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ABSTRACT

Over the last 50 years, American attitudes toward rural areas have shifted from pride and concern to indifference and ultimately neglect. This shift in attitudes has accompanied the decline in rural population. The media tend to portray rural areas in extremes, depicting either poverty, neglect, and despair, or breath-taking scenery and an idyllic lifestyle. Such conflicting representations feed misconceptions about rural areas. A good example of our neglect is found in rural education. Rural schools are underfunded, and rural students have been neglected in educational studies and viewed from a deficit perspective. The urban model imposed on rural areas has resulted in consolidation, not just of schools, but of governments and farms. Consolidation, whose primary aim has been to save costs while improving rural education, has been described as the single most damaging policy for the quality of schooling and sustainability of rural communities in this century. Consolidation overlooks the wealth of knowledge, sensibility, and history embodied in the relationship between a community and its children, resulting in loss of valuable cultural capital. Successful rural school reform depends on rural community revitalization. Although the great diversity in rural areas complicates defining "rural," the rural life fosters democracy, egalitarianism, and independence, which are foundational ideological elements not only of rural life, but of the United States as a whole. Thus, to preserve rurality is to preserve the foundation of our society. (TD)

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME
Reclaiming The Rural Story

Mary Casey

A Rural Lesson

Every story, when we were children, revealed a lesson.

Jane Smiley

I remember the first night I spent in Shelby. I checked into a hotel on a Sunday evening around 6:30, or so. It was cool. So cool, in fact, that I had made the 40 minute trip from the airport in Charlotte without once turning on the air conditioner in the car — unusual conditions for North Carolina in mid-July. I needed to copy some materials for a presentation I was giving to a group of rural teachers the next day so I inquired at the front desk about where I might find a copier in town. The receptionist eyed me quizzically for a moment, handed me my room key and politely informed me that there were no copy places in town, and that even if there were they would not be open on a Sunday evening. He was kind enough, however, to give me the name of a local printer he thought might be able to help me in the morning. I then asked about finding a place to eat. Again, he told me that nothing was open just then but recommended a nice family-style restaurant I could try the next day. My next question, predictably, was to be, "Is there anything that *is* open on Sunday evenings?" Before I could pose it, however, the man leaned forward over the desk top, smiled and said simply: "Y'all not from around here, are you?" Clearly, it was a not a question.

For the next 30 minutes or so, I stood at the desk, my luggage still at my feet and the key to my room dangling in my hand as I listened to story after story about Shelby. The receptionist, it seems, was more than happy to share his wealth of local knowledge with me. He covered it all, from politics to agriculture, weather to religion, local history to local family gossip. I learned that Shelby is the county seat and that cotton has regained its status as the ruling cash crop of the area; I heard about how no one misses the annual county fair, and about how most people in Shelby had lived there all of their lives. Even the weather conditions seem to be perfect with "just the right amount of sun and snow to

keep everyone happy." There was no mistaking the pride in his voice when he told me that Shelby is just a "real nice place to live — safe, friendly, caring — a good Christian town."

Nestled just beyond the foothills region of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I was surprised to learn that Shelby was a critical site in the final stages of the Revolutionary War. By now, this hotel receptionist-turned-history teacher was well aware that he had a captive audience so he insisted that I make time to visit historic downtown and to be sure to walk through the old county courthouse —" built just like the State House in Raleigh, only a lot smaller, of course." "Shelby," he said, "may be a short stop on a road map but it has a long history." As he spoke, I became aware that he was teaching me an important lesson, not just in the ways of rural life in Shelby, but in ways of seeing that go beyond looking — that *explore*, rather than simply *observe* the unfamiliar. Listening to his stories I was reminded of how easy it is to look without ever really seeing what may be right in front of us.

The fact is, what we are able to see depends, in part, on what we want to know and what we think is *worth* knowing about a place. To those who seldom venture into rural terrain, Shelby might appear to be no more than a rest stop or a crossroads that you pass through on your way to somewhere else. And yet, every place has its own story, its own unique social history colored by events in the lives of the people who live and love, hope and dream, labor and rest within its borders. These events are the stories of our living and our dying — the chronicling of our journeys in a particular place, in a particular time in history. For those of us who claim to be social historians, social science researchers, educators, and learners interested in understanding more deeply the human experience and the conditions that support ways of living that are sustaining and enduring, these are the stories and the lessons that matter.

Our task as members of the Annenberg Rural Challenge research and evaluation team is to document the work of a number of projects funded by the Rural Challenge to help revitalize rural schools and rural communities. Central to this work are the narratives of people who live in places that are very much like Shelby — "short stops on a road map" with long histories of rural traditions and ways of living. Unfortunately, these traditions are becoming harder and harder to find, even in these more rural areas of the United States.

The story of rural life in this country is one that has been neglected, too long overlooked or relegated to the past as if to suggest that there is no present rural reality worth telling. Over the last 50 years, or so, American attitudes toward rural areas of the country have shifted from pride and concern to indifference and ultimately neglect (Sher, 1977). It is by no means a coincidence that this shift in public attitudes occurred at the same time that the rural population was in the midst of a steady decline. By 1917, urban dwellers had outnumbered those living in rural areas for the first time in the history of the United States (Miller, 1993). At the start of World War II, this decline accelerated, leaving many rural areas struggling for their existence. The "lure of the city," its lights, its excitement, and its promise of work pulled hard on the hopes and dreams of many rural families who felt the conflict of choosing between a life they had long known and loved and economic survival (Degler, 1970).

