

THE REVIVAL OF RURAL AMERICA

Something is stirring in the American countryside. The signs can be as subtle as a thickening of traffic on two-lane country roads or as startling as the sudden appearance of stark new subdivisions, retirement communities, and trailer parks on mountainsides and pastureland. Shiny, aluminum-clad poultry-processing plants, small factories, and Miracle Miles now dot many rural landscapes. After a century of decline, rural America is experiencing a sudden influx of people and wealth.



Half Dome and Mt. Rincon with California-style Houses (1987), by Roger Brown

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The Rural Rebound

by *Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale*

For most of the 20th century, the story of rural America was an epic of decline. American agriculture prospered, but mechanization and the changing economics of farming drove millions from the land. In the smaller towns and cities, economic opportunity dried up. The rural exodus was a dominant theme in American life and culture, distilled in images of the Okies' flight from the heartland during the 1930s and the great postwar African-American migration from the rural South to Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other northern cities, as well as in novels and films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Last Picture Show*. In a sense, the roots of the decline go even deeper than the current century. In this land that long proudly called itself a nation of farmers, the rate of urban population growth actually began outstripping that in the countryside during the 1820s, the decade when John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson occupied the White House.

Now all of this may be about to change. A variety of powerful social and economic forces appears to be reversing patterns that have prevailed in the United States for a century or longer. They are pushing and pulling significant numbers of Americans into the areas beyond the metropolitan fringes. The first signs of rural turnaround came in the 1970s, when population in the nation's sparsely populated regions suddenly jumped 14 percent, lifted by an unprecedented influx of newcomers and returnees from metropolitan areas. While the news media were quick to herald this "return to the land," some scholars, skeptical that such long-standing trends could be so suddenly altered, dismissed the 1970s experience as a fluke. Then the devastating farm crisis of 1980–86, along with a wave of deindustrialization that hurt



New settlers arrive in Oregon

textiles and other rural industries, put a stop to in-migration. The rural population still managed to grow slightly, but only because rural women bore enough babies to offset out-migration and deaths. In rural America, the 1980s looked a lot like the earlier part of the 20th century: more people moved out than moved in.

But fresh evidence from the 1990s suggests that the 1980s were the anomaly, not the 1970s. Our research shows that between 1990 and 1996, the population of America's rural counties grew by nearly three million, or 5.9 percent. In July 1996, about 53.8 million Americans, or just over 20 percent of the U.S. population, lived in areas officially classified as "nonmetropolitan," here termed *rural*. (To qualify as metropolitan, according to criteria established by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, a county must include an urban area with a population of at least 50,000. Surrounding counties within its orbit, as determined by factors such as commuting patterns, are also classified as metropolitan. There were 837 metropolitan counties in 1993, grouped in more than 300 metropolitan areas.) It turned out that once the unprecedented economic disruptions of the 1980s subsided, growth resumed in the countryside. During the first half of the 1990s, for example, rural areas enjoyed a faster rate of job growth than metropolitan areas did. The rural rebound is for real.

The migrants of the 1990s have settled in the Mountain West, the Upper Great Lakes, the Ozarks, parts of the South, and rural areas of the Northeast. Widespread population losses have occurred only in the Great Plains, the western Corn Belt, and the Mississippi Delta. The counties that have benefited least from the rural revival are generally those that have remained most economically dependent on the two most traditional rural pursuits, farming and mining.

What the United States experienced between 1970 and 1996—and is continuing to experience, according to recently released Census Bureau data—is population “deconcentration.” People are gradually moving away from larger, more densely settled places toward lightly settled areas. This is not simply a reversal. Americans are not returning to farming, nor even in very large numbers to small towns, much as some may dream of it. They are scattering across the landscape in “farmettes,” trailer parks, houses along country roads, and even in subdivisions much like those in suburban America. The new arrivals are a mixed lot: retirees, blue-collar workers seeking jobs in the new factories, “lone eagle” professionals using the new information technologies to conduct business from remote locations, disenchanted urbanites seeking refuge from urban life, and many others. For the most part, they are attracted to rural areas by a desire for what they see as a better way of life. Economic necessity was a powerful factor in the earlier rural exodus. Now economic and technological change is allowing many Americans to choose where they will live.

Early in the 20th century, a clear-sighted observer might have discerned the beginnings of the trend toward suburbanization that would, along with the rural exodus, define so much of national life in the ensuing decades. The emptying out of the countryside, the swelling of the cities, the rise of the suburbs, and the decline of the urban cores as centers of population and economic activity all define important parts of the economic and social history of the 20th century. Will deconcentration prove to be as powerful a force in the next century? A hundred years from now, will we see a nation of people and businesses dispersed across the landscape? It is simply too soon to tell. Nobody can predict how strong or long lasting the current of movement toward rural America will be. Yet no matter how far the current carries and what it may mean for the nation as a whole, it is already plain that rural America itself will, in some important ways, never be the same.

Rural America is a deceptively simple term for a remarkably diverse collection of places and things: vast swaths of plains planted in wheat and corn, auto plants scattered around the outskirts of towns strung along Interstate 75 in Kentucky and Ohio, ultramodern

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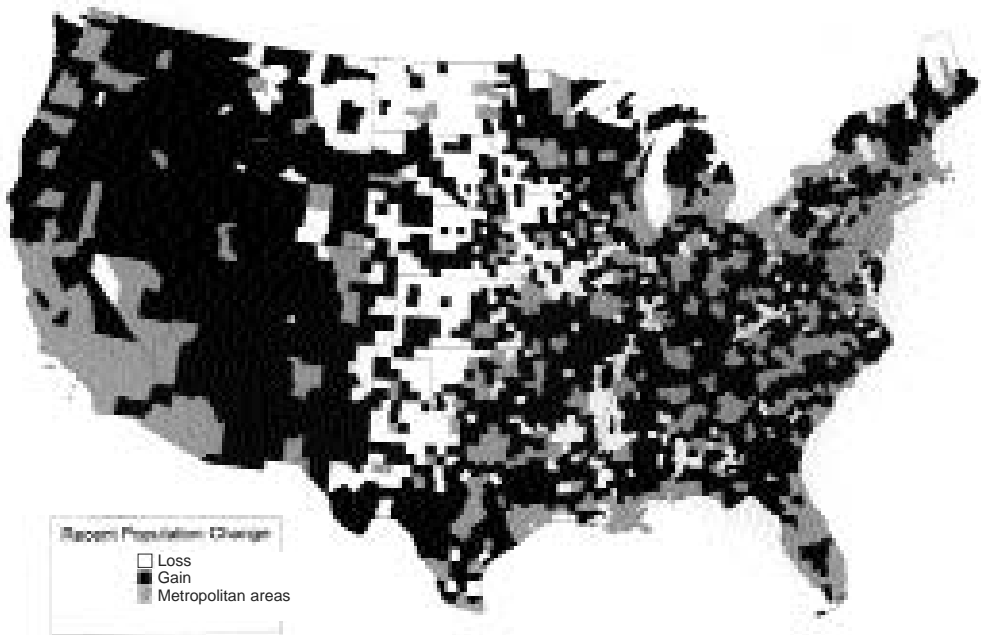


Corporate America is finding new homes in the countryside, especially as executive “lifestyle” preferences are weighed along with economic factors in deciding where to build plants and offices.

catalog distribution centers on former country lanes, small villages on sparkling northern lakes, the cool, mountainous timberland of the Pacific Northwest, and the flat and humid vastness of Florida’s Everglades. Certainly no single county among the 2,304 classified as nonmetropolitan in 1993 has felt the influence of all the powerful forces driving the rural revival. But most of the counties experiencing growth in the 1990s have one very important characteristic in common. Dickinson County, Kansas, is as good a place to look for it as any.

