

RURAL SOCIETY IN AMERICA: THE 1980'S AND BEYOND

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Rural America today finds itself in a critical transition period. It could be said that perhaps "rural" society is coming of age. However, the rural communities in this country are not playing catch up. Instead, rural communities and those who live in them are setting the pace and leading the way. This may not fit the old stereotypes of rural America as we have known it in our lifetime; but nevertheless, the changes are occurring.

To this, you might respond with one word "How?" And my response is, "In so many fundamental ways that are exciting and challenging, let it be said at the outset that despite what the media would lead us to believe, Rural America is alive in 1985." Rural America is not dead nor is it dying, rather it is undergoing yet another critical "revolution." This is not the first revolution nor will it be the last.

Those who saw hand labor replaced by the McCormick reaper or the John Deere plow of the mid-nineteenth century, witnessed the first rural revolution. Later in that same century, further mechanization replaced still more tedious tasks.

In our own century, we have witnessed the substitution of tractors for horses, electricity for kerosene lamps, and technology for human labor.

And now we stand on the edge of another revolution -- high technology and its application not only to farming but to other sectors of the rural community as well.

The first thing we must do is dispel the myth of the country bumpkin. No longer will images such as the "Dukes of Hazzard", "Green Acres", or the "Beverly Hillbillies" be acceptable in portraying the rural lifestyle. In the past, rural people have been brought into the arena of urban America much more than urban people have been brought into the arena of rural America. The challenge before us is to turn this around and to be proud of our rich rural heritage. It is time that the national media be made aware of the diversity and vitality of rural people and their communities. It is time to change the Grant Wood "American Gothic" image.

In the past, the term rural would bring to mind images of big white farm houses, pristine surroundings and an idyllic lifestyle. This is the myth we need to dispel. Our typical rural communities of the past and realistically for the future will remain quite constant. These include farming communities of the Midwest, coastal fishing communities of the Northeast, logging camps in the Northwest, coalmining towns in Appalachia, and cow towns in the Southwest. Yet within these long established communities we are beginning to witness a diversification of the economic base beyond farming or other natural resources extractive industries.

These communities in the future may also include a center for a service industry such as an insurance company,

a collective group of professionals linked to urban workplaces via computer terminals and modems, or even a high technology center where component parts, silicon chips, or computer software are produced.

Creativity and innovation on the part of rural entrepreneurs will transform the economic and social base of rural America. Yet there is one catch to all of this--rural communities will continue to be distinctive and organizationally different from urban America.

At first, these appear to be two mutually exclusive events--how can change occur and yet remain constant? Quite simply no matter how many non-farmers move into a community, the rural community's largest industry has been and will always remain agriculture. It is precisely the changes in agriculture which have allowed for the change in rural communities.

Agriculture, in its broadest sense, has always been and will continue to be the base from which all other economic endeavors have evolved. The basic needs of all people--food, fiber, and shelter--are extracted from the earth. As we migrated to urban centers and concrete walkways many of us lost the sense of rootedness in the land and what it produces. Those who live and work in rural communities have not lost this rootedness. Daily they are surrounded with the realities of food or energy production. The community tends to revolve in the cycle of the seasons.

This in turn has had and will continue to have a profound effect on those who live there. Whether or not you are

engaged directly in agricultural production, your life in a rural community follows much the same cyclical nature.

Before 1970 the rural communities in this country experienced a continual decline. There was no reason to believe that the decline would not continue throughout the 1970's. Then, as the census data from 1970 became available along with the mid-decade update, Calvin Beale, a demographer from the United States Department of Agriculture, discovered an unprecedented change. For the first time rural counties were growing at a higher rate than were the urban centers. This phenomenon came to be known by several popularly used terms--"Rural Renaissance" and "Rural Turnaround" being the most widely used. Between 1970 and 1980 rural counties gained nearly 4.8 million new residents. Many counties, in fact the majority of those which increased population, were for the first time beyond the urban fringe communities. This turnaround came to be a significant factor for two reasons. First, vast, depressed, sparsely settled rural areas experienced not only population growth which has brought jobs, additional commercial services, diversification but, in general, an overall improvement in the quality of life.

Second, the myth that was once held sacred, that growth could only occur through expansion of urbanization, was dispelled. The major modern theories of social economic development were to be reassessed. One no longer needed a densely populated area in order to ensure economic growth. The movement of the in-migrants impacted all sectors of the rural community much more than natural increase through

births. Demand for jobs increased, new transportation systems were needed, public services, health care facilities, and entertainment demands multiplied. The only industry that did not witness growth in actual numbers, however, was agriculture. This in-migration did not signify a resurgence in the number of people in the on-farm population. As a matter of fact this sector continued to decline at an almost steady rate.

