

# The Value of Rural Life in American Culture

*The image that people have had of rural areas is one largely fashioned by the residents of cities, who have seen the countryside as the often welcome antithesis of urban life. Rural life is no longer the predominant one in America, but its influence is still seen in city parks, suburban yards, and the recreational activities of urban people. Rural values provide stability against the rapid change of modern life.*

## Rural Values

For as long as people have lived in cities, they have seen rural lands as their opposites, primitive yet also unspoiled. The distinction in ancient Rome between *urb* and *rur* cut in two directions, praising urban refinement yet admitting that rural life was free of crime and disease, all too common in cities. Countryside is an urban idea, reflecting both pride and anxiety about the city's status. That ambivalence sustains the tradition of pastoralism, an image of rural bounty and innocence projected by urban artists. Pastoralism accelerates in periods of rapid urban growth, as societies that invest heavily in progress also sentimentalize "primitive" rural ways.

The language Americans use to describe rural land employs a double standard, negative and positive. Undeveloped land is uncivilized, inferior because it occupies a low rank in commodity production. This value afflicts low-population regions, for those empty lands produce raw materials—food, fibers, minerals—that supply just 3 percent of the gross national product. Yet countryside is a cultural resource, for its emptiness makes it clean and unspoiled, embodying simple, traditional, and authentic folkways. However rough-mannered a rural American may be, that style is not seen as counterfeit or copied, but genuine and trustworthy.

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**“Civilization does not lie in a greater or lesser degree of refinement, but in an awareness shared by a whole people.”**

—Albert Camus

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American culture thus embodies a central paradox: in a Nation dominated by urban people, our prevailing values derive from rural traditions. Today's city gardens, parks, and arboretums emulate country landscapes. Suburban streets are lined with copies of colonial farmsteads, furnished with rustic cottage furniture. Popular music is a collage of Delta blues, Appalachian ballads, and Western swing, all styles born in rural areas. Candidates for national office make tours of farms and small towns, and the urban votes follow. At times the affection for rural life defies reason, as when we consult *The Farmer's Almanac* for weather forecasts. Progress only accelerates this nostalgia, for every step toward change brings a strong counterthrust for permanence and continuity, to stem the fears of cultural loss.

## New World

These factors have long influenced the American past, which covers some 50,000 years of emigration and settlement by people from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Earliest to arrive were the Amerindians, who in time spread north and south across two continents and built a population of 75 million, divided into hundreds of language and tribal groups. These aboriginals had varied success, depending

on their regions and social organizations. Small bands and tribes led subsistence lives, ordered by the seasons, and they dwelled in nomadic camps or rude villages. Nations like the Mayans and Pueblos advanced to high levels of literacy and built great cities, rivaling the capitals of Greece and Rome. Whatever their fortunes, many Amerindians saw their homelands as sacred places, “the center of the world” in the words of Navajo tradition, and they used the arts of dance, song, or story to preserve customs and teach their young.

Those conditions changed after contact with Europeans, first in the 11th century A.D., when Vikings came ashore at Newfoundland to set up forts. That act of development, clearing natural sites to “improve” them, marked a new stage of history, invasion for profit. After 1500, the explorers and settlers of North America sought wealth for European empires. To such entrepreneurs, the “New World” was less a home than a warehouse, storing raw materials for Europe to extract and refine. Their attitude was imperialist, yet hardly new: Mayan and Aztec empires had ruled over weaker domains, while Occidentals had followed an imperial course some 4,000 years, after Aryans left India and began migrating west. Dominion is the apparent DNA of civilization, a code instructing nations with high birth rates to seek larger areas of terrain. New World plants and animals also tell that story, for every species the Europeans called “native” was migratory, arriving from elsewhere and, through evolutionary succession, managing to survive and prosper.