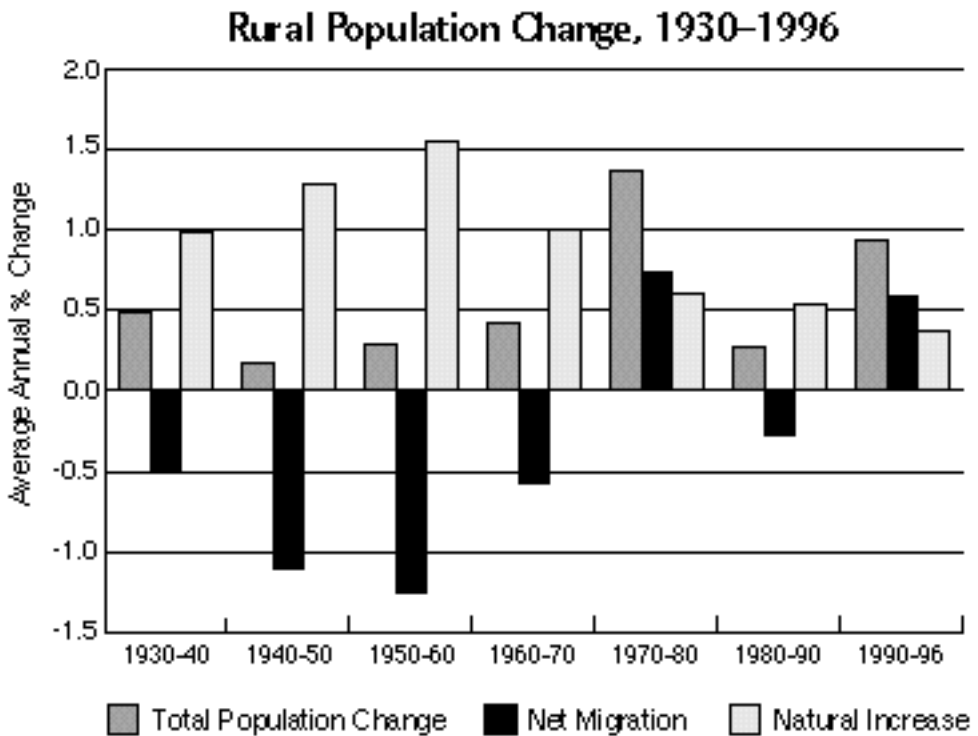
During the 1980s, this Great Plains farming county, with 515,000 acres of wheat, sorghum, and hay, the boyhood home of Dwight D. Eisenhower, was hit harder than most other rural counties by the farm crisis, with its soaring interest rates, overproduction, and falling crop prices. Despite its advantages—a county seat, Abilene, that is a service and retail center with 6,000 people, and an interstate highway that runs right through the county’s middle—Dickinson suffered a six percent population loss during the decade. Yet between 1990 and 1996 the county’s population grew by five percent. What happened? In 1994, the Russell Stover company gave the county an enormous lift when it opened a sizable new candy factory that employs some 600 workers making Whitman’s samplers, pecan delights, and other treats. Land was

Where the Growth Is (Population Change in Rural Areas, 1990–96)



Source: Prepared by the authors from Census Bureau data

The benefits of the rural rebound are distributed unevenly. Places blessed with natural beauty—lakes, mountains, oceanfront—have attracted a disproportionate share of the recent rural migrants. The graph below emphasizes how unusual rural in-migration has been during the 20th century.



Source: Authors' calculations from Census Bureau data

Behind the rural revival is a potent blend of economic, social, and technological forces.

cheap, the work force attractive, and access to I-70 easy. The city, county, and state governments all threw in tax incentives. Workers drawn by jobs at the Stover plant were joined by retirees from surrounding farms and small towns, attracted by the relatively superior diversions, services, and health care that Abilene offers.

What Dickinson and other growing rural counties have in common is net in-migration. Through much of this century, most rural areas that managed to increase their population did so on the strength of relatively high rural birthrates. Farm families and small-town residents simply had more children than their big-city cousins, and enough babies were born to offset the constant departure of working-age people for the bright lights and job opportunities of the cities. But over the last two decades, rural women have been bearing fewer children, as the trends that influenced their urban counterparts—rising levels of education and paid employment outside the home, as well as delayed marriage—have reached into the countryside. The fertility levels of the two groups are now virtually indistinguishable.* The areas that are growing now are doing so chiefly because fewer local people are leaving and more outsiders are choosing to move in.

During the early 1990s, rural America gained 1.8 million inhabitants through in-migration. Between 1990 and 1996, it enjoyed a higher rate of in-migration than the nation's metropolitan areas, 3.6 percent versus 1.8 percent. Only once before in recent memory has that occurred: during the population turnaround of the 1970s. This voluntary movement of people is the great unifying factor behind the revival of rural America during the past quarter-century.

Driving the revival is a potent blend of economic, social, and technological forces. Improvements in communications technology and transportation have sharply reduced the “friction of distance” that once hobbled rural areas in the competition with the great metropolitan centers for people and commerce. In practical terms, rural areas are now much less isolated than they were only a few decades ago. Satellite technology, fax machines, and the Internet are among the most familiar aids, rendering distance virtually irrelevant in the transmission of information. Other sources of change are less obvious. Decades of steady state and federal investment in roads and airports—building and widening of highways, runway paving, subsidies for equipment pur-

*This fertility decline, coupled with the aging of the rural population (which reduced the number of couples of childbearing age while increasing the number of older adults), left an estimated 600 nonmetropolitan counties with more deaths than births between 1990 and '96, the highest number in history.

chases—have also made an enormous difference. At the same time, congestion has increasingly vexed the nation's large metropolitan areas, reducing the value of one of the cities' great competitive advantages: proximity. Catalog retailer Lands' End is able to operate a huge national distribution headquarters in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, a small town west of Madison, in part because the state government upgraded U.S. Route 18-151 to a four-lane divided highway during the 1980s. In Michigan's Upper Peninsula and other once-remote places, Federal Express trucks now regularly deliver packages down long dirt roads. With the assurance that crucial parts and supplies can be secured overnight, small-factory owners can now set up shop virtually anywhere.