Those who moved to rural America were mostly younger, with higher occupational statuses and more years of formal education. There was as well a great influx of younger retirees looking for places in the country after long careers in urban areas. Many of the new residents were affluent and all were far more cosmopolitan than the native rural resident. Rural people were no longer synonymous with the farm population. Yet today, ten years after this phenomenon occurred, the quaint and provincial image of the rural population persists, when in fact diversity and complexity may be better descriptors of rural communities.

While the number and variety of economic options have increased, rural America remains persistent in differing from urban America. Many policymakers believe that rural America no longer needs special attention. After all, with the coming of modern transportation systems, rapid communication, mass media, and internal migration, America has become one homogeneous society, hasn't it? This in fact is false, and it is time to speak up that watered down urban models will no longer be acceptable for rural society. The differences

between urban and rural must be explicitly recognized if we are to truly serve rural America.

Rural America is made up of ecological, occupational and sociocultural characteristics that differ from urban America. Ecologically rural communities have been long settled and have remained relatively geographically and socially isolated from other segments of society.

Occupationally, rural is no longer synonymous with agricultural, yet a high percentage of the workforce is involved in agricultural or natural resources related occupations. Examples of such are businesses specializing in supplying firewood, truck farms which supply fresh vegetables to local supermarkets, artisans who rely on the natural environment for their crafts, and those involved in extractive industries such as lumbering and fisheries. Tourism likewise constitutes a large segment of rural communities and requires multiple occupations in the natural environment. Even if professionals have moved to rural areas, many are involved with producing something from the land either out of necessity or for therapeutic reasons.

Finally, the predominance of personal, face-to-face relationships among similar people marks the sociocultural aspect of the community. While rural culture is impacted by the larger American culture, there persists a comparative slowness in altering the rural heritage.

Admittedly, even using the three criteria--ecological, occupational, and sociocultural--rural and urban do not form entirely distinct or separate subpopulations. But there are

still important differences. In rural America:

- \*the ratio of males to females is higher
- \*incomes are lower
- \*proportionately more families are in poverty
- \*women are less likely to be employed outside the home  
full-time
- \*native-born adult residents have less formal schooling
- \*elderly are disproportionately represented.

Likewise there continue to exist many disadvantages in the quality and quantity of many public services in rural communities. These disadvantages stem largely from the small, scattered populations that contribute to a high cost per person of providing services. These services include, fire and police protection, education, religious institutions, transportation facilities, welfare services, health care, and available, safe water supply.

Beyond demographic and service delivery differences there also remain distinctions between rural and urban outlooks. While the influx of new residents has been a fairly smooth transition, it is the differences in outlooks that have caused the greatest clash between old and new residents. The values, beliefs, attitudes, and goals of the rural resident are markedly different from those of urban Americans. Rural communities tend to be more traditional in moral orientation, less accepting of minority rights, more ideologically religious and conservative, more likely to oppose the intervention of federal or state governments, and are

genuinely more satisfied with their present lifestyle.

Just as there are differences among rural communities so to are there differences among rural residents. The rural population does not present a single, united, or undifferentiated position on any characteristic. Often the distinction depends on the degree of ecological or occupational rurality. Other factors such as age, income, education, sex, race, and ethnicity have also been shown to relate to behavioral differences. Still, geographic subcultures of rural can also enter into the picture. For example in the agriculture sector, tobacco farmers in the Deep South differ from the Midwest corn grower, who differs from the Northeastern dairyman and the West Coast fruit farmer. At the present time there is a lack of reliable national survey data for rural inhabitants, and therefore, it is difficult to state with any certainty that there are persistent differences between the value systems of long term rural residents and new rural residents.

With all of this then as background let us now take a look at the future and what it might hold for rural America. As it was stated earlier, rural America is in the position to lead the way in the areas of high and bio-technology developments of the future. Borrowing a term from the 1960's--rural America stands on the threshold of a "new frontier" of change and development in rural America.

Rural society's economic base is now linked to the most progressive parts of the national and international economy. The rural economy is in actuality an adjunct to metropolitan

production rather than the distant supplier of materials, workers, and life-styles.