In many ways, this same conflict is reflected in the eyes of the media which tends to portray rural areas in extremes; the images being either very positive or very negative.

We are as likely to see photos of remote places with breath-taking scenery as we are to see images of rural people struggling in poverty, neglect, and despair. Television, in particular, has contributed heavily to these conflicting and often highly distorted images of rural life. Shows such as "Green Acres," "Beverly Hillbillies," and "Mayberry" anchored images of country people in the minds of millions of viewers as either simple-minded or uneducated folk, while programs such as "The Waltons" tended to glorify and romanticize rural life as the American ideal.

The press also seems to favor extremes in its coverage of rural places. For the most part, newspapers and television news reports tend to paint a rather harsh picture of rural life. Last year, the Boston Globe ran a series of articles on life in rural Massachusetts that focused exclusively on the economic hardships experienced by many families in these communities. If the intent of these articles was to call attention to the plight of the rural poor, they could not have been more successful. The accounts were largely graphic portrayals of families struggling to survive in an environment rife with poverty, incest, illiteracy and alcoholism. These reports also seemed to support the claims of numerous studies that teen pregnancy and high school drop-out rates are growing in rural areas and that the incidence of violence at the hands of rural children and adolescents is increasing rapidly. Accounts such as these are a sobering counterpoint to the enticing images and interesting stories of rural areas often portrayed and told in magazines such as National Geographic and Country Life.

For sure, these problems do exist in rural areas. Yet, it can hardly be said that such conditions as described in the Boston Globe are indigenous to rural life. In fact, most of them are as much of a concern in many urban communities as they are in rural areas. The fact is, we have ignored rural communities for so long in this country that we do not have an accurate understanding of either their problems or their strengths. Moreover, such polarized perceptions of rural life are hardly beneficial to rural people or their communities. Arguably, such conflicting representations simply confound the problem of misperception and ignorance that underpins the lack of respect and adequate attention rural communities have received since the first half of this century.

There is no better example of the depth of our neglect than the long-standing tradition in this country of inadequate educational funding of rural schools (Nachtigal, 1982). Further support for this assertion is evinced by the dearth of information on rural students in the field of educational research. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural youth have historically been: 1) neglected in educational and developmental studies of adolescents and schools (Stern, 1994); and 2) viewed mainly from a deficit perspective, seen as having limited educational and economic resources, limited career opportunities, and low incentives for achievement (Haller & Virkler, 1992).

In her introduction to the report, *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools*, editor, Joyce Stern (1994), suggests that the time has come for the nation to focus its attention on Rural America which has, for years, given much of its resources —material goods as well as intellectual ideas - - to the development of urban centers all over the country. Stern argues that the agrarian tradition is responsible for far more than simply keeping Americans well nourished: "Rural America may be seen as providing one of the most important spiritual and ethical anchors for the nation" (p. 1). Stern also argues that with the continued growth of urban America the question about the vitality and long-term viability of rural life has won the attention of many local, state, federal and national

education policy makers. In the last several years increasing numbers of interested teachers, students, parents, as well as researchers, community activists, and funders have joined this conversation. The result of this recent attention to rural areas can be seen in the growing numbers of new initiatives across the country that are aimed at studying, strengthening and sustaining rural communities. Among these initiatives is the Annenberg Rural Challenge.

The purpose of this paper is not simply to dispel all the negative images of rural America or replace them with positive ones. Many of the problems identified by the media, policy makers, researchers and educators are real and need to be addressed. Our concern is that these stories may convey, however implicitly, a perception of rural people and rural communities that is both unwarranted and inaccurate. A central aspect of the work of the Rural Challenge is to confront, expose and *challenge* the underlying assumptions that engender or continue to support such negative perceptions. The problems have been well-documented; our intent is to provide a more balanced, holistic and realistic perspective on the 25% of our nation's people who identify themselves as rural by intentionally seeking those stories that focus on what is genuinely *good* about rural communities. But first, we need to look carefully and critically at the existing stories and, perhaps more importantly, who is telling them.

The Power of Story

> *Life and story are not two separate phenomena. They are part of the same fabric, in that life informs and is formed by stories.*
>
> *Guy Widdershoven*

The relation between life and story is concerned primarily with the relation between lived reality and the way in which the meaning of that life or reality is determined, understood, and communicated. The hermeneutic claim that life and story are internally related is based on the premise that the meaning of life is both explicated and created in life stories (Widdershoven, 1993). As we begin our work of listening for and documenting narratives of rural life, a question we must address is, how can we tell a story that will convey the essence of what we mean by rural when there is no one reality, no one definition, or no one story to tell? A partial answer, at least, might be that we focus first on what narratives already exist within rural communities as well as what form they take, what function they serve, and what meaning they hold for those who live in these communities.