Such advances have freed businesses to light out for the hinterlands and all their perceived advantages: lower labor and land costs, the absence of unions, what many executives see as the superior work ethic of the rural labor force, and economic incentive programs offered by state and local governments.

Missouri's Mercer and Sullivan counties tell one tale of deconcentration. They adjoin one another near the Iowa border in the southern Corn Belt, where, thanks to poor soil and sloping terrain that promotes soil erosion, farm productivity lags behind that in the best midwestern farming areas. The land has never generated enough wealth to sustain a strong local economy. The result has been an extraordinarily prolonged population decline. Mercer County's population peaked at 14,700 in 1900 and then commenced a long and steady fall to only 3,700 in 1990—a devastating decline of three-fourths. Sullivan County lost 58 percent of its population, reaching 6,300 in 1990.

Then, in the early 1990s, an entrepreneurial area firm called Premium Standard Farms, armed with investment capital and encouraged by a strong market for pork, opened a large new hog-raising and pork-processing business. Premium has its headquarters building in Mercer County and a packing plant in Sullivan County. Vast numbers of hogs are produced in highly efficient confinement-feeding operations, slaughtered, packed, and shipped—all of which generates a large number of jobs. And the workers have come. Census Bureau estimates for Mercer County in July 1996 indicated that its population had spurted by 7.5 percent, while Sullivan had recovered by 5.1 percent. The result: a local housing shortage that has fueled residential construction and forced some workers to commute from other counties.

This kind of story is being repeated in various forms all over rural America, as business and industry expand and move into new areas, especially in the South and, more recently, the Midwest. Between 1985 and 1993, rural areas increased their share of the nation's manufacturing jobs from 20 percent to 23 percent. Indeed, since 1960, manufacturing has supplied more rural jobs than farming. It now accounts for about one-sixth of rural employment.

The roster of rural industries is varied, including poultry processors,

clothing manufacturers, auto parts makers, and manufacturers of computer equipment. Some of these enterprises are relatively small and self-contained, but others are big enough to generate considerable ripple effects. In the archipelago of auto assembly plants that Toyota and other carmakers have built along I-75, for example, the factories don't stockpile parts but use just-in-time manufacturing techniques that effectively require many suppliers to have their own plants less than 100 miles away. Workers at these plants then carry their paychecks home to communities perhaps as much as 60 miles distant, where the money may find its way to local retailers and other businesses.

One very special sort of “industry” has provided a surprising lift in many rural areas and small towns. More than 50 non-metropolitan counties that have rebounded from population losses in the 1980s have been helped by the boom in prison construction spawned by the nationwide crackdown on crime. In Tennessee's Lake County, a declining Delta cotton-farming area, a new state prison that opened in 1992 brought more than 1,000 inmates (whom the federal census counts as residents) and 350 jobs. Secure, well-paid prison jobs are highly prized by people in places such as Lake County, but it is questionable whether prisons will give rural communities a foundation for longer-term growth.

Important as economic and technological forces have been in fostering the rural revival of the past quarter-century, it would be a mistake to see them as the sole driving force. National prosperity, job growth, and the declining “friction of distance” have combined to give many more Americans the freedom to choose where to live, and it should come as no surprise that many prefer the countryside. Through the decades of exodus from the hinterlands to the cities—much of it more a matter of economic necessity than choice—many Americans retained a strong attachment to the rural ideal. It was this desire for a retreat from big-city strains and hazards, the desire to enjoy nature and live in a community where one can be known and make a difference, that made the suburbs grow, and now that technological and economic change allow, it may continue to benefit rural areas. In a 1995 Roper survey, for example, 41 percent (up from 35 percent in 1989) of those polled said that they would like to live in a small town or rural area within 10 years.

Among the most important contributors to rural growth are the most footloose people of all—retirees, who are free to go almost anywhere their pension and Social Security checks can reach them. They are drawn to areas in the Sunbelt, coastal regions, parts of the West, and the Upper Great Lakes, places that offer beautiful scenery or recreational attractions, from lakes to ski slopes and golf courses. Of the 190 rural counties classified as “retirement destination” counties (i.e. those with a history of large influxes of retirees), all gained population between 1990 and 1996, and 99 percent experienced net in-migration.

Most other rural migrants are still tied to jobs. They include older people who have cut back their work week and the growing number of

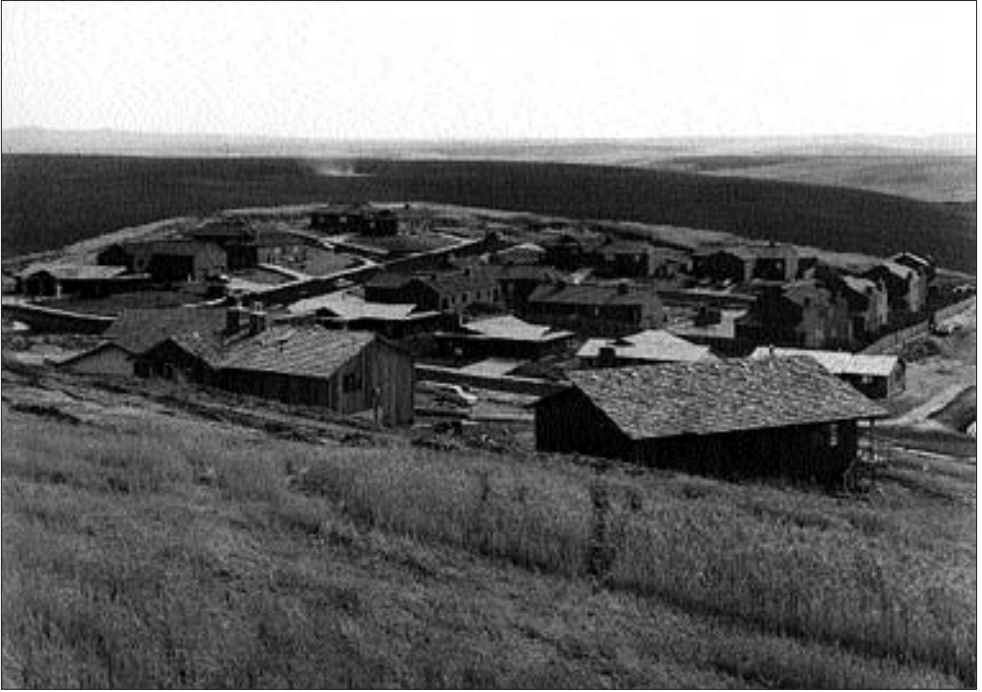
working-age people who have been freed by new communications technologies and changes in the organization of work to move far from major cities, or who perhaps need to show up at the office only a few days a week. Those are not primarily the “lone eagles” in pressed flannel shirts we see in magazine ads making multimillion-dollar deals by cell phone as they gaze at distant mountain peaks, but computer consultants, editors, and other middle-class workers. Still other rural migrants are returning to areas where they were born, now that jobs are available, wanting to raise their children in the kind of atmosphere they enjoyed as youngsters.