Of the areas that are seen to have the greatest growth rates, high technology and the service sector lead the way. Telecommunications, satellite technology, and computers will become as familiar in rural America as silos and windmills. This expansion of high technology will also reinforce the present trends in rural employment. First, the decline of agriculture as the dominant employer in all regions of the country. Second, the growth of small manufacturing companies in rural communities, many related directly to high tech. And finally, the expansion of the service industry which employs nearly 60% of the rural labor force. This expansion of the service sector will provide in many instances the new basis for the growing rural economy.

To get a clear picture of this growth let us look at some facts and figures.

Professional service industry employment grew 43.1 percent from 1970-1977. This included: trucking, insurance, wholesale trade, construction, and computer services.

According to a study conducted by Calvin Beale at the USDA: 22.9 percent of recent in-migrants are employed in professional services. Only 17.0 percent of old-time residents are professionals; 21.3 percent of migrants are employed in trade; 18.1 percent are employed in manufacturing.

Overall, newcomers equalled or exceeded old-timers in proportion of employment in all fields except manufacturing,

agriculture, and transportation.

Most of the attractiveness of the rural communities in the 1970's, 80's and beyond is directly linked to the attractiveness of the interstate highway system, expanded rural electrification, improved rural schools, available public services, higher education opportunities, and expanded regional planning.

How then can agencies begin to develop a strategy to serve this heterogeneous population called rural America? How can parameters be set so that realistic goals can be met? How can we categorize the different types of rural growth communities in order to better serve the varying constituencies?

Throughout my remarks today, I have alluded to the fact that rural communities are not all alike and are as clearly differentiated as urban neighborhoods. Rural growth has created a number of interdependent types of communities that are linked in regional networks throughout the nation. As planners of a service to rural communities you are probably aware of each of these "types". Let us look at these and then explore the linkages that affect not only the individual communities but also those rural residents that live in the open country surrounding these communities.

#### Government-Trade Communities

These communities are the prototypical service communities. Usually larger than county seats these communities operate as centers of trade and government services. This is where you would find regional shopping centers as well as central offices for social services.

### University-Professional Communities

Sometimes referred to as "town and gown" these communities are usually the location of a state college or university. Often this type of community serves as the center of technological development for the rural community and much of the economy is based on the expertise housed at the educational institution. Of benefit to the entire community, healthcare facilities are usually exemplary as compared to other rural communities.

### Industry Dominated Communities

In these communities one will find large manufacturing or office complexes for the rural employees. The incentives to build in rural communities include a reliable labor force, the ability (through non-union shops) to pay lower wages, and tax considerations. In the past these were more traditional industries but now one can find insurance companies and high tech businesses located in rural towns.

### Tourism Communities

These communities have three distinctive constituencies: first, the native rural resident who supplements other income by working in a position related to tourism, often at a minimum wage; second, the tourist who, for perhaps two weeks out of the year, resides in the community; and third, the professional with portable skills and the resources to afford the high cost of a tourist setting who moved to the rural community permanently. Examples of such communities include Stowe, Vermont; Mendocino, California; Bar Harbor, Maine, and the list could go on and on. A remote-located

computer programmer would be a typical professional one would find in a tourist community as a year-round resident.

#### Retirement Communities

The 1970's also marked a change in the retirement patterns of American workers. For the first time large numbers of the population were taking early retirement. This group could usually afford to move to rural communities that had been planned with their special needs in mind. Areas in northern Wisconsin, Florida, California, the Missouri Ozarks, and Arizona come to mind. In these communities the retired usually constitute about half of the population while the other half provide services to them.

#### Resource-Based Boom Towns

One will find these communities primarily on the eastern slope of the Rockies, in Appalachia, in oil-rich parts of the South, and in parts of the Big Sky country of Wyoming and Montana. Wherever extractive industries such as oil, mining, strip-mining, or lumbering can be found, you will also find boom towns.

Just contemplating the great diversity of these different types of communities it should become clear that every educational and occupational variation is represented--minorities, poor as well as affluent, men and women, young and elderly, old-timer and new resident. And this is just for the growing communities. Yet not all rural counties saw growth during the 1970's and 80's.

According to census data, 485 rural counties lost population from 1970-1980. Primarily in the Midwest and

South, these communities are still dependent on agriculture, or have declined because of the closing of railroad lines or (as in New England) the closing of many small factories. These communities are less attractive to new migrants, and the decline creates a cyclical effect of more decline. All of the same constituencies are present, yet the economic slump tends to also create a sociocultural slump of helplessness. These communities in turn become more dependent upon outside help.