We have chosen a narrative approach to our work as a research and evaluation team because we are interested in story as a way of understanding and documenting the meaning of rural life to those who live in rural areas. Storytelling is a central aspect of human experience. It is, in Eliot Mishler's (1986) words, "one of the significant ways individuals construct and express meaning" (pp 67-68). The act of telling one's story is as much social and political as is it personal; it is an inherently relational act that links past and present and connects us to ourselves as well as to our listeners within a particular cultural, temporal and relational context. We weave strands of our lives together in narratives that are meant not simply to communicate what we know but to *make sense* of what we know;

to help us understand our own actions and the actions of others (MacIntyre, 1981; Mishler, 1986).

From a research perspective, "story" is a unique kind of social history that is told both by those who are at its center and those who seek to record it for a larger purpose. The story we seek to tell is concerned not only with documenting the details of life in rural communities but also with capturing the diversity of their people. Clearly, there is no one rural story or one rural voice. The coastal villages of Maine are not the same as the backwater towns of Mississippi; the open regions of the great plains are vastly different from the dense forests of the Northeast Kingdom; and the soaring mountains of the Northwest are a far cry from the coal-packed mountains of Appalachia. And yet, many traditional forms of research and evaluation do not accommodate these differences.

A fundamental premise of most narrative approaches to research is that narrative privileges language and culture in the meaning-making process (Tappan & Packer, 1991). Thus, focusing on narratives allows the diversity in rural areas not only to be recognized, but to be preserved in and throughout the research process. Perhaps more importantly, narrative and storytelling allow diverse voices to speak with the authority of their own experiences, thereby, helping us to hear and to see more clearly what might be unique to each place.

Many of the existing stories from rural areas have been preserved and passed on through folk ways and oral traditions that are so much a part of the culture of rural life. Told in word and in song, they are rife with a wisdom born of generations of men, women and children whose lives were shaped by the lessons of the land that sustained them. Storytelling was an art form in many rural communities and served as both entertainment and as a way of keeping the history of a particular place. Song, particularly ballads and even dance were also popular forms of storytelling and were often used to record special events or happenings in the community. These creative expressions contain far more than the facts and details of a particular time period, place, or event. They constitute the cultural heritage of entire regions of rural America — their folk ways, their arts and their traditions (Clapp, 1939). As such, it is important for us to consider carefully what each of these traditions contributes to the larger narrative of rural life, both then and now.

To enter rural places through the work of their artists — to read their poetry, to sing their songs, to play their music, or to feel the rhythm of their dance *is* to tell their story. Here we join rural people at the threshold of their living where struggle and courage collide and creativity is born. These were the moments that made living life at the bone bearable (Sayers, 1974), and out of them grew a faith in themselves and a belief in their ability to survive.

In pursuing narratives of rural people and their communities we seek to communicate an account of rural life that contains both personal and cultural meaning as well as historical fact. A good story is one that communicates — not just facts, but a vibrant, palpable sense of the life, the people, the context, and the events that they represent. The true power of story, however, lies not simply in its recording, but rather in its telling. In order for stories to remain alive and vital parts of our on-going life narratives they must be told and re-told. And it is this process of telling and re-telling life stories that links our past to our present and points the way to our future.

The Story of Rural Life

Part I. The Beginning

We have been repeatedly warned that we cannot know where we wish to go if we do not know where we have been.

Wendell Berry

It is difficult today to imagine ourselves a predominantly rural people, with a greater reliance on nature than on commerce or technology for our subsistence. And yet, for centuries prior to the earliest European settlers and for several hundred years afterward that is precisely how the majority of people lived in this place. Even at late as 1850, little more than 10% of the population of the United States lived in cities, only nine of which were larger than 50,000 people (Degler, 1970). Though our identity as a rural people had waned dramatically by the turn of the century, the fact remains that until this time, the vast wilderness, what settlers referred to as the roaming free lands, had been, perhaps, the single most defining feature of this nation and its people.

In this century, numerous social, political, and ecological movements have attempted to stem the widespread urbanization of our country with varying degrees of success. Though the intention of many such movements was to preserve the environment and support rural life, the pervasiveness of urban influence was evident even in some of the more prominent efforts. Of President Roosevelt's reasons for the establishment of the Country Life Commission in 1908, Carl Degler (1970) writes:

> *It was the President himself who asked, "How can the life of a farm family be made less solitary, fuller of opportunity, freer from drudgery, more comfortable, happier, and more attractive?" Such a question was itself a severe indictment of what life on the farm was. And when the Commission had completed its inquiry, it reported in the same vein as the President's charge: "Agriculture is not commercially as profitable as it is entitled to be for the labor and energy that the farmer expends and the risks that he assumes" (no one seemed willing to admit that the farmer was now a producer in a market in which the supply was far outrunning the demand) "and . . . the social conditions in the open country are far short of their possibilities." In brief, farming was hardly the wholesome, satisfying existence American had thought it was; the problem of "How you gonna' keep 'em down on the farm" long antedated any visit to Paree (p. 327).*

I do not mean to suggest that either President Roosevelt or the Country Life Commission was anti-rural; on the contrary, the report contains many examples of the benefits of country living. In fact, in many ways, the report echoes sentiments of agricultural historians and popular writers of the day who believed that farm life offered greater economic security and a healthier and more stable living than did city life (Harvey, 1894; Johnstone, 1940). Still, the reach of urban influence was felt with growing frequency in rural areas across the country. And as the lure of the city grew stronger, the ways of city

life seemed to become the norm by which all other styles and standards of living would be measured.