These sorts of people account for the rapid growth of 285 non-metropolitan counties we classify as “recreational” destinations. Included among these are forested lake counties of the North Woods, winter sports areas of the West, and the foothills of the Appalachians and Ozarks, where mountain vistas and golf courses abound. Ninety-three percent of them grew between 1990 and 1996, with a large majority (88 percent) enjoying net in-migration.

Chaffee County, Colorado, set in the Arkansas River valley and flanked by the high peaks of the Rockies, is a good example. The county suffered during the 1980s when a large molybdenum mine shut down—the metal is used in the fabrication of high-tech alloys for military aircraft and other products—taking a lot of good jobs with it. From 1990 to 1996, however, the population rose by 15.7 percent, thanks largely to the arrival of newcomers fleeing growing congestion and dense settlement in Denver and elsewhere in the Front Range of the Rockies. The county also attracted workers employed in the nearby resort towns of Vail and Breckenridge but forced out by rising real estate prices. Some of the more affluent Chaffee newcomers have launched new businesses or bought out older proprietors. A number of small-scale manufacturing plants have come on line: a toolmaker, a manufacturer of archery equipment, and an assembler of first-aid kits.

Recreation brings many to counties such as Chaffee, supplying a big share of jobs and income: motels, restaurants, and recreation provide jobs and attract visitors, whose dollars in turn create more jobs in construction, retail, and services. In Grand County, Utah, in the shadow of Arches National Park, the county government was more successful than local leaders had dreamed—and perhaps more than they had wished—when it decided to promote the area as a tourist destination for mountain bikers. Between 1990 and 1996, the population jumped by 18.2 percent, and restaurants, motels, and other businesses sprouted to serve the vacationers. Quite a comeback from the 20 percent drop in population Grand County experienced in the 1980s, when the uranium mines shut down.

The boundary between the nation’s metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas can be blurry at times. Some counties, though officially metropolitan, are hardly “close in.” Clarke County, Virginia, for



The small-town ideal remains, but reality for most newcomers to rural America consists of familiar suburban-style subdivisions and commercial strips.

example, is more than 65 miles from downtown Washington, D.C. There is no question that the rural revival owes some of its vigor to spillover effects from the rise of “edge cities” on the periphery of metropolitan areas. These quasi-urban agglomerations of office parks and shopping centers have made it easier for people to move farther from downtown districts, to places such as Clarke County and beyond, without severing their links to the metropolitan economy.

Indeed, more than 85 percent of the rural counties adjacent to urban areas gained population in the early 1990s, and 77 percent enjoyed net in-migration. Another tier of counties farther out also benefited from the arrival of metro-area workers willing to drive long distances to their jobs. Eventually many of these counties will also be absorbed, at least in official data, into metropolitan areas. But many commuters coming to rural America are traveling to other rural counties or to towns and cities that are too small to be classified as metropolitan but are nevertheless experiencing the effects of deconcentration.

Wolfe County, Kentucky, illustrates some of these complexities. Mountainous and thickly wooded, it lies three counties distant from Lexington, the nearest metro center. The county’s population fell by 2.9 percent in the 1980s as coal-mining jobs in the area were lost to mechanization, but the county benefits from the four-lane Combs Mountain Parkway, which permits residents to work an hour away in Lexington and in a new Toyota plant located yet another county distant. It has also attracted

a fair number of retirees—some returning home after having made lives elsewhere, some leaving the rawer Appalachian hill country to the east. In the 1990s, Wolfe County began growing again, with population up 13.2 percent between 1990 and '96.

Will success ruin rural America? It is already exacting tolls of various kinds in many rural communities. After decades of population shrinkage, revenue sources are limited and are not likely to grow as rapidly as the demand for roads, schools, and other services and infrastructure. And newcomers often demand not just a greater quantity of services but better quality as well. People coming from cities and suburbs with professional fire and ambulance corps, municipal sewage systems, and regular garbage pickup may not see much charm in volunteer fire departments and backyard septic systems. Newcomers may also retard change. Retirees lured to an area by low living costs and scenic beauty may not be sympathetic to pleas to increase spending on public schools.

While many long-time residents welcome the energy and enthusiasm new arrivals bring, others fear they will undermine the very “rural way of life” they seek. Some rural communities are already beginning to experience traffic congestion and even sprawl. The newcomers, moreover, have few ties to the traditional rural economy or way of life; they are in rural America but not of it. It is almost inevitable that they will change it.

The rural revival raises other questions of policy. Many remote rural counties that lost population during the 1980s also found it difficult to attract and retain doctors. The influx of newcomers, however, combined with the continuing aging of the established population, almost certainly increases the need for medical care. Yet federal programs designed to encourage physicians to locate in such underserved areas were cut back in the early 1980s.

A larger and longer-term question is whether the revival of rural fortunes will someday pose a threat to the health of cities. No one can see that far into the future, but it is at least possible to point out that it has not done so yet. The 1990s seem to have been as good for metropolitan America as they have been for the hinterlands. The cities remain the great economic engines that drive the American system, the command-and-control centers that direct the development of the economy, government, media, and the arts. They remain the source of the best economic opportunities and highest-paying jobs, magnets for immigrants and for people with strong appetites for cultural, social, and educational opportunities. They are the gateways to the increasingly important global economic system.

Some trends suggest that the rural revival may continue for a long time. The aging of the affluent baby boom generation suggests that there will be a plentiful supply of retirees well into the future. And the revolution in communications, the improvement of transportation, and the evolution of the organization of work are all unlikely to

be reversed. Yet the slowdown of the rural revival during the 1980s underscores the fact that such large changes seldom proceed at an even pace. A sour economy, for example, can undo a great deal.

America may, in any event, have entered a period of relative equilibrium, in which short-term demographic shifts are acutely sensitive to immediate changes in the economic, political, and social climate. Because rural America no longer enjoys the high fertility rates that traditionally fueled its population growth, its demographic prospects in coming decades will depend more than ever on the course of migration. The fate of rural areas will be linked more directly than before to national and global economic, political, and social forces—the forces that directly and indirectly influence the millions of individual decisions that people and businesses make about where to locate.

The problems and challenges that await a growing rural America are bound to be daunting. But whatever they are they will almost certainly be preferable to the challenges posed by isolation, exodus, and decline.

