ENDANGERED SPACES, ENDURING PLACES

Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America

Janet M. Fitchen

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With illustrations by
Sandra Rosenzweig Gittelman

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Contents

1 Introduction: Rural America in a Time of Change 1

A Troubled Decade in Rural America, 2
The Fast Pace of Change in the Late 1980s, 3
Rural New York in a Time of Change, 5
The Purposes and Plan of This Book, 8

PART ONE
THE FARM CRISIS AND ITS CHALLENGE TO RURAL COMMUNITY LIFE

2 Dairy Farms in a Time of Change: Struggle for Survival 15

The Farming Way of Life, 15
Background: The Farm Crisis and Dairy Farm Losses, 18
Farms in Stress, 20
Families in Stress, 25
Strategies for Farm Survival, 28
Strategies for Family Survival, 32
The Crisis Recedes—For Now, 35

3 Community Impacts: The Special Significance of Dairy Farm Losses 37

Impacts of the Farm Crisis on Community Economies, 37
Social Impacts of Farm Financial Problems, 40
The Deeper Impacts: Effects on Rural Identity, 44

PART TWO
SHIFTING NONFARM ECONOMIES

4 Paradox in Rural Economies: Vigor and Vulnerability 53

A Case Illustration: Changes and Contradictions in the North Country, 53

Changing Components of New York's Rural Economies, 58
Rural Economic Indicators: A Mixed Picture, 63
Vulnerability of Rural Manufacturing, 65

5 Plant Closings and Substitute Jobs: Labor Force for Sale 70

Case Studies of Plant Closings, 71
Common Threads and Implications, 76
Job Creation: Shortchanged by New Jobs, 78
Rural Employment Issues for the Future, 79

PART THREE
CHANGING RURAL POPULATIONS

6 People and Places: Demographic Change and Local Response 85

Signs of the Times: Observations at a Rural County Fair, 85
Overview of Recent Demographic Trends, 87
Local Trends: Population Loss, Household Change, and Aging, 89
Return Migration to Rural Communities, 91
New Year-Round Residents, 94
Land Development and the Nonresident Population, 96

7 Perceptions and Frictions: Problems in Accepting and Absorbing Newcomers 98

The Mythic Rural Community: Perceptions of Stasis and Stability, 98
The City Comes to the Country, 100
Blacks, Southerners, and "Others Who Are Different," 108
Stereotypes, Scapegoats, and Uneasiness with Change, 111

PART FOUR
WORSENING RURAL POVERTY

8 Poverty in Rural Places: Patterns and Changes 115

Rural Poverty Through the 1980s: National and Statewide Trends, 115

Portraits of Rural Poverty:
Three Residential Patterns, 118
Implications for Communities, 129

9 The Dynamics of Rural Impoverization:
Causes and Processes 131

Inadequacies in Rural Employment, 131
A Tighter Rural Housing Situation, 135
Instability and Insecurity of Family
Relationships, 142
Residential Mobility Within and Between
Rural Communities, 144
In-migration of Poverty to Rural Communities:
A National Trend? 146
A Complex, Troubled Situation
in Some Communities, 149

PART FIVE
PROVIDING COMMUNITY SERVICES
IN CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

10 Problems in Meeting Rural Service Needs 153

Consequences of a Cost-Effectiveness Model
for Rural Services, 154
Effects of Urban Service Delivery Trends
on Rural Services, 158
The Legacy of Outdated Rural Attitudes
About Human Services, 161

11 Local Innovation and Cooperation 164

New Local Institutional Efforts, 164
Localized Solutions to Local Problems, 172
Lessons Learned from Local Efforts, 176

PART SIX
CHANGES AND CHALLENGES
IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

12 Leadership and Local Government in Flux:
Changes in Who, What, and How 181

Shifts in Political Alignment and Influence:
Changes in the Who, 181
New and Dominating Issues for Local Governments:
Changes in the What, 185

Emerging Issues of Finance and Structure: Changes in the How, 190
Tensions Between Center and Periphery, 195