In rural areas, nowhere was this more evident than in the clash of old and new ideas about farm size and productivity. It is here that the sentiment embodied in the phrase, "bigger is better" found its foothold in rural life, an ideological shift that would eventually result in massive changes in both the structure and lifestyle of rural communities. Ironically, it is the very same ideological foothold that many rural communities today are trying to loosen. With current initiatives in areas such as education, economic development, and the environment, rural communities are mounting a new resistance to an old problem.

Still, revitalizing rural communities will require more than simply loosening an ideological foothold. I would also add that the plight of rural communities today is not just a problem affecting rural people. In Garret Keizer's (1988) words, "civilization begins with agriculture" (p. 22), meaning, of course, that the *civitas* cannot exist without farmers producing enough food to sustain it and themselves. The problem, as Keizer sees it, is that too many people have "come to regard rural and urban as opposites rather than complements" (p. 23). If in fact we are as historically interdependent as Keizer suggests, then it seems clear that the future of rural communities and rural ways of living depends, in part, on how much we as a nation are willing to invest in our own history. But before we can invest in it, we have to know it and know what led us away from it; in short, we need to know the lessons of our past that will help us take new steps toward ensuring our future.

Part II. The Exodus

I have dreamed on this mountain since first I was my mother's
daughter and you can't just take my dreams away, not with me watching . . You
may drive a big machine, but I was born a great big woman
and you can't just take my dreams away, without me fighting. . .

Holly Near

There is something extraordinary about the human spirit under siege that somehow finds its way to rise in the face of incredible hardship and oppression, infusing hearts and bodies with a strength that comes not from the struggle itself, but from the dream of living beyond it. Dreams such as these are born of defiance wherever life or ways of living are threatened. They find hope in the ancient and enduring wisdom of the land. Above all, they refuse to lie down beneath the turning wheels of change — not while there is one left to watch, one left to fight, one left to tell the story of the mountain and the generations of daughters and sons she bore to this land.

In a way, rural areas have been under siege for most of the last two centuries. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the mechanization of farms led to a radical shift away from a small, family-based agrarian culture to large-scale production both in the farming industry and in factories across the United States. This shift that began in the Civil War, found its apotheosis in the heavy globalization of American culture that began

with the end of World War II (Degler, 1970). But it was the accumulative effect of a series of tragic events that directly preceded the war that made this time such a defining moment in the history of rural life in this country.

In 1931, following the depression, farmers all across the mid-west struggled, many in vain, to sustain their farms through one of the worst droughts in history. The heavy dust-storms that followed one year later ravaged the land and left farmers with little hope of survival (Fitchen, 1991). With the help of government and private relief efforts, some chose to stay and rebuild their farms; many others, however left the countryside for good and went in search of work in urban areas where jobs and industry were fast on the rise. As the country moved rapidly toward greater urbanization, the way of the farmer was quickly growing dim (Degler, 1970).

The second great migration from rural areas to cities began in earnest at the end of World War II when millions joined in the effort to build highways connecting the major urban centers across the country — what some believe to be the largest public construction project since the building of the Roman Empire. They came from every corner of the country, black and white, men, women and children, most looking for work. Many were lured away by the bright lights of city life, but there were other reasons, as well. In the south, black families headed north, desperately trying to flee a life bounded by fear and racism. In droves, they fled to the cities of Chicago, New York, Detroit and Cleveland in search of "work, bread, and not least, the promise of a new life — the vote, the dignity of citizenship, release from a fear the sheriff and his deputies, or a lynch mob, constantly imposed" (Coles, 1977; xiii).

The enormity of the impact of these migrations from Rural America on the urbanization of this country has yet to be rivaled. The tide had turned, and the agrarian way of life would never again know the prominence it had enjoyed before this time. But perhaps the greatest tragedy of these events was that we as a people would very quickly begin to lose not only our reliance on the land but also our understanding of the necessity of its great resources in our lives. Cities were bigger, faster, more efficient, and seemingly more economical. All of this meant more resources and more opportunity for less cost. But even those who remained in rural areas would feel the strong arm of this new ideology taking hold in their communities. The new wave of cost effective living had arrived; in rural communities that spelled consolidation.

Part III. The War and Fallout of Consolidation

The years that followed the great out-migrations from rural areas to urban centers were marked by enormous economic hardship. It was during this period of economic crisis that the consolidation movement was ushered in, and its impact felt almost immediately in rural areas across the country. Few aspects of rural life escaped its reach. Family farms, which had been the foundation of rural economy, were bought out in many rural areas by large corporate owners. But these new owners, as Wendell Berry (1995) points out, had a new agenda for farming practices. Reliance on the sun as a "cheap, clean, and . . . limitless energy" source was abandoned in favor of the "expensive, filthy, and limited energy of the fossil fuels" (p. 2). Further, farmers were replaced by machines and chemicals while these large corporations "bought cheap and sold high the products that, as a

result of this agenda, have been increasingly difficult for farmers to produce" (p. 3).