FURTHER READING

The transformation of rural America lends urgency to a number of new and old issues, from the persistence of rural poverty to the future of agriculture to the problems of growth and sprawl. These and other subjects are surveyed in three useful anthologies: **The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places** (Univ. Press of Kansas, 1995), edited by Emery N. Castle; **Rural and Small Town America** (Russell Sage, 1989), edited by Glenn Fuguitt, David L. Brown, and Calvin L. Beale; and **Rural Planning and Development in the United States** (Guilford, 1989), edited by Mark B. Lapping, Thomas L. Daniels, and John W. Keller. The two-volume **Encyclopedia of Rural America** (ABC CLIO, 1998) also offers a surprisingly accessible overview. **Migration into Rural Areas: Theories and Issues** (Wiley, forthcoming), edited by P. J. Boyle and Keith Halfacree, brings to light some signs of rural revival overseas.

The countryside is astutely observed in a number of more literary works, including **Bad Land: An American Romance** (Vintage, 1997), by Jonathan Raban, **Great Plains** (Penguin, 1990), by Ian Frazier, and **Praeryerth (A Deep Map)** (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), by William Least Heat-Moon. Eulogies for the vanishing rural way of life—now almost a genre of their own—include Wendell Berry's **Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture** (Sierra Club, 1996) and Victor Davis Hanson's **Fields without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea** (Free Press, 1997), each dealing eloquently but in different ways with the disappearance of the family farm, and W. D. Wetherell's **North of Now** (Lyons, 1998). Two significant books on the rethinking of the meaning of wilderness and the natural world are Daniel B. Botkin's **Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century** (Oxford, 1992) and **Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature** (Norton, 1996), edited by William Cronon.

Keeping the Heart in the Heartland

by Rob Gurwitt

Over the last 40 years, the town of Garden City, Kansas, has twice collided head-on with the disruptive forces at large in the wider world. The first time was unsettling. The second changed it forever.

The first collision came in 1959, when a pair of drifters named Perry Smith and Dick Hickok wandered into Holcomb, a tiny settlement 10 miles to the west of Garden City. When they left, rancher Herbert Clutter, his wife, and two of their children were dead, brutally murdered in a botched robbery. There could be no plainer reminder that isolation is no insurance against the outside world. Even so, the after-effects probably would have been limited to the passing shock and some muttering about the need to lock doors had Truman Capote not installed himself at the Windsor Hotel, on Main Street in Garden City, and turned the incident into the best-selling book *In Cold Blood* (1965). Capote memorialized the area around Garden City as a land of “awesomely extensive” views, with “grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples,” a land “more Far West than Middle West,” so lonely that even other Kansans call it “out there.”

Nearly four decades later, the murders’ effects on the town remain palpable. Today, just behind the door that leads to the interior of Garden City police headquarters on Ninth Street, you can find a display case holding a coil of the rope that Perry and Hickok used to tie up their victims, the boot whose print led investigators to the suspects, and the license plate off Hickok’s car. Over at the Finney County Library, reference librarians still handle more inquiries about the Clutter murders than any other subject.

Yet Garden City still managed to hold its rural self inviolate for some



Some things never change: the 1997 Beef Empire Days Parade on Main Street in Garden City

years after Capote's book appeared. It wasn't until 1980, in fact, that the big change came, and when it did there were no lurid events and ugly headlines involved. In December of that year, IBP, which began life as Iowa Beef Processors, opened the world's biggest beef-packing plant in Holcomb. For the meatpacking business, on the one hand, it was an important, though hardly earthshaking, event; it gave IBP the ability to slaughter, skin, gut, and cut up cattle on a massive scale, then ship the meat out in tidy boxes. Garden City, on the other hand, was utterly transformed. A slow-paced, contentedly remote agricultural and market town, it became almost overnight a more cosmopolitan, multiethnic, and thoroughly complicated place. From that day to this, it has been trying to regain its bearings.

Garden City's story is like thousands of others during the past few decades of uneven rural revival—a new plant, a new prison, an urban refugee longing for simplicity, a commuter's hunger for some greenery after the workday is done, and suddenly life in some small patch of rural or small-town America is very different. Rural communities have always been subject to distant forces, shaped by railroads or mining companies or commodities brokers, given or denied sustenance by the vagaries of distant bankers and markets. But in a time when drugs and gangs travel the interstate, when the latest videos can be had at the general store, and when a wheat farmer can buy his kids the latest cartoon show spinoff at the Wal-Mart every bit as quickly as a securities analyst half the continent away, remoteness has even less meaning than it once did. As the fortunes of places such as Garden City are tied more closely than ever to the same forces that affect cities and their sub-

urbs, communities that were once secure and self-contained are finding themselves grappling with how to define themselves.

If Garden City is any guide, their greatest challenge lies less in the encroachment of mass culture than in the arrival of people who are quite simply different—who have different backgrounds, expectations, and ways of life. The newcomers may be upscale urbanites or middle-class retirees or factory workers or even the families of prisoners; what is beyond question is that they bring their own concerns and aspirations, and these can change a place just as surely as the arrival or departure of a major employer. Yet Garden City's experience suggests something else as well: that if these communities are subject to the increasing gravitational pull of the world beyond, they also retain certain native strengths, a sense of where they come from that is embedded in familiar landmarks, institutions, and habits of community life.

IBP's appearance in Finney County was a sterling example of the unforeseen consequences of progress. The county sits in southwest Kansas, in the vast, sparsely populated High Plains triangle formed by Denver, Colorado, Amarillo, Texas, and Wichita, Kansas. For much of the first half of the century, the county's economic fortunes were tied to ranching and sugar beets, which were grown in the area and processed at a factory in Garden City. But in the 1960s, farmers began tapping into the Ogallala Aquifer, the body of water that underlies a huge swath of the Southwest. Together with the arrival of center-pivot irrigation, this allowed them to turn the region's dry sandsage prairie into a fertile producer of corn, milo, and other feed grains. This, in turn, attracted feedlot owners, who began setting up large operations in Finney County and its environs to fatten up cattle before shipping them off to the slaughterhouse. Garden City became a cattle town. There are, today, something on the order of 200,000 head of cattle in Finney County alone, which explains the heavy aroma of cow dung that clings day and night to Garden City's air.

The rise of feed grains and feedlots over the course of two decades made the area perfect for IBP. For much of this century, meatpacking had been a largely urban industry, concentrated in Saint Paul, Kansas City, and the other great stockyard cities, shipping cattle in from far away and employing a work force that was, by the 1970s, for the most part skilled, unionized, and well paid. IBP, which got its start in the 1960s, broke that mold. Its strategy was based on the notion that it would be cheaper, in an industry with very tight profit margins, to butcher beef close to where it had been raised, on a disassembly line that used unskilled, nonorganized workers. The innovation revolutionized the industry, giving rise to huge plants that could handle several thousand head of cattle a day and driving the packers who couldn't shift gears out of business. Southwest Kansas became a center of this new approach: IBP's Finney County plant is just the largest of four that have

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A sign at a feedyard on the outskirts of town reminds passersby what matters most in Garden City.

located in the region—ConAgra’s Monfort division has one at the eastern edge of Garden City, Excel owns one in Dodge City, and National Beef runs one an hour’s drive to the south, in Liberal.