### Colonies

Using the literacy and technology they inherited from Mediterranean cultures, Europeans wrote the history of North America after 1500. Early values associated with rural and urban lands arose during two centuries of building agrarian colonies, which evolved from simple farms and villages into distinctive land-use practices and policies that differed from region to region. At first, most colonial settlements lay along seacoasts and rivers, owing to the scarcity of interior trails or roads. While the French and Spanish made early advances west and southwest, the largest occupations were on the eastern seaboard and formed three distinctive cultural zones, each affected by their natural environments.

In New England, settlers of British descent lived in a glaciated landscape of rocky upland and sandy outwash plain, dominated by a marine climate of stark seasonal changes, from winter freeze to summer heat. To survive in this region took faith and determination, fostered by a Puritan theology that regarded New England, as William Bradford wrote, as “a city upon a hill,” a model God had set for the world to admire and follow. The greatest prosperity came from fishery and maritime industries, while New England farms were small, labor-intensive home-

steads within a day’s journey of nearby towns. Farm life was necessarily self-reliant and thrifty, focused on home and field; while towns offered public structures for exchange, whether at the commons, a central pasture and marketplace, or in the meeting places of churches and shops. This basic village model later followed New Englanders who settled the Nation’s northern latitudes across the Midwest and Northwest.

In the Mid-Atlantic, a region extending from New York to Maryland, settlers of mixed northern European origin lived on variegated land, ranging from forested Appalachian ridges to marshy Tidewater lowlands. The fertile soil and moderate climate favored great biodiversity and also profitable agriculture. Religious and political tolerance, invoked by Quakers, Roman Catholics in Maryland, and other Protestant dissenters, created the most polyglot, hybridized colonial culture, distributed in small farms and villages of tightly clustered brick or stone structures. While heterogeneity prevented the Mid-Atlantic from evolving a distinctive politics or literature, centrality made it the cradle of Revolution, a meeting place where colonies mediated their differences. As J. Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur noted in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), the model for American culture became agrarian independence:

Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself.

Later the region became a staging ground for Western migration, providing a gateway via rivers and mountain gaps into the central Midwest, where farms and towns took on a familiar mid-Atlantic character.

The South developed apart from other regions, owing to its many natural barriers: a long, low coast, drained by few navigable rivers; a wide band of piedmont soil, mostly thick clay; and in the interior, a forbidding maze of mountain ridges and hollows. Lying in the humid subtropics, these colonies had small populations, a long growing season, and little arable terrain. The most profitable crops—tobacco, rice, and cotton—depended on importing African slave labor to plant and harvest. While slavery initially yielded wealth to the southern colonies, its White population remained widely scattered and culturally isolated. More than any other region, the South remained rural and undeveloped, and it paid a price for this conservative heritage. Thomas Jefferson embodied that legacy, for while he envisioned America as a vast republic of independent farmers, at his mid-Virginia

estate he owned many slaves and never recognized their right to equality.

### Frontier

These three cultures defined much of America's early history and ideology governing the use of land. During the century leading up to Revolution, settlers occupied coastal areas and accepted their dependent status in trade, producing raw materials for export and importing finished goods from the mother country. Intercolonial trade improved profits and strengthened regional alliances, leading eventually to a united rebellion. After independence, a liberated nation sought rapid development by expanding its interior lands and opening them to new settlers. By offering land grants to war veterans, buying new domains from France and Spain, and forcibly exiling native tribes to the West, the Federal Government redefined America's frontier and also the new importance of central policy in land acquisition and distribution. Previously a matter of colonial enterprise, buying and clearing land now became a Federal role defined by constitutional powers.

Americans responded to these changes by pouring in large numbers across the Appalachians into the Ohio Valley and central prairie. Although this rolling, well-drained soil was suited to farming, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted in *Democracy in America* (1838) that the expanding country would develop new enterprises. Agriculture was too slow and stable, not suited to a rising middle class:

... democracy not only swells the number of working-men, but leads men to prefer one kind of labor to another; and while it diverts them from agriculture, it encourages their tastes for commerce and manufactures.