Education in rural areas also suffered the so-called "benefits" of consolidation. Small community schools were closed and the children sent to newer, larger regional schools. The ruling notion supporting this plan, of course, was that bigger was better — that larger schools would be more efficient and have more resources than the smaller schools. But embedded in this notion was also the prevailing attitude about the inadequacies of rural life and the "backwards" or simple nature of rural people. In his brilliant account of the life of tenant farmers in the south, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee (1939, 1988) wrote eloquently about the problem of seeing, or rather, *not* seeing rural people, particularly rural children as having any hope of receiving the advantages of a qualified education. To consider the centralization of resources in the education of rural children as the best solution to the economic hardships of small-town schools is to overlook the wealth of knowledge, sensibility and history embodied in the relationship between a community and its children (Casey, 1997). Consolidation, the primary aim of which has been to save costs while improving rural education, has been described as the single most damaging policy decision regarding the quality of schooling and sustainability of rural communities made in this century (Monk, 1991; Stephens, 1991; Sher, 1986).

There have been a significant number of arguments made opposing consolidation, also on the basis of cost, though not so much in a monetary sense as in a cultural sense. There is no dollar value that can be easily assigned to the personal interactions between teachers and students, schools and communities or the individualized instruction and family-like atmosphere that were traditionally seen as strengths of rural schools. It is difficult to imagine how the relative gains of consolidation could begin to compensate for the loss of such valuable cultural capital (Miller, 1993; Monk, 1991). In the foreword to *Education in Rural America,* Robert Coles (1977) argues that consolidation represents a greater threat to the well-being of rural children and their families than the problems associated with living in small towns with limited resources. In his view, consolidation is modernization's assault on the values of rural life: "All too often, rural children are not so much short-changed by inadequate school facilities, books, and supplies — the physical or technological side of education — as by a more insidious, and arguably, more dangerous assault . . .[on their] intelligence and sensibility . . . in the name of "modernization" or "progress" (xiv-xv).

While the resistance has grown stronger in recent years, opponents of consolidation began speaking out not long after it started. Joyce Stern (1994), explains how, despite efforts to provide contrary evidence to the perceived wisdom of consolidation as a course of action, these arguments went unheard, or at least unheeded. She writes:

> *Nearly 30 years ago, a study was released comparing certain non-academic outcomes in small and large high schools in Kansas (Barker & Gump, 1964). The researchers found clear evidence of affective advantages for students in smaller schools, for example greater participation in school activities, sports and greater personal satisfaction (Fowler, 1992). The 1964 study received little attention, at the time; rather the country soon after experienced widespread efforts to enlarge schools and districts. These state policies stemmed from recommendations made by James Conant, president of Harvard University, who argued in 1967 that high*

school classes of at least 100 were needed for curriculum comprehensiveness, particularly in the study of foreign language and advanced subjects. Successive waves of consolidation, including that following the Conant recommendations reduced the number of school districts from a high of 128,000 in 1932 to 22,000 by the end of the 60's. There are currently under 15,000 school districts (p. 55).

At present, there is no strong evidence of the benefits that proponents of consolidation claimed it would provide for rural school districts (Rincones, 1988; Sher, 1995) On the contrary, findings of more recent studies suggest that schooling in smaller environments has a more positive effect on all levels of student performance and attitudes toward schooling (Fowler, 1992; Walberg & Fowler, 1987). What is clear, however, is that the consolidation of rural schools has succeeded in stretching, and in some cases, even severing the bonds that have historically linked schools and their communities. It is a growing belief that a key element in the success of rural school reform is the level of community involvement. This means, however, that rural communities need to be as much a focus of study and revitalization as schools. Shifting the focus from schools to communities will hardly be an easy task. In this area there is still much work to be done.

Part IV. The Current Stories in Rural Research

While the literature reflects a dramatic increase in research in rural education over the last 10 years, a major focus of many of these studies has been schools — mainly, policy issues related to school reform, consolidation, curriculum development and rural economic decline (Seal & Hobart, 1995; Fitchen, 1991; Reid & Frederick, 1990). Other main areas of research in rural education include outcome studies identifying predictors of academic performance (Monk & Haller, 1993; Monk, 1991; Cobb, McIntire & Pratt, 1989); dropout rates, (Smith, Beaulieu, and Israel, 1992; Sherman, 1992); and a number of comparative studies highlighting urban and rural differences (Pollard and O'Hare, 1990; Haller and Virkler, 1992; Coladarci and McIntire, 1988).

Since the findings of these studies are largely grounded in national, aggregated data, the profiles of rural education that they can provide are limited. A serious implication of national or regional-based studies is that these data tend to gloss over or obscure important differences that show the diversity in rural areas in terms of population, geography, culture, and language within and across states. And while each of these studies appears to promote a genuine concern for the lives and welfare of rural youth, few seem to focus on what is good about their actual experience of rural life (Fowler & Walberg, 1991, Smithmier, 1994). Further, it is clear from a review of current literature on rural areas, particularly rural education, that there is a critical need for more careful and systematic studies of the relationships between rural schools and their communities (Casey, 1997).

As was mentioned earlier, another significant problem in the existing literature on rural life is the negative frame in which it has often been cast. In many studies, rurality is often synonymous with deficiency - - rural schools are depicted as too small, offering too narrow a curriculum and lacking the resources necessary for their own survival (Howley & Howley, 1995). The claim that these problems might exist is not in dispute; that it contains the implicit notion that such risk factors are inherent in rural life, however, is

open to dispute.

