disappointment, they forged ahead to many failures and much success.

It is impossible to trace the history of this country without gaining deep appreciation for the discovery and exploration of new lands attributable to the characteristics of the people we have just described. Territorial expansion of this nation in the 18th and 19th centuries kept pace with the growing population. Moreover, thereby were kept alive the attributes of persons similar to the pioneers: migrants - people on the move; individualists - confident of their own abilities, unafraid of what was new and different; achievers - intent upon owning a piece of the land on which they could live and work; and learners - not inhibited by their own lack of expertise, but rather willing to learn by doing!

It was that set of circumstances and kind of mind that added another dimension to our history worth noting: the development of new techniques. Inventions, innovations, and improvements of all kinds have attended the efforts of those who have gone before us. Such developments have been the rule, rather than the exception, for every institution of our lives: economic, educational, recreational, religious, political, and social. Nothing in our lives is taken as permanent and unchangeable! Everything is subject to a new idea, a fresh insight, a bold approach, a labor-saving device, a better technique, a scientific breakthrough, etc. ad infinitum, it seems. Quite naturally, these changes have brought about different ways of thinking about the world and behaving in our lives. Culture, our lifestyles or social heritage and values, our concepts of right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, satisfying or disappointing, useful or worthless, are inextricably associated with our history; who we are, and what we believe, and how we live, evolves out of the past, in the present, and toward the future.

Derivatives

What are some of the specifics of culture and values that we have derived from the past? What has survived, in whatever form, from those traits of character and lifestyle cited above? Are there patterns of behavior and/or frames of reference which are more predominant in some sectors of society more than in others, i.e., in rural communities by comparison with urban centers? What do we know that may help us?

We noted earlier that it is the conditions under which people live and work which shape their beliefs and behaviors. To put it otherwise, the ways in which human beings cope with the environment and adapt their life-

styles, or order their thoughts about it, contribute to the kinds of individuals, societies, or communities they turn out to be. Let us apply that logic to ruralites.

The Size of Rural Communities

Regardless of the definition used, rural communities come out on the small end of the scale. Historically, our government tended to use a single criterion for rural: that which was derived from Bureau of Census distinctions, in which a rural place was one with a population concentration of less than 2,500 people in the unit of analysis. More recently, various agencies of the government have modified that Census rule-of-thumb for their own convenience, so that the "metropolitan-nonmetropolitan" distinction is based upon population sizes of 50,000 more or less. Whatever the measure, however, rural is always on the side of fewer people in the area designated.

It is that low density of population which gives the culture a particular character that engages our interest. Under such conditions, residences tend to be spread out with plenty of open space between and among them. Easy access is afforded to the world in its natural state: streams, lakes, fields and forests. Congregations of persons are generally small, reflecting the few people there are to rally around whatever the cause. It is fairly easy, therefore, to get to know those who share the locale and/or the associations in which neighbors are gathered. Families are frequently engaged in a common business, each member of the family being involved according to sex, age, size, and capability for the appropriate and assigned task. Relatives abound close-by as a product of an apparent sense of security and satisfaction with the shared local lifestyle. The effect of all this is that

many rural people are interrelated as extended families. The few who are not related tend to stand out as latecomers to the community, hardly less known to the oldtimers, however, because the natural effect of everyday intercourse of peoples is on the basis of personal face-to-face interactions.

Another consideration is no less important in understanding the culture and values in rural communities.

The Nature of Rural Industries

As was indicated earlier, extractive industries, rather than processing factories, characterize rural communities. Jobs provided in this sector of labor deal with raw materials in an atmosphere close to nature. Whether it be agriculture, forestry, fishing, or mining, there is a keen sense of weather conditions as they impinge upon pursuit of the work. A sense of competition with the natural forces of wind, rain, sunshine, darkness, heat, cold, etc., overrides comparison with what workmates, colleagues, or neighbors are doing. Scheduling is a function of the vagaries of the biosphere; workloads and labor demands are highly seasonal and cyclical. When the time is ripe for planting, harvesting, fishing, or whatever, little concern can be shown for regulated workdays and holidays, i.e., eight-hour days, multiple shifts and forty-hour weeks are not always possible in rural community labor patterns. These peaks, however, soon pass, and with them the occasion for numerous hands to help - intensively, for short periods - in many of the industrial operations typically found in rural areas. Other characteristics may also be cited: much of the work is dirty; it is often dangerous; it is demanding of skills frequently gained only by experience; and there are not a few evidences of demeaning activity, especially if you consider crawling on

your hands and knees, bending over or squatting, for extended periods, and association with foul-smelling animals, fermented feeds, manure, agrichemicals, or even well-sweated workmates distasteful.

Each of the conditions of life and work detailed above might be applied to and illustrated in a wide variety of rural extractive industries. As a near constant atmosphere in which people are associated daily, it is little wonder that scholars suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between such circumstances and the sorts of world views and frames of reference which emerge among rural people. Herein are the roots of the values which become ingrained in rural societies and transmitted through the generations.