13 New Governmental Interactions Around a New Environmental Problem 198

Groundwater Contamination: A Rural Problem with State and Federal Dimensions, 198
Examples of Groundwater Problems Arising in Rural Communities, 200
Local Roles in Rural Environmental Problems, 208

PART SEVEN
NEW USES FOR RURAL LANDS: DUMPING GROUND FOR SOCIETY

14 Prisons in the Wilderness: The New Growth Industry of Rural New York 215

Rural Prisons for Urban Inmates, 215
Two Sides of the Prison Debate in Rural Communities, 217
Prison Effects: Some Benefits and Some Disappointments, 221
Establishing Realistic Expectations: Learning from Other Communities, 223

15 Waste Disposal: LLRW and Other LULUs 226

A Major Unwanted Land Use: Other People's Garbage, 227
LLRW—Low-Level Radioactive Wastes, 229
Understanding Resistance to the LLRW Facility, 236
From Farmland to Dump Site: An Unnatural Succession, 240

PART EIGHT
RURAL IDENTITY AND SURVIVAL

16 What Then Is Rural? Challenges to Rural and Community Identity 245

Rural Defined, 246
Land as the Spatial Basis of Rural Identity, 250
Community as the Social/Symbolic Basis of Rural Identity, 253

Changes in Rural Realities; Challenges to Community Identity, 255
Updating Community Ideology and Image, 259

17 Ensuring the Survival of Rural Places 266

Federal and State Roles in Endangering or Ensuring Survival of Rural Communities, 266
Utilizing Rural Initiative, Institutions, and Energy, 270
"Options" and "Futures": Issues for Survival of Rural Communities in a Changed and Changing World, 272
Why It Matters, 278

Appendix One: Anthropological Approach to Studying Change in Rural Communities 281
Appendix Two: Selected Data on the Four Core Research Counties 286
References 289
About the Book and Author 303
Index 304

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Rural America in a Time of Change

From time to time in this urbanized, postindustrial society, images of rural and agricultural life flicker across the screen of national consciousness, evoking memories and myths of an agrarian past and provoking a passing awareness of current rural realities. In the mid-1980s, the farm crisis rose to the forefront of national attention, featured in the nightly news, television documentaries, commercial films, and print journalism. It was a gripping story, with homicides in heartland and grim prophesies of "death of the family farm." Gradually, however, farm families and family farms both faded from public attention. As the farm crisis slipped out of awareness, so too did rural America. Though its vast stretches and thousands of small communities hold over one-fifth of the U.S. population, rural America's problems are scarcely able to hold the attention of the rest of the nation.

One reason for the limited attention paid to rural issues is simply that urban problems seem so much bigger and closer to most citizens. Second, most Americans have only a minimal knowledge of rural America to serve as a background for the media stories of rural events and crises. Each event is just happening somewhere out there in the vast unknown of rural America. And third, each rural issue or problem that we hear about comes to us separated from every other issue or problem affecting rural places. Thus, even those people who are concerned about rural America develop little sense of the whole, little sense of the way the problems and events interact with each other and how together they affect the lives of people and communities.

This book provides the needed context and wholeness for understanding changes presently occurring in and to rural America. It does so by taking a local-level approach, focusing on actual rural places and specific changes. For example, what happens to rural workers when a small-town factory closes down and moves away as part of a national trend toward overseas assembly? How do national and regional housing trends cause poverty to become worse in some rural communities? And as the nation looks for places to house its growing prison population and to store its waste products, why do some rural communities campaign to receive a prison and others mount protest movements against radioactive wastes? Although such changes, issues, and problems sweeping across rural America are national—even international—in cause and scope, it

is in actual communities that the impacts of changes for individual lives and social institutions are felt. Hence, research for this book *about* rural America has been conducted *in* rural America.

Many rural spaces, the settings of rural life, are now endangered by a variety of societal forces. Some rural places, the social matrices of rural life, are now in serious stress or decline, and some will disappear. But many rural places will manage to adapt and survive into the twenty-first century, although transformed and redefined. They will endure as communities because their people are working hard to preserve what they value in rural life and at the same time adjust to an increasingly urbanized society.