Federal land policy fulfilled that prophecy by authorizing western surveys and land sales. In 1830, surveying teams began to map and number territory before settlement, selling the allotments through Federal land offices. These surveys followed the rectangular, English-mile scheme of townships laid out in 6-by-6 mile units, 36 sections of a square mile each, or 640 acres. To provide access, public roads were aligned along the section and half-section lines. With planned offsets to allow for the earth's curve, surveyors constructed property across great linear distances, producing an exact geometry for fields and fences to follow. Henry Thoreau, a New England surveyor and abolitionist, took a dim view of western expansion: in *Walden* (1854) he argued that Americans were far too materialistic:

My neighbors tell me of their adventures with famous gentlemen and ladies, what notabilities they met at the dinner-table; but I am no more interested in such things than in the contents of the Daily Times. The interest and the conversation are about costume and manners chiefly; but a goose is a goose still, dress it as you will. They tell me of California and Texas, of England and the Indies, of the Hon. Mr. — of Georgia or of Massachusetts, all transient

and fleeting phenomena, till I am ready to leap from their courtyard like the Mameluke bey. I delight to come to my bearings— not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may—not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by.

But few heard this call in the era of Civil War, fought in part to determine if the Western lands would be slave or free. The Homestead Act signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 anticipated a Union victory, by donating quarter-sections of land to citizens willing to occupy and develop their claims for at least 5 years. After 1865, that policy populated much of the fertile, rolling prairie and plains, but beyond the 100th meridian, little of the dry, shortgrass country was suitable for intensive grazing or plowing. Transcontinental railroads encouraged homesteading in those marginal lands, and at the same time built up and determined the location of urban centers. Towns that were railway stops prospered, while others barely survived. By linking western farms and ranches to markets in Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago, railroads swelled those cities and assured the dominance of eastern financiers over most of the continent. During two decades of transition (1880-1900), rural areas waned in importance while urban areas steadily gained population, wealth, and political power. Industrial production doubled in that period, converting western minerals into gold, iron, and steel; building inventions that enhanced daily life; and creating in cities an affluence quite beyond the means of most rural areas. The rural zones became a second colonial America, exporting resources in exchange for goods and services.

### Nation

During the 1890's, several events guaranteed that America would become a predominantly urban nation. In 1892, Oklahoma staged the last open land rush, an event that symbolically closed the western frontier and spurred all territories to seek statehood. In 1893, a worldwide financial panic ruined fortunes and raised high levels of debt, especially for western farmers held to a strict gold standard. Inspired by William Jennings Bryan's "cross of gold" oratory, Democrats campaigned for adopting inflationary silver to provide rural relief. But the Nation was no longer agrarian: Bryan led his party to defeat in three elections. From 1880 to 1900, the urban population rose from 28 to 40 percent of the whole, swelled by some 9 million European refugees who worked for low factory wages. As further evidence of rising urban influence, in 1896, the Postal Service began to send mail directly to farm families via Rural Free Delivery. This improvement, long sought by the National Grange, was resisted by rural merchants who feared competition from mail-order companies. The later creation of Parcel Post allowed those vendors to reach rural markets with urban fashions and appliances.

Census after census confirmed that Americans were moving to towns and cities. After 1890, the countryside emptied rapidly, especially across the South as mechanized agriculture began to displace Black and White tenant farmers, forcing them to abandon subsistence lives and migrate to wage-earning, often in factories. By the early 1900's, most American writers lived in cities, where they had trained as journalists—a breed with tough, urbanized values. In *Maggie* (1896) and *Sister Carrie* (1900), Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser depicted young women as sexually defamed by city life, while such authors as Jacob Riis, *The Battle with the Slums* (1902), Lincoln Steffens, *Shame of the Cities* (1904), and Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906), bluntly described urban-industrial squalor. These “muckrakers” agreed with Marxist and Darwinian theory, that life is determined by competitive material struggle. Most books of this era found little innocence in rural settings. Fiction by Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), and Frank Norris, *The Octopus* (1901), portrayed farmers as tiny, pathetic figures pitted against harsh land and climate, snared in the coils of market or railroad monopolies. Americans were no longer a Nation of free, republican farmers; now they were marooned in a vast, indifferent landscape.