At the time the IBP plant opened, rural communities had not had a lot of experience with new facilities on this scale—the plant was to employ some 2,800 workers and slaughter 5,200 head of cattle a day—so Finney County didn’t really know what to expect. It seemed enough to know that it was getting a stable base for its economy and a steady source of jobs. What it hadn’t quite reckoned with was who would fill those jobs.

Meatpacking is not pleasant work; it’s bloody and smelly, and the method that IBP pioneered demands that the same cut be made thousands of times during a shift. Workers find their hands, arms, and backs constantly in pain, and serious injuries are not uncommon. The “trimmers” swing razor-sharp knives in close quarters, and the chain mail

The crowd that used to meet downtown after early morning Mass at Saint Dominic's now gathers at the McDonald's.

and masks they wear don't always protect them; meatpacking ranks among the most dangerous jobs in the country. For all this, an employee can make perhaps \$7 or \$8 an hour. But the work requires neither education nor skill, nor much command of English—just a willingness to work hard. Not surprisingly, there are many native-born Americans who don't want jobs like that. There are, however, a lot of immigrants who do.

And so Garden City and other meatpacking towns, from Dodge City and Liberal to Storm Lake, Iowa, and Guymon, Oklahoma, have become home to an astoundingly diverse population: Mexicans, Central Americans, Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian refugees, Somalis, Guatemalan Indians, even, in Garden City, a small group of German Mennonites from Mexico. In Garden City these days, Asian restaurants outnumber steak houses, and if you're looking for someone at lunch time, you're as likely to find that person at Pho Hoa One, an immensely successful Vietnamese noodle house just beyond downtown, as at one of the fast-food restaurants up on the Kansas Avenue commercial strip that runs through the northern half of town.

Yet surely as striking as Garden City's diversity and growth—it now has some 30,000 residents, almost double the figure in 1980, and about a third of the population is Asian or Hispanic—are the ways in which it has become subject to forces that not so long ago it could ignore, if it even knew about them at all. The competitive decisions of faraway meatpacking executives now have a direct impact on spendable income in town. Federal refugee policy helps determine who shows up looking for work. Garden City's police occasionally confront Asian gangs traveling from Wichita and even California at odd hours of the night. Even the fate of Mexican economic development matters in this corner of Kansas. As Donna Skinner, an administrator at the local community college, points out, "Once Mexico gets its economy and population under control, Mexican workers won't be coming up here, and when that happens, Garden City will be in a hell of a mess." In all of this, Garden City has as much in common with Wichita or Fresno, California, as it does with Dodge City.

To be sure, there is much about Garden City that would be familiar to old-timers. Life for many people in town still revolves around church and family. On summer nights, the ball fields over near the fairgrounds are packed with families watching their sons and daughters play baseball in their Bar-T and Western State Bank and Preferred Cartage Service T-shirts. You can still see friends and neighbors at the Friday night band concerts in Stevens Park. High school football still matters. And for sheer High Plains culture, nothing

can outdraw the yearly Beef Empire Days Rodeo.

There are also, of course, plenty of ways in which Garden City has changed over the years quite apart from its major employer and its demographic makeup. There was a time, at midcentury, when dozens of cafés and restaurants were sprinkled around downtown, serving bankers, lawyers, railroad laborers, farmers, sugar beet workers, and housewives. You could eat at Dinty Moore's, Sever's Café, or Mrs. Sessler's Diner, the Green Lantern, the Midway Cafe, the Blue Goose, the Ve-Dor. There was the Elite—usually called the “E-light,” to the dismay of visitors from more refined parts of the country—the coffee shop in the Warren Hotel, the fountain at Remick Drug, and, of course, the lunch counter in Woolworth's. All are gone. Most of the storefronts on Main Street are still occupied—although the grand old Windsor Hotel, the Waldorf of the Prairies, now stands empty except for a furniture store on its ground floor—but there is no question that Garden City's commercial heart has moved out to Kansas Avenue, to the Target, the Wal-Mart, the Western Auto, the Kentucky Fried Chicken and Dairy Queen and Sonic Drive-In.

For all of that, Garden City's community life is still intact. It's just that it now gets carried on in different places. The crowd that meets after early morning Mass at Saint Dominic's long ago forsook downtown; now it gathers at the McDonald's on Kansas. Recently, in fact, there's been a contest for tables with the Methodists,



At Garden City's Victor Ornelas Elementary School, students speak more than 30 languages and dialects. The school marks many ethnic holidays, including Tet, the Vietnamese new year.

who have also begun staking out McDonald's as their after-church turf.

The true test of the town's adaptability, however, came with the opening of the IBP plant. Suddenly, thousands of people were descending on the town looking for work; they slept in their cars, they camped out in the parks, they fought in the bars. Schools that had one or two immigrant children when they let out in June found themselves in September facing dozens of Southeast Asian and Hispanic kids who spoke no English and knew little of American society. Crime rates soared, and so did all sorts of other social indicators no one wants to see rise: alcoholism, drug abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence. Municipal and county officials, taken entirely unaware, discovered they didn't have the police, the social services, or even the infrastructure to deal with the town that Garden City was becoming.

It might all have fallen to pieces; certainly, other communities have come apart at the seams over less. But Garden City had some latent strengths to draw on. There was a widespread ethic, hardly uncommon in rural areas, that adversity is there to be overcome. As Pat Fishback, a long-time resident, puts it, "It's the ethic that says, 'So you had a bad wheat crop this year. Well, you just have to go on.'" There was a strong set of community institutions, particularly the town's churches. And above all, there was a small group of community leaders who were more than willing to take matters in hand, and who could have an impact in a place the size of Garden City that would have been lost in a city or even a large suburb. "As an anthropologist, I usually feel I have to wash my mouth out with soap when I talk about the 'great man' theory of history," says Don Stull, a University of Kansas professor who has been studying the impact of the meatpacking boom on the town. "But it's applicable to Garden City."

After the IBP plant opened, a handful of religious leaders—Monte Fey, the Presbyterian minister, Wayne Paulsen, a Baptist minister, and Levita Rohlmann, a former nun who still runs the Catholic relief agency in town—organized Garden City's churches and began working with municipal officials. They aimed not just to reach out to individual newcomers in need but to create institutions that could provide lasting help. They started a summer camp for immigrant children who needed help with English; they created the South East Asian Mutual Assistance Association, to help refugees deal with the society around them; and, along with the community college, they set up the Adult Learning Center, which rapidly became a place where immigrants could not only learn English but get practical advice and support in making a life for themselves in town. The schools set up English-as-a-second-language programs and began sending teachers out to the trailer parks and poorer neighborhoods to enlist students and pass out information about health care. The religious leaders weren't alone in their efforts. The police not only added officers but began teaching them about Southeast Asian, Mexican, and Central American cultures. The *Garden City Telegram* took it upon itself to track down and debunk the various ugly rumors about immigrants that occasionally swept through town. Garden City's response



The IBP plant

to the influx was not always what it might have been—Hispanics, for example, got less formal help than Southeast Asians did—but it was enough to get the town through its crisis years.