The Values of Rural Sociocultures

If the definitions presented in the opening part of this presentation are taken seriously, it must be immediately evident that this section of our discussion is the most difficult to establish. Whereas in each of the previous points of emphasis, it is possible with the definitions to designate areas for observation, examination, testing, and analysis, those tasks become extremely difficult when dealing with the rather abstract concept of "values." The presence or absence and strength of the values can be tested only by inference. It ought not to surprise us, therefore, that considerable controversy surrounds the very suggestion that research on rural-urban value differences is possible! Nonetheless, sufficient replication of research with similar findings has been done to recognize some consensus.

The work of Professor Robin Williams of Cornell University on American society in general and values in particular has gained wide acclaim. An array of some fifteen items has been identified as historically in evidence

among us. More critical work has focused upon about half of these including such values as useful activity or work, achievement or success, group superiority, moral orientation, humanitarianism, individual personality, equality, and freedom. Virtually no one claims that these are equal in strength no matter what sectors of society are tested. It does seem possible, however, to group these around three generally accepted values characteristic of rural communities: conservatism, pragmatism, and independence.

Conservatism: It has long been recognized that rural people are relatively slow to change. In spite of all the opportunities for the emphases upon a massification of society so that rural and urban differences would ultimately vanish, continued research indicates that differences remain quite marked. In studies which have identified some measure of traditionalism, rural people invariably score much higher than do their counterparts in urban centers. Such findings are generally supported in our own experience, especially if we allow for the elaboration of conservatism in the more precise values of Williams' schema. Thus, for example, the moral orientation most characteristic of ruralites seems at times to be archaic, old-fashioned, and passe. A second of Williams' values is also in evidence in much the same contexts: group superiority. There is a strong sense of common standards characterizing rural people with a great reluctance to be the first to break the code, go out on a limb, or to try something new. While that sort of squeamishness or old fogeyism may be deplored, its expression in a third value identified by Williams is wholesome: humanitarianism. The generosity of rural peoples is legendary. There is abundant evidence of their reaching out, in time of need, to be of assistance, often even at great sacrifice of them-

selves. That kind of action, admittedly, is quite often locally oriented; ruralites are not especially caught up in the support of foreign aid, whether under the auspices of government or the church!

Pragmatism: In a most interesting overview of American rural societal values written for the United States Department of Agriculture's Yearbook of 1963, Professor Roy Buck elaborated the position that a "pragmatic perspective" seems best to fit the value stance of American rural people. His view was that throughout history, ruralites have largely been motivated by standards of utility, i.e., if it works, get it/do it/use it/make it/etc. Moreover, he asserted, success has been measured in terms of accomplishment, as illustrated in a familiar country greeting at the end of the day, "Wha' d'y'u git done today/this week?" Professors Buck and Williams seem to agree, although Williams suggests the dual values of work activity and achievement or success. In either case, what is common knowledge to many of us is evident: few and far between are the rural people you'll meet who don't have a keen sense of value of a hard day's work as a privilege, not a chore. Moreover, there is little patience with the person who wants only to eat and sleep, shirking any responsibility for contributing to the common cause of labor.

Independence: Finally, there is reasonable consensus on the third value cited: independence. Once again, Williams talks about three values, each of which is an elaboration of independence. "Individual personality" emphasizes the right of everyone to be his/her ownself, not beholden to anyone, not necessarily a carbon of anyone. There is, or ought to be, "freedom" to be, to choose, and to become what one desires, without pressure to conform to

a common mold through which all are shaped. Moreover, in Williams' terms, that independence of the individual validates the claim to "equality" whereby all are taken at face value, on the same grounds, with undifferentiated opportunity for whatever is offered. And once again, these values, whether three or one, seem to fit our images of American ruralites. There just appears to be a better chance for a "fair shake" in the countryside, as against the city.

There is ample research evidence to support the assertions made in this section regarding the value of sociocultures. Some of these data have been gathered as part of national Gallup Poll information. Other data represent more limited samples of persons in specific geographical areas or within particular age categories. Nonetheless, they speak to a common conclusion: there continue to be differences in value orientations between rural and urban communities, the rural still tending toward the conservative and traditional, pragmatic, and independent characterizations.

What, therefore, can be said about the application of these ideas to the tasks of rural libraries and librarians? I have no hesitancy in urging upon each of you a sensitivity to the generalizations about culture and values in rural communities that have been made. I would hasten to add, however, that given the tremendous diversity that has gone into this "melting pot" of America, including the many ethnic enclaves scattered throughout rural America, it is essential that each community be studied! The very multiplicity of values cited in the literature suggest that further sorting out and sifting down is needed. Moreover, the controversy that continues to surround the study of values is evidence of disquiet with the research process in this area, up to now. There is something there, we know. We need to know a lot

more about it. In the meantime, let none of us be unappreciative of the distinctive culture in rural communities that has evolved its own particular values to fit its overall lifestyle and world view.

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