### Mass Society

The census of 1900 marked an apogee for rural America, when a plurality of citizens still lived on isolated homesteads, connected to small towns by unimproved roads. Life in the villages and outlying districts was strongly tied to the cycles of farm work, making the yearly round of activity simple, uniform, and traditional. Relations in families were personal and kin-bound, while social activity was largely defined by churches, schools, or granges. On infrequent occasions—a county fair, political rally, or camp revival—people came together in mass meetings. The structure of rural society remained stable even if people moved away. As in their singing of church hymns, the “lining out” call of one voice brought the comforting response of many.

Rural cultures were strong when stable, but they contributed to changes in population and migration over the next two decades. Farm families tended to have high birthrates to produce enough labor, yet when sons came of age they often declined to farm or acquire land and so migrated to cities. Mechanical tractors and combines also displaced workers from the countryside. Rural populations aged and diminished until, in 1920, the census reported that urban populations exceeded 50 percent, as America evolved into a mass industrial society. The literary image of rural life changed into dark introspection on death and failure, as seen in the poems of Robert Frost, *North of Boston* (1914), Edgar Lee Masters, *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), and Carl Sandburg, *Corn-Huskers* (1918); or in the early prairie novels of Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

(1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918). Few of these works depicted the realities of farming in 1915, but memories of 40 years earlier: homesteads, small towns, railroads. To writers of this era, rural life was a cultural legacy, fading into national mythology.

After 1920, that view became more frankly experimental, as writers explored Freudian themes of sexual obsession in both city and countryside. In *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Sherwood Anderson populated his fictional rural village with dreamers and ravers, people compelled by sexual drives and thwarted by repressive neuroses. To Ernest Hemingway, the woods and streams of northern Michigan became havens for a convalescing war veteran, in search of childhood security. “Big Two-Hearted River,” published in *In Our Time* (1924), enacts the state of psychological repression by never alluding to a war injury—yet every moment of camping or fishing threatens to awake the hero's violent memories. The countryside was not safe but broken, its abandoned farms and milltowns a portent of oncoming national failure.

The Great Depression only intensified that pessimism, despite the best efforts of the New Deal to save farm life through programs of modernization. The Rural Electrification Administration introduced rural electrification in 1935 to improve farm life and slow migration to urban centers. Yet after 98 percent of American farms had electrical lights, well pumps, and radios, those changes only increased production and automation, and the out-migration continued. The Depression that struck industrial cities in the 1930's was old news in the rural districts. From 1910 on, American agriculture had experienced severe shocks, jolted by wartime overproduction, prolonged drought, and the arrival of tractors. Those changes ended the Southern land tenancy system and forced millions of farm workers to migrate to the Far West. Popular literature focused on rural rather than urban depression, and mainly on agricultural collapse in the South. Since the Civil War, that region had suffered 70 years of economic stagnancy, and the image of its rural decay became firmly etched in the novels of William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and John Steinbeck.

Faulkner and Steinbeck created two controversial images of modern rural life, working from opposite visions of history. Faulkner's 14 novels and many stories (1929-62) about a mythical “Yoknapatawpha” present a conservative saga, in which the landed gentry of northern Mississippi decline through moral bankruptcy, the old wages of slavery, while poor Whites rise as parvenu merchants, the new possessors of capital. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) Steinbeck posed a Marxist analysis of the Depression, describing poor White sharecroppers who migrated from the Cotton Belt to the Central Valley of California, where they fall victims to the fascist practices

of corporate agriculture. Although a gigantic bestseller, his book drew fire from critics on both the political left and right. Yet the novel is historically significant because it is the last major popular book to treat the working lives of American farmers.