Even more troubling is the tendency, where schools are seen as deficient, to assign the same label, by association, to rural students. The result is a kind of negative stereotyping of rural youth that is pervasive and one that places them at psychological, as well as academic risk. What is needed is a definition of the term rural that is authentic to those who identify as rural people and rural communities — a redefining of the term based on experience rather than stereotypes, characteristics rather than caricatures, qualities rather than quantities, and values rather than products.

Part V. The Problem of Definition

Any conversation about rural areas inevitably leads to the problem of defining what is meant by "rural." The diversity of landscapes is so vast that it is impossible to find simple descriptors that connote a general sense of rural place. Depending on what part of the country we live in, the word rural could bring to mind images of flat lands or rolling hills; corn or wheat fields; acres lined with fruit trees, vegetables, cotton, or tobacco. Our mountains may range from dense forest to barren rock, to snow and ice, or to massive ascents of red clay, shimmering in the haze of an unforgiving sun. And though generally we are slower to think of our oceans and waterways as rural places, they too, possess qualities of wilderness unique to marsh lands and to certain coastal areas. While these images provide a good sense of the range of rural regions in this country it is clear that there is not one definition that would apply to all of them.

If the diversity of rural settings makes finding a suitable and comprehensive definition of rural a challenging task, what is even more problematic is that too often we frame the question solely on the basis of *what*, rather than *who* we mean by rural. It is important to consider that the term carries a cultural as well as a descriptive meaning. What is at issue here is not simply establishing criteria for a community's rurality; at its core, rural holds in its meaning the personal, social and cultural identity of a people and their way of life, and it is this deeper meaning of the term that is too often overlooked or dismissed.

But even here we find distortion. As Jonathan Sher (1977) writes: "One popular image of rural America is that of an agglomeration of farmers and farm workers. Yet, as of 1975, over 80 percent of America's rural population neither lived nor worked on farms (p. 1)." The fact is that the major industries in rural areas are no longer agriculturally-based or even related to natural resources (Stern, 1994). If it is true that these images are archaic, then clearly we need to adjust our perceptions to meet the present reality of rural life. These notions of rural people, rural communities and rural conditions, however, all stem from one basic question: what do we mean by rural?

A common definition of rural America is as much based on what it is not than what it is; to put it another way, rural is simply the opposite of urban — it *is* whatever urban *isn't* (Fitchen, 1991; Sher, 1977). According to the US Census Bureau, rural is assigned as a demographic label to areas with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants. A community's rurality is usually measured by population density, number of square miles of open farmland or country, and distance from the nearest urban or metropolitan area. Because of the fact that state governments have the authority to define rurality according to their own statutes

there is no consistency in either the use or the application of the term from state to state. In some states, "rural" and "non-metropolitan" are used interchangeably, even though the term "non-metropolitan" refers to counties outside of large metropolitan areas of 50,000 or more (Stern, 1994). While the differences between these two terms could not be more evident, the fact that they are used interchangeably in some areas highlights the need for a more accurate definition of rural.

To many who live in rural areas, however, the term is much more than a statistic. Rural conveys a sense of identity and lifestyle, as well as certain values, beliefs and customs. Descriptors such as close-knit, family-like, personal touch, and local pride are considered valued characteristics of rural community life (Haas & Lambert, 1995; Sher, 1995). Other characteristics of rural life include a philosophy of living that is democratically-based, socially egalitarian and fiercely independent (Beaver, 1986; Herzog & Pitman, 1995; Sher, 1977).

These last three characteristics — democracy, egalitarianism, and independence have historically been considered foundational ideological elements of rural life. The isolation and remoteness that was common to most rural areas at one time in this country imbued both the individual and the community with a sense of governing power that was far greater than that of the state or federal authority. People in rural communities relied on themselves for providing the necessary care, order, and infrastructure needed to raise and educate their children, to support their economy, to attend to their spiritual and healthcare needs, and to maintain an honest and healthy way of life.

Democratic ideals, tempered by a strong sense of justice and fairness thrived in these areas, as did a sense of independence, witnessed most clearly in rural folks' distrust of "big government." It could be argued that local governance represented the core of their lives, where life was guided, more often than not, by the democratic principles of social equality and respect for all members of a given community. Maintaining these principles was central to who they were as rural people; consequently, it was also a matter of deep personal and communal pride (Agee, 1939; Beaver, 1986). Myles Horton (1990) once wrote that the basic tenet of democracy is a belief in a people's capacity to develop the skill and ability to govern themselves. Whatever these early rural communities lacked in resources or opportunity they made up for in a belief in themselves that was unwavering.

Today, many rural people still uphold the principles of democracy, equality and independence as core features of their communities. And yet, in light of continuing economic decline, advances in technology, widespread access to the internet, and other factors associated with urban expansion, it might be more accurate to say that these principles represent the rural ideal rather than the rural reality. For one thing, few rural areas are as isolated as they once were, making local governance somewhat more difficult to contain to local influence and assessment. Moreover, as the on-going annexation of rural areas, in the wake of urban sprawl and the out-migration of rural youth, continues, rural communities are finding themselves in a precarious position; not only is the viability of rural life threatened, so too, is a philosophy of living that is supported and made possible by the social, environmental and economic conditions unique to country life (Miller, 1993).