This is not to say that Garden City has become a multicultural paradise. True, you can find Southeast Asians and Hispanics living next to Anglos in middle-class subdivisions, as well as in the giant trailer park on the eastern edge of town. But they are neighbors, not truly part of the same social circles. There are barriers of language and culture, and many immigrant meatpackers are so busy working long hours and scraping to get ahead that they don't have much energy left for other things. (That same work ethic does, however, win them respect in the larger Garden City community.) Even among middle-class immigrants, there has not been much interest in civic affairs, although that may be changing; recently, a group led by a Vietnamese doctor wrote the city manager asking how they could become more involved in the public life of the town. Still, the most extensive intermingling takes place among the town's schoolchildren, and it's no less true for being a cliché that the next generation will tell whether Garden Citians develop the comfortable friendships that knit together most smaller communities.

If you were to wander into Tom's Tavern, the no-frills bar and restaurant a few blocks off Main Street where old Garden City likes to gather, it would be easy to get a heated argument going by asking whether the town is better or worse off for its new profile. There are plenty of people who complain about traffic and the fact that the town has been forced to triple the size of its police force over the years. And, as Don Stull points out, a lot of townfolk have yet to come to terms with Garden City's diversity. "There is bigotry and discrimination in Garden City, as there has been in every town," he says. "There's no doubt that there are people in town

who would like to see every Mexican and Vietnamese and Laotian gone, and it's clear that part of the reason the community as a whole is as accepting as it has been is because the new arrivals are taking jobs that most native Garden Citians don't want."

But there are also a lot of people who love what Garden City has become, who like eating ethnic food and are delighted that conversation in school corridors often concerns the latest Thai soap opera to arrive on videotape or the fact that a music lover can choose between the offerings of the venerable Garden City Concert Society and the bands from Chihuahua and Sonora states that now pass through. Garden City these days is cosmopolitan enough that sons and daughters who left for the cities in earlier decades are beginning to come back, and kids who go away to college now think seriously of returning home afterward. Because of its size and its experience, it has become the most important rural town in a three-state region, the host of the annual Five State Multicultural Conference, the place people from hundreds of miles around go to shop, visit the zoo and the Finney County Historical Museum, or learn about how their own communities might handle rapid demographic shifts.

Still, it is easy to make too much of change. There may be people with unaccustomed faces and languages on Main Street, but they are walking a familiar path. There are Laotian families, for instance, who began life in the United States in California, living on welfare, fearing that their children would get wrapped up in gangs, and watching as the traditional authority of parents was eroded by the mores of street life. They moved to Garden City seeking the same things that generations of native-born Americans have found in small-town life: a place where their children could go to school without fear of gangs or violence and where they could plant their own feet on the ground. A lot of families, having earned enough to put some money away, have since left, moving on to work that does not involve cutting up beef. But other families, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Hispanic, are choosing to stay in Garden City, buying houses in new subdivisions, starting businesses, and tentatively trying to become part of the community. If you ask the parents what they like about Garden City (and their kids what they don't like), the answers sound startlingly familiar: the peacefulness and comfortable rhythms of daily life in this still-small American town.

These are qualities, powerful and universal in their appeal, that are drawing so many different kinds of people to the American countryside. Simply by moving there in their present numbers, they are changing it, but they are not changing it beyond recognition. Not even close. As Donna Skinner says, "I go visit my kids in the city and you're bumper to bumper on the freeway for an hour just to go to a restaurant. Then I come back here, and I've got to say, 'You know, life's a piece of cake.'"



The Course of Empire: The Pastoral State (1995), by Sandow Birk

The Landscape of Disturbance

by Frederick Turner

Where is Arcadia in the 21st century? Ancient poets found it in the *Rus*, or countryside, in a pastoral place where the cultivated mingled with the uncultivated, or in sacred groves that were uninhabited but managed unobtrusively by eccentric sibyls or priests. In 18th-century America, the Founding Fathers found it

in the agrarian archetype of the virtuous small town, with its meeting-house and gentleman farmers with thumbed copies of Plato and the Bible on their shelves. This is an enduring ideal for Americans, as the work of late-20th-century writers such as Wendell Berry show. In the 19th century, the poets and painters found Arcadia in what they thought were wild landscapes—the Alps, the Lake District, the Rocky Mountains of Albert Bierstadt, the prairies of Frederic Remington. They did not realize that such landscapes were the product of the careful work of Swiss and Cumbrian farmers, of a continent full of Native American hunter-gatherers and gardeners of considerable ecological sophistication. To the Romantics, the human impact on nature was always a loss of innocence, a violation. Thus their attitude to Arcadia was elegiac, as they foresaw the encroachments of the city, the dark satanic mills. Twentieth-century poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound found Arcadia, by sardonic reversal, in the city, where the evening is laid out on the sky “like a patient etherized upon a table,” and where the faces in the Paris metro are like “petals on a wet, black bough.” In the 21st century, we will find Arcadia in a *Rus* that is both suburban and subrural, not so far away from the groves of the bucolic poets, of Virgil and Horace, Tu Fu and Li Po, Kalidasa and Hafiz, Miklós Radnóti and Boris Pasternak.

But this landscape will be a post-, not a pre-, technological one. It will be a landscape in which the technology is perfecting itself into invisibility, and where form has ceased to follow function but rather elaborates itself into new, delicate, intelligible structures that create new functions, functions that we suddenly recognize from the cultural past—a temple, a folly, a bower, a tomb. There are times when the present breaks the shackles of the past to create the future—the modern age, now past, was one of those. But there are also times, such as the Renaissance and our own coming 21st century, when it is the past that creates the future, by breaking the shackles of the present.


In North Texas, where I live, there is a strange zone of savannahs, residential real estate, and huge artificial lakes, very tangled and unkempt in places (and then suddenly tamed or as suddenly let go wild again), where a whole new ecology is evolving—plant and bird species from Louisiana, the eastern forests, the Gulf coast, the Yucatán. It must extend for hundreds of square miles around the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Each year I walk there I find a different dominant weed species, and huge flocks of birds. It is a *mélange* of original Texas prairie and low forest, ghost towns with little cemeteries, tract housing, sculpture parks and wildlife preserves, radio and TV towers, and the fantastical margins of the huge new lakes. Such landscapes are everywhere in America, but nobody sees them: they are what one passes through to get to Yellowstone. I have seen them around Oklahoma City and Tulsa

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We are torn between the postmodernist vision of the sublime technological landscape and the environmentalist wilderness.

and Atlanta and Columbus, Ohio, throughout central Florida, northern Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and the southern half of New England.