This brings us to one more factor confronting rural America today and that is the farm crisis. Earlier I stated that I would be remiss if I did not touch upon this. Having laid the groundwork of the rural community, it is now that I would like to address this issue.

First, please do not tune-out as is often the case when this topic is discussed. At the outset it must be remembered that the farm crisis is not just the farmers' problem, it is everyone's problem--for we all eat. What is at stake is a sustainable food production system in this country. And the loss of family farms not only jeopardizes that food supply system, but also it threatens the very fabric of our rural communities. As stated before, agriculture, while employing 2.7 percent of the population, is still the largest industry in the rural community. As farmers and their families are displaced from the land, the economic structure of the entire community is affected. For every six farmers that go out of business, one business on Main Street will also be boarded up. Families will move away. Schools will be closed. Even

churches will stand empty. And a community, once lost, will be gone forever. While newcomers have brought new occupations, no one is quite sure just what will happen if the economic base of the community is undermined by the loss of agriculture. The corporation who will eventually own the land will have total vertical integration from planting to marketing; they will come to raise the crop and will take the profit far from the local community and its institutions. The rural community will be gone. So as you can see, what is the farmer's problem today will become yours and mine in the near future.

Rural communities today are marked by increased divorces; women are working full-time. Children are experiencing the same levels of stress and anxiety as their parents; drug and alcohol dependency is growing. Displaced farmers and businessmen are seeking retraining for other jobs. School enrollment is declining. And in general, the mood is bleak. By 1990 we will have lost nearly 2/3 of the farmers that were present in 1980. Just how this will affect rural America no one really knows. But just a few facts from a recent study completed in Missouri by Dr. William Heffernan. This study is representative of only one situation in the country, but I am sure the enormity of the problem will become apparent:

Ninety-seven percent of the men and 100 percent of the women interviewed indicated they became depressed.

Over 50 percent of the men and 72 percent of the women still experience depression.

Two-thirds reported "withdrawing from family and friends."

Three-fourths of the men and 69 percent of the women reported experiencing feelings of worthlessness. Children's school grades went down.

Adolescent children became more withdrawn and bitter over diminished social status and being forced to move and change schools. And the list could go on.

With the private sector deteriorating, it is not long before the public sector is affected--declining property values and tax bases, and shrinking public revenues. As a result, county services are being cut at a time when there is increasing need for them.

#### Conclusion

In a short period of time I have given you a great deal of information. Some of it you may have heard before, while some information may be new. All will impact your jobs as people who work with rural communities.

With the plethora of information in the media about the "rural renaissance" the general public is being informed, at least by implication, that the welfare of many rural communities is greatly improving. While, more recently, the media has proclaimed the farm crisis as the end of rural America. Both images are in their own way correct, but to the general public confusing. Perhaps it can be said this way, "Rural America is not dead, but everything in the countryside is not O.K.!"

The media would have us believe that there is a mass exodus occurring from rural America, and that the last one out will close the door and shut off the lights. This is hardly

the situation. Yet if nothing is done to offset this image, we may well find any and all funding for rural projects being discontinued.

Whatever shape agricultural industry takes as it moves through the current transition period, there will still remain rural communities of some sort to serve. Just how we can predict how this will be done may be an exercise in crystal ball gazing until new data is collected. But we must not stop the creative energies that have brought all of us to work with rural people.

There are three things all of us can do through this uncertain time period:

1. Continue to be optimistic. Doom, gloom, and woe-is-me will not solve anything. Look for the positive aspects that rural living and serving rural communities can offer to others in your profession! "Rural" has some very exciting things happening.

2. Continue to be creative. You will have an opportunity at this conference to share ideas with your colleagues from all regions of this country. Take advantage of this opportunity. Creative ideas will flow here that you as an individual may never have thought to try.

3. Continue to be caring. I am convinced that those who choose to work with a rural constituency really care about people. Why else would we travel for miles and miles to serve such small numbers? As professionals in the information business you have an exciting future ahead of you in rural communities. Bringing not only books but many of the

new technologies to rural communities, you have the opportunity to profoundly affect the lives of many men, women, and children who would have no other means of broadening their horizons beyond the rural communities in which they live. Heterogeneity is the new operative word as you look to the future and the service you bring. I thank you for allowing me to share my observations concerning rural America with you today, and wish you success for your time together that it will be both rewarding and revitalizing as you return to your individual states to implement new ideas. I hope you enjoy your brief stay in Columbus and likewise that you might consider returning to rural Ohio, the heart of it all.

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