

A LIFETIME OF CHANGE IN RURAL AMERICA

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For a Rural Libraries and the Humanities workshop on June 18, 1982, Mr. Firth talked to librarians about the changes in farming and rural society. Firth was appointed to an 18 member committee by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture John R. Block to look at the future of Cooperative Extension Service nationally.

Initially, a common understanding of the terms "changing rural scene" needs to be established. 'Rural,' in this presentation, will basically be the census definition: farms, open country and places of less than 2,500 population located outside of urbanized areas. Pennsylvania has the nation's largest rural population with 3,643,044, out of a state population of 11,863,895, or about 30 percent. 'Rural' and 'farm' are no longer synonymous, if indeed they ever were. As 'changing' is discussed, in some cases it will mean specific dates and in other cases the reference will be generally within our lifetimes.

Many changes have taken place in rural America in our lifetimes, but starting with the 1970's there have been some rather dramatic turnarounds and developments in rural communities. This paper will address changes that are occurring in several broad categories which are not mutually exclusive. The categories are: industrialization of agriculture, urbanization of rural areas, transportation, schools, housing, rural crime and mining and gas/oil exploration.

INDUSTRIALIZATION OF AGRICULTURE

There are roughly 2.8 million farms in the U.S. at the present time-less than one-half of the number 30 years ago. However, the rate of decline in farm numbers has slowed substantially in recent years because of higher net incomes for farmers combined with the fact that many people with favorable non-farm opportunities have already left farming.¹ In fact, the latest census of agriculture showed an increase in the number of farms in some counties.

Farms are more specialized, the result being fewer general farm operations. It is a much bigger business today, with larger acreages, herds and flocks. Today in this country 155,000 farms with annual gross sales of \$100,000 or more account for 60 percent of all farm sales, in contrast to 1960 when 23,000 farms accounted for 17 percent of the sales.

There is at the same time an increasing number of part-time farm operations. Off-farm employment along with farming is now a permanent pattern, with the exception being dairy farming. Today at least two out of three farm families receive more than half of their income from non-farm sources, compared to only 16 percent of the farmers working off the farm in 1944.²

Today many family farms require a large capital investment, have greater risks, and often employ labor outside the family. This large capital requirement is at the root of the struggle a family faces to stay in farming. It continues to be a family operated business, with perhaps 98 to 99 percent of the farms family-owned and operated in Northwest Pennsylvania.

Farming is not only a way of life but it is increasingly operated as a business using sophisticated management tools. The modern farmer is well educated, a scientist and a businessman. Farming is becoming more stressful;

it no longer provides the easy way of raising a family, working with and training a son because of the higher volume of business and use of larger, more sophisticated equipment. However, farming still provides a greater freedom of choice and independence than most other occupations.

Changes are occurring in the types of crops grown in and around Clarion and Mercer counties. We see greatly increased corn and soybean acreages and few fewer fruit farms. These changes are the results of economics - the profit potential. Current high interest rates are taking their toll in agriculture as in other businesses. We also see changes in agricultural productivity, such as increased crop yields, improved milk production per cow and gains in feed efficiency in meat animals and poultry.

More than ever farming is affected by events arising from outside its border, such as exports, marketing programs, equipment costs and repair availability.³ "Together with the loss of agriculture's uniqueness, and springing from the same causes, has come loss of agriculture's power to control the farm policy agenda."⁴

Some 'ag' policy issues that continually arise at the national level and have an impact on Northwest Pennsylvania include:

1. Food prices - specifically how to hold them down, an issue put on the agenda by the consumers.
2. Food Programs - especially food stamps, a concern of the hunger lobby.
3. Adulterated Foods - of concern to the natural foods people.
4. Junk Food - of concern by nutritionists.

5. Ecological Questions - a concern of the environmentalists.
6. Rural Development - of interest to the 85 percent of the rural people who are not farmers.
7. Limitations on government payments to farmers.
8. Grain embargos.
9. Civil Rights, Occupational Safety & Health Laws.
10. Preservation of 'ag' land.

URBANIZATION OF RURAL AREAS

Rural and urban are merging. By 1950 farmers were a minority in rural areas. Non-farmers now out-number farmers at least 7 to 1 in rural America. Why is off-farm employment increasing? There has been a growth and increase in variety of non-farm jobs. Traditional occupations such as farming, lumbering, mining and small services businesses remain important; however, government positions, personal services of many kinds and factories have provided the basis for these employment shifts.⁵

Thus today rural society is more heterogenous. We see rural poverty and affluence farming side by side. Farm people are no longer readily distinguishable from non-farm people in speech, dress or manner. Today the rural family is as exposed to television, magazines and the national news as people in other areas.