Whether or not these principles represent an ideal or a reality, one thing is certain: that they hold within them the blueprint of a way of life that is currently struggling to reclaim its place and its voice in the heart of this country. And as this struggle gains

momentum, many rural communities across the country are taking stock of where they are, where they have come from and reassessing where they go from here. In the process, many have come to realize that the essential question in this reclaiming of place and voice is not what does rural mean, but rather what does it mean to *be* rural. What is at stake here is not simply a philosophy or an ideology, but a social, spiritual, political and psychological identity that is distinctly rural.

The importance of rural identity was underscored in a passionate and moving address to a gathering at the recent Rural Challenge Rendezvous in Granby, Colorado, by Devin Smither, a high school student from Ed-Couch Elsa, Texas. In his comments, Devin referred to the cultural differences in rural areas across the country as the "detail", the "specificity" that defines rural people:

> *The reason that I am up here today is that I have discovered something about the Rural Challenge, but also about rural as a quality, as something that is appreciated in an aesthetic sense. It is not the general sense of the word that people are here for. It is the specific one, the one that is detailed. We are here to celebrate and encourage our own different forms of rurality. That is the entire point of our presence here, it seems to me. We are trying to keep from being swindled into believing that urbanity is the world, that it is all that matters. We are also trying to avoid a worse fate. We are saving ourselves from being sucked back into the black hole that is lost identity, the belief in our uselessness. We are attempting to defy what up until recently seemed an eventual certainty. And it is not through our use of the word rural that we will succeed, but through our individual identities.*

The issue of identity is a key concern in the writings of many rural authors. In a marvelous autobiographical account of his life as a teacher in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, Garret Keizer (1988) uses allegory and metaphor to describe the ways in which rural communities define the people who live there; rural is not just a place, it is the context — it is *who* they are:

> *I am writing an essay on teaching in a rural community. It is that simply because a rural community is the only place in which I have taught. Rurality is my context more than my subject, though to some extent it must be both. I write . . . .not as a soldier would write about making war in a desert — where lack of water and cover define the very strategy — but as a lover might write about his affair in a village, where the mountains and verandahs have determined the moods and the occasions of love, but have made the loving itself little different than it is everywhere else. At least this is what I suppose — as I say, I have taught no place else but here (p. 3).*

And in *Growin' Up Country* (1989), a collection of songs, poems, reflections and autobiographical accounts of growing up in Appalachia, Susan, a woman from Logan County, West Virginia begins a story of her childhood in this way:

> *You ask me to tell you who I am. I understand your reason, but I shy away from saying, for I am a product of my experiences and my being is so closely tied to the*

history of my people. I can best relate who I am now by telling you where I've been. Three things have been constantly with me through my whole development — coal, poverty, and my family. When I was little, that was the whole world (p. 50).

The history of any people must include those characteristics that define them and set them apart as uniquely diverse from those who are members of other communities. Or as Susan suggests, we cannot say who we really are without knowing the history of our people and where they've been. But *where they've been* is not, as Garret Keizer suggests, just a place; rather it is the context, or the basis of who they are. In rural life, *community* is the context; as such, it is, as anthropologist, Janet Fitchen (1991) suggests, the social and symbolic basis of rural identity. Fitchen argues that it is the psychological sense, more than just the physical sense of community, that supports and promotes a sense of belonging, "not only *to* a place, but *in* its institutions and *with* its people" (p. 253). Bruce Miller (1993) of the Northwest Regional Laboratory agrees. In an article on the importance of community in rural survival he argues that "the psychological sense of community may be the pivotal axis upon which successful community development turns" (p. 87). The point is, community, as a social and symbolic entity, represents the collective body of individuals who contribute to and rely on the whole for their sense of identity — of *who* they are.

The three institutions that are considered central features of all rural communities are family, church, and school. While all three play a vital role in the life of their communities, schools are currently seen as having the greatest chance of making a significant impact in the movement to revitalize rural life (Miller, 1993; Sher, 1995; Stern, 1994). In her summary of the findings in the 1994 U.S. Department of Education report, *The Condition of Education in Rural Schools*, editor, Joyce Stern remarked that the bond between rural schools and their communities was not only a valued element of rural life but it was also identified as a potentially powerful resource to rural communities as they struggle to maintain their viability. She writes:

The link between the community and the school is a defining feature of most rural settlements and can be a major source of strength to its citizens and to the quality of education offered there. Many communities are exploring new avenues for this relationship to the mutual benefit of the school and community (p. 69)."

While there may not be a single definition of rural that satisfies all places and perspectives, what seems elemental to all notions of rural is the centrality of land in rural people's lives. Land is the spatial basis of rural identity (Fitchen, 1991) and in almost every rural community it is considered its most valuable resource (Keizer, 1988; Beaver, 1986). It is also the central organizing feature of what we mean when we speak about preserving the commonwealth of our communities (Berry, 1995).

The relationship between land and community is far from symbolic; the borders of any rural community are defined, not by street posts but by the land on which its members live. But land is also the spatial grounding of the social relationships within a given community (Fitchen, 1991). These relationships among families, neighbors, and other individuals form the boundaries of the social community which, in turn, forms boundaries

of the space in which they reside. Therefore, definitions of rural are determined, at least in part, by the relationships of land and people that are bound together in communities of diverse rural places and configurations all across the country.