For most of the 20th century, urban life has dominated American culture, providing it with industry, commerce, and arts through high-density population centers, which are highly complex social structures. In cities, life intermingles and yet is more hierarchical; its diversity comes not just from interaction but also specialization; and individuals often find themselves playing anonymous roles within corporate walls, their contacts with supervisors kept formal and impersonal because status may change rapidly. Urban sites are crowded: today 75 percent of America's population occupies 2 percent of its land mass. Cities grow exponentially, with little coherent planning. Most cities come into being as ports, funneling materials and products between markets, so they must exist along transportation corridors: the coasts, rivers, canals, roads, railways, and airports that provide access to elsewhere. The city is not self-reliant but dependent, and it can readily decline as its industries and population mature. When tax revenues decline, so do public improvements, leading toward stasis or the decay of slums.

### Suburbia

As urban and international problems intensified after 1940, most writers ignored rural areas. Wars fought on international fronts, the horrors of genocidal and nuclear destruction, spread a pall across these decades, now glumly identified as postmodern. In literature of the era, long silent and ignored groups of Americans—women, blacks, ethnics, homosexuals—attacked the forces that denied them identity. The nameless black hero of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) capitulates racial history, migrating from rural South to urban North, where he is still treated as a cipher. Rootless and transient, other nomads of a Nuclear Age reject politics, religion, or any ideology that presumes a common social contract. Angry and disillusioned descendants of Puritan stock, the characters of Lillian Hellman, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, John Updike, and Thomas Pynchon live in paranoid worlds, fractured by ignorant bias. In the postmodern call for a multicultural America, people affirm difference, not similarity. They know who but not *where* they are, having lost the old core of identity, a strong sense of regional and social place.

Although ignored in postmodern literature, rural land is still there, forming a panoramic backdrop for the continental journeys of Jack Kerouac, Robert Pirzig, Joan

Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Leslie Silko, whose counterculture heroes compulsively take to the road in frenzied replays of the old Westering history—and of their pastoral ancestors, dressed in native and rancher costume. Few note that the West has become a toxic waste dump and nuclear arms range, studded with abandoned family farms. In *The Nine Nations of North America* (1981), Joel Garreau calls that region “The Empty Quarter,” a barren interval lying between the two coasts, merely a background to the figure of society.

The most recent phase in this story has moved in a new direction, as inner cities decline and around them grows the “edge city” of suburbia. Only seven decades after cities rose to the fore, the 1990 census revealed that suburban populations now exceed 50 percent, the other half split almost evenly between urban and rural sites. American rural life has drastically changed: 90 percent of its population now earn salaried incomes, often in urban locations. The 10 percent who still produce resources are stunningly efficient, generating 20 percent of the world's coal, copper, and oil; 10 percent of its wheat, 20 percent of its meat, and 50 percent of its corn. Those figures reflect the activity of large commercial farms, not single families. The reality of American rural life no longer favors that old agrarian dream.

Even so, an enduring pastoralism still shapes our culture: it appears in city parks and suburban gardens, second country homes and wilderness treks, Winnebagos on the road and Bambi in the videocassette recorder. As the Nation grows more technological, its economy turns from producing goods to services, and those trends guarantee the tenacity of rural values. Hence, a paradox is clear: faster, busier, more artificial and technological lives will cling ever more strongly to nostalgia. The reason? We seek but also resist change. Wanting to be close to soil is a fable that secures the hopes and fears aroused by history.

Societies that develop deliberately court change, and modernization inevitably brings the crowded, swifter pace of urban life. Rural values monitor that social change, calming fears of progress with the stability of nature. In a world now driven by ideology and information, rural life reminds us of direct physical labor, the pleasure of raking leaves or stacking firewood. Americans cling to that old dream of wild and open land, “the clean, fresh breast of America” that Scott Fitzgerald thought the first explorers saw. The truth: on the land, all people are tenants, paying the rent a while before returning to its dust. Rural values mediate our fear of change; they celebrate what has vanished and could not exist without the diminished here and now.

## For Additional Reading . . .

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