The 1980 census indicates that for the first time in more than 160 years the population growth rate was higher in rural areas and small towns than in metropolitan areas. In absolute terms the number of people in nonmetropolitan counties increased from 54.4 million in 1970 to 62.8 million by 1980. This

includes a net of at least 4 million people who moved in from metropolitan areas and abroad. By contrast in the 1960's some 2.8 million more people moved out of the rural areas and small towns than into them.⁶

A relatively recent change, which has somewhat increased farm numbers, is that many people have moved back to the land. They purchase a small farm or portion thereof. They now live in the country and are interested in horses, gardening, flowers, rabbits and backyard poultry productions. In reality, they are involved in small scale agriculture. This is a vivid contrast to the larger commercial farm operation.

The influx of urban newcomers into rural areas is being viewed as a turnabout in more than numbers alone. Cultural implications are being predicted and expected. It is anticipated that some will be beneficial, while others will be potential problems for rural areas. An assortment of recent case studies conducted in rapidly growing rural areas suggests, for example that newcomers have different conceptions of what is appropriate and desirable for the communities in which they locate than do the existing residents.⁷ Consequently, the traditional leadership may be challenged and new controversy may occur over public issues. On the other hand, benefits brought on by newcomers are evidenced in the enrichment of local cultural resources as young, educated individuals and families bring new ideas and energy to rural growth areas.

A general point made in the studies is that urban-origin newcomers bring a particular type of social organization and set of attitudes to the community. They bring certain needs competencies, resources, and of course, their own ideas about the good life.

What is overlooked in many discussions about the rural renaissance is that fast growing rural areas are also experiencing an influx of newcomers from another source, other rural areas. These newcomers too have views and values not often identical with the traditional values of the area.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEWCOMERS

Urban newcomers are, on the average, younger, better educated; they have higher income and occupational levels and a higher incidence of households with younger children than do the residents. These people have moved from large urban centers for reasons which can be described as being noneconomic, non-employment in nature.

The newcomers from other rural areas, however, are even younger and of a higher socioeconomic status than the urban newcomers. In addition, they have moved to the fast-growing rural areas for job-related reasons.⁸

Other writers suggest another grouping or description of these newcomers to rural areas:⁹

Back-to-the-land Social Isolates - They want to live in at least a semi-isolated area, grow most if not all of their food, and be as independent as possible from community and society. Most of the adults are relatively young, under 35 years of age.

Rural Pragmatists - Generally they blend pragmatic economic and social/political points of view with a desire to share in the presumed amenities of rural or small town life. They include the new store owner who restores a rural aura to a business and the professional who conducts business according to his/her definition

of traditional rural norms. They are often environmentally oriented.

Rural Romanticist - They are middle-aged, urbanites, many are relatively young retirees who are, by local standards, well off. They tend to see glories in rural life that natives, particularly those who live at low economic levels, cannot see. Many rural returnees are included in this group.

TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS

Interstate roads opened new frontiers to development. State and local roads were often impassable in winter and spring not many years ago; but now generally daily travel from remote areas is possible. This mobility made it possible to shop in nearby metropolitan areas and to attend cultural and sporting events. Improved roads have eliminated the isolation aspect of rural living. Daily delivery services are also available in many rural areas. Farmers, businesses and industry now purchase and sell products over a wider geographic areas.

SCHOOLS

The consolidated schools provided opportunity for interchange and acquaintance over a larger geographic area. They do provide broader selection of courses and teachers. Improved school library facilities have been developed. With these larger schools, however, (parents) do not have the

close acquaintance and personal ties to teachers and school systems. They are not fully aware of problems, needs, concerns and opportunities in elementary and secondary education.

HOUSING

Rural housing is now little different than urban housing. Central heating and cooling systems have improved. The mobile home has changed the rural countryside and is the only affordable home for many. Contamination of individual water supplies is a problem in some areas and poor water (high iron-sulfur-acid) is prevalent too.

RURAL CRIME

Crime is no longer just an urban problem. The interstate roads make quick access to remote areas possible. Rural buildings have been built to keep out the weather, not people. A spokesman for the American Farm Bureau Federation estimated that rural crime costs the American farmer one billion dollars annually.¹⁰

EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRY

Certainly strip mining activities have changed the rural countryside in many ways. Environmental issues and roads are two of the concerns. A renewed development is gas and oil exploration. The economic and environmental impact is of interest to rural citizens, including farmers.

These and other external influences discussed above have drastically altered the traditional life-style and community interaction patterns of rural people.

The rural turnabout in development has created several problems for agriculture. Farmers now need to deal daily with their rural non-farm neighbors on odor, noise and environmental issues that may be associated with the farm business. We see land debates on issues such as solid waste and sewage disposal.

In recent years we have seen the development of recreational areas, camping areas and generally a greater influx of vacationers, tourists and hunters. Thus, we witness a diversion of land to non-agricultural uses.

Local governments were traditionally considered caretakers of limited number of needs, such as roads, schools, law enforcement and fire protection. The idea that local, state and federal governments should take a major hand in managing a broader range of human and environmental resources is difficult for many rural people to accept.¹¹

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