Such reciprocity between community and land is possible, however, only when a long-term investment has been made by a particular community in a particular place. In almost all rural communities, membership in the community is determined by the length of time a family or an individual has lived there. It can take newcomers to a rural community as much as two or three generations of their offspring living there before being confirmed as "one of us." And the longer people stay in one place, they become more one with the land on which they are living. So it is quite common to hear local folks refer to a particular house or farm as the "McClean's place," for instance, long after the McCleans no longer lived there.

To reside in a place, however, is not only to live there for a long time but also to be vested in that place. Historically, land was the foundation on which communities built not just their homes, but their dreams and hopes for the future. For generations in the lives of rural people, the land has been their legacy as well as their livelihood. And although fewer rural families today are actually making a living on their land, the sense of its place and importance in their lives remains strong and vital (Beaver, 1986; Fitchen, 1991).

Part VI. Bringing It All Back Home

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
T.S. Eliot

All explorations begin with a question. Presumably, we explore something so we can know it better and then, hopefully, teach others what we have learned. Where our questions lead us, and what they can teach us, however, depends on how well we are able to commit ourselves to being learners. As Myles Horton (1990) says, "education is what happens to the other person, not what comes out of the mouth of the educator" (p. 131).

In the process of writing this paper I realized, also, that "education is what happens" when we believe that there is something worth learning. In listening for the story of rural life I have learned that there are many stories, told from many different perspectives and in many different voices. As there is no one definition of rural, likewise, there is no one story of rural life. But there is a story that needs telling, one that relates a better sense of the urgency and shifting ground that many rural communities today are experiencing. And as the ground shifts, so must the story. Old definitions of rural need to be re-negotiated to fit the new reality. Keeping alive images that are outdated for the sake of nostalgia is just not good enough; to treat rural people and places this way is to suggest that there is nothing new to say about rural areas, or worse, nothing real about rural areas left to tell.

What I have learned, or perhaps re-learned is that to some extent we are all rural

people, at least by virtue of our inheritance as citizens of a nation that for generations lived an agrarian existence. This is our history, if not our experience. And it is a proud history, one that has, for better or for worse, shaped the conversation that we now find ourselves engaged in across many cultures and places, diverse in multiple ways, yet, all distinctly rural. In small movements here and there, the dream of rural life as a viable existence has survived, tucked away in the mountains of Appalachia and the great western plains, in the wheat fields of the mid-west and the cotton fields of the south, in the desert plains of the southwest and the forests of the northeast kingdom. And others have joined this rural movement and have taken up the challenge to strengthen rural communities and to teach our children about the places where they live and about the great resources of nature. This is what the Rural Challenge is all about — making rural communities a vital part of our way of life in this country and a vital part of our story as a people.

Today, as in the past, these movements are inspired by those who understand and appreciate the importance of place and of the ecology that supports and makes a place distinct. Philosophers, naturalists, educators, researchers, and poets, alike, have been writing for years about the endangered state of natural environments in this country. Wordsworth recognized the danger we faced in turning away from what he saw as an intrinsic connection between ourselves and nature. In his sonnet, "The world is too much with us; late and soon," his opening words read as an indictment of our society, which he suggests has been so taken by the false wealth of the mechanized world that we have set nature aside and, in so doing, we have wasted our most powerful and valuable resource:

The world is too much with us; late and soon
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

To lose sight of ourselves in Nature is to lose touch with a vital part of the essence of who we are as a people — our identity, our sense of rootedness, of place, of the road leading from our past and the road that stretches out before us toward our future. In the wake of this massive urban tide it could be said that we no longer find ourselves enchanted with nature; we have conquered it, mechanized it and in so doing we have "given our hearts away, a sordid boon." Perhaps we would do well to recall the words recited by thousands of young people across the United States who have pledged their lives and their resources to the preservation of the land. There is no better example, no finer inspiration for the work we have set about to do than the creed of the Future Farmers of America. We include it here, in its entirety:

I believe in the future of farming with a faith born not of words but of deeds — achievements won by the present and past generations of agriculturists; in the promise of better days through better ways, even as the better things we now enjoy have come to us through the struggles of former years.
I believe that to live and work on a good farm, or to be engaged in other agricultural pursuit, is pleasant as well as challenging; for I know the joys and discomforts of agricultural life hold an inborn fondness for those associations which,

even in hours of discouragement, cannot deny.
I believe in leadership from ourselves and respect from others. I believe in my own ability to work efficiently and think clearly, with such knowledge and skill as I can secure, and in the ability of progressive agriculturists to serve our own and the public interest in producing and marketing the product of our toil.
I believe in less dependence on begging and more power in bargaining; in the life abundant and enough honest wealth to help make it so — for others as well as myself; in less need for charity and more of it when needed; in being happy myself and playing square with those whose happiness depends upon me.
I believe that rural America can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community which will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task.

Where we go from here is a question that occupies a place in the hearts and minds of all who are invested in the future of rural communities. For *our* part, it seems that the time has come to reclaim the story that was once not simply a story, but a proud and sustaining existence. In our work, the challenge is for us to render our hearing of the story of rural life in a way that honors the experiences of those who have lived it and those of us who wish to contribute to its on-going preservation. And while there will be many ways to account for where we have been and what we have heard and seen and done, it may be that the full measure of our learning will be clear to us when, as the poet, T.S. Eliot suggests, upon reaching the end of all our exploring we shall again "arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

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