This half waste-dump, half theme-park place, this Disneyland of the incomplete, has its detractors. It is in doubtful taste; indeed, it is kitsch, for its irony is aimed not at itself but at the censoriousness of its critics. Friendly bikers customize their Harleys in backyards still heaped with dead leaves from last winter's flash flooding. A tiny garden of clubferns and dragonflies nestles in the mud-soaked foam rubber of a seat cushion lost from a boat in a fishing accident. A thousand white birds settle on the lake, or a gigantic blue heron, as massive as a pterosaur, lumbers up into the air. Coydogs, part coyote, part dog, howl there at night. It is a landscape not in harmony with itself, not like our conventional idea of nature. It is changing all the time. It is the domain of nonlinearity, of dissipative systems that flourish on the flow of decay, of perverse consensual fetishisms, of emergent structures and fractal depth; it is drawn by strange attractors rather than pushed by causes and laws. Only a new language, from the laboratories of chaos and complexity theory, can accurately catch its strangeness and aesthetic difficulty. And this hadean Arcady is often the domain of death, where the middle class goes to die.

 Our distaste for the emerging *Rus* is an essentially modernist distaste. Modernist landscape plans, the cities of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, always seem to lie stunned beneath an endless halcyon-blue sky. There are no puddles in the streets, no high winds and fogs and damp feet and wet dogs shaking themselves over the carpet. Our fundamental tastes in landscape are enormously influenced, often at second or third hand, by the landscape designers, by the Capability Browns and Frederick Law Olmsteds of the world, and at present we are torn between the postmodernist vision of the sublime technological landscape and the environmentalist wilderness. But a near-century of radical art in this continent, beginning with the Armory Show and cycling through expressionism, op, pop, and conceptual, has brought us full circle to where earthworks artists such as James Turrell have restarted the romance with landscape left unfinished by the Hudson School. And there is a new breed of landscape designers—including Julie Bargmann, Richard Hansen, Kristina Hill, Anuradha Mathur, Dilip da Cunha, Joan Nassauer, William Wenk, Billy Gregg, and Achva Stein—who are looking at transitional landscapes that include human beings and that are happily undergoing continuous change. They are redesigning—or, rather, gently retrofitting—old mining sites, city parks, whole suburban districts, freeway margins, residential areas, university campuses, museum grounds, and Governor's Island in New York harbor.

These designers don't, for instance, like underground drains, and often include surface rainwater in their landscaping. They like sophisticated low-tech systems of French drains, wet meadow bands, micro-prairie restoration, "wetland to be viewed from a lawn." This idea, of using runoff from streets, parking lots, runways and roofs, and treating what was a menace and a waste as a resource and a source of renewal, has the deepest implications. One of them is the notion that human waste itself is not the end of the world.

Such designers are willing to work with the tastes of people who like lawn ornaments, swing sets, outdoor barbecues, and neatly mown grass. The human "œconomy" is part of the ecosystem too. A similar spirit moves the New Urbanist architects and town planners, who don't mind making "sentimental" Currier and Ives gestures, because these are things that make people really want to come and live in their Seasides



Creating a new landscape: Denver's Harvard Gulch is part of the city's Urban Stormwater and Flood Control District.

and Celebrations. This approach marks an important transition in the role of the artist, from the Romantic/modernist hectoring genius to the wise servant of the people. Perhaps it will take a century for local middle-American suburbal tastes to refine themselves to the point that an average Mediterranean town has already reached. But there is no other way

of getting there than the slow way, and that way will have some very endearing eccentricities of its own that we will want to keep.

One of the key ideas in the new approach is the notion of disturbance. The root of the word is *turb*, the same *turb* that we find in *turbulence*. When midwestern restoration ecologists such as Robert Betz, Keith Wendt, and William Jordan realized not long ago that restored prairies could be as good as the real thing, some of them started to yearn for buffalo to stomp about in the grass and kill some of the existing vegetation, creating deep prints that would contain tiny puddles, and allow seeds of the rarer species to take root. This was disturbance.

True biodiversity seems not always to occur in stable and homogeneous habitats. Rather, it happens in places of varying degrees of disturbance, where there are many opportunities for biotic specialists to flourish. Many of the classic prairies and forests are the ones ravaged periodically by fire. The Amazon rainforest got its marvelous biodiversity over the millenniums through a series of catastrophic world climate oscillations between dry, cool ice ages and hot, wet interglacials. It is the wild swings of salt and fresh, wet and dry, storm and calm that make sea-

coasts so fertile a field of genetic experiment.

Cities and other human settlements, with their herbaceous borders, arboretums, roof gutters, sewers, warehouses, wharfs, market gardens, university horticulture departments, zoos, pet shops, and waste dumps are actually hotbeds of biodiversity. An entirely novel species of mouse has recently evolved in a small town in northern Italy, providing biologists a rare spectacle of species development. Steve Packard, a prairie restorationist, has been creating “oak openings” on waste lots in the suburbs of Chicago. Perhaps we are already becoming, if sometimes inadvertently, the breeders, gardeners and husbanders of nature, rather than the despoilers of it that we have often been.

We are undergoing a major transition in our basic cultural model of the human relationship with the rest of nature. To sum it up in a sentence, it is a transition from a heroic, linear, industrial, power-based, entropic-thermodynamic, goal-oriented model, to a tragicomic, nonlinear, horticultural, influence-based, synergetic, evolutionary-emergentist, process-oriented model. The heroic model postulates a human struggle with nature culminating in human victory, while the tragicomic model postulates an ongoing engagement within nature, between the relatively swift and self-reflective part of nature that is human, and the rest. The linear model imagines one-way causes and effects; the nonlinear model imagines turbulent interactions in which the initiating event has been lost or is at least irrelevant. The industrial model requires a burning; the horticultural model requires a growing. The power-based model's bottom line is coercion; the influence-based model's is persuasion and mutual interest. The entropic-thermodynamic model involves an inevitable and irretrievable expense of free energy in the universe and an increase of disorder when any work is performed; the synergetic-evolutionary model seeks economies whereby every stakeholder gains and new forms of order can emerge out of far-from-equilibrium regimes. The goal-oriented model imagines a perfect fixed or harmonious state as its end product, and tends paradoxically to like immortal, open-ended narratives; the process-oriented model knows that the function of an ending is to open up new possibilities, and it prefers beginning-middle-end narrative structures; it knows that nothing in the universe is ever perfect and immortal, and that death comes to everything.

The new rural settlers of America have the responsibility to create an artificial landscape as rich, satisfying, and deeply natural as the ones left to us by Roman, English, and French gentlemen when they created the classic landscapes of Tuscany, the Cotswolds, and the Loire. Perhaps one day there will be an American *Rus* as satisfying and apparently eternal as those are now. But meanwhile, for the perverse and the poetic, there may even be a special pleasure in the landscape of disturbance itself.