A TROUBLED DECADE IN RURAL AMERICA

The turning over of the calendar to the start of the last decade of the twentieth century, revealing the looming presence of the twenty-first, provides an appropriate occasion for taking stock of the directions of community life in rural America. It is a time of reflection and questioning in many rural communities, and a time in which even the identity and meanings of rural life and rural community have become issues. The deep and pervasive impact of the decade of the 1980s on rural America has been summed up by former Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland as follows: "At the end of the decade, it is clear that the troubles of rural America have deeper roots than comparatively short-term crises such as drought and farm foreclosures. The economic restructuring occurring in rural America in the 1980s has had dramatic social and economic consequences that are contributing to the decline of the quality of family and community life in rural areas" (Bergland 1988, p. 29). In one rural New York county, an economic development specialist concluded, "Like it or not, we're going through gut-wrenching change here." A probation officer in another community pondered, "Can we really consider ourselves rural any more?" Like so many others, these people wonder, Will the communities to which they devote such time, energy, and love still be around as functioning communities by the time their children mature? And if so, will their children stay? These are the personal ways in which the larger issues facing rural communities are often phrased. These comments reveal the kinds of local perspectives on rural change that are woven together in this book.

Change is nothing new in rural America. Broad societal trends and restructurings have been affecting rural areas since the founding of the nation, and the shape and fate of rural places has long been tied to what happens in urban areas. Now, however, many changes are occurring in a compressed period of time. The cumulative effect of this quickening pace challenges not only what goes on in rural communities but what people think about their communities and about their lives. In many rural places, the entire image of rural life is being called into question, and rural identity is becoming blurred.

THE FAST PACE OF CHANGE IN THE LATE 1980s

To keep the scope of this study manageable and to maximize familiarity with the context in which changes are occurring, I concentrated my research within a single geographic area, upstate New York. To introduce the study, I begin with a few brief vignettes from field notes taken between 1985 and 1990, during the course of research. Together these five glimpses indicate the kinds of changes and problems that will be discussed in depth in separate chapters of the book. They also illustrate the local-level, community-centered focus of the book and the effort to show how the changes touch and alter the lives of people living in rural places.

Performing Arts in the Cow Pasture

A center for performing arts was recently established on former hillside farmland in central New York State, attracting day visitors from the New York metropolitan area, along with weekend tourists and nearby vacation-home owners. The narrow dirt road that leads to the center bisects one of the county's waning number of economically viable dairy farms. On performance weekends in 1988, over 1,000 cars a day drove up the road right between the house and the cowbarn of this farm that has been in Pete's family for four generations. In Pete's view, the center is symptomatic of what is happening to farming in the area. He sees a future with further clashes between farms and the encroaching city. He forecasts that the current generation may be the last to farm in this valley: "My younger son is studying animal husbandry in college. I don't know if he will—if he should—take over the farm when he finishes."

A Village Factory Closes

In central New York, a factory that had been a mainstay employer for several hundred families in surrounding small towns suddenly announced at the end of 1988 that it would soon shut down and move its operations to Mexico. Through spring 1989, workers awaited their pink slips and began looking around to find other jobs. Martha, whose mother before her had worked in this factory, could only find a night-shift job in a smaller plant at a pay loss of $2.50 an hour. Her friend Ellen took a part-time job in a local fast-food restaurant for just over minimum wage. With the factory closing, each woman had lost a good job and had little hope of a satisfactory replacement. On a larger scale, the real loser was the community, which lost not only its major employer but a major community institution as well.

Housing Problems for Poorer Residents

In another central New York village, just as 1989 began, an owner of a large block of low-rent apartments suddenly announced that he and other landlords had arranged to sell over 100 apartments to a developer from the New York metropolitan area, who planned to renovate the buildings and sell the units individually as condominiums. Instantly, 100 low-income families were faced with losing their homes, trying to find a place to live at a price they could

afford—in the middle of the school year and in a rural area where there is almost no other low-rent housing available. Sandra had already been looking for a better place to live before the announcement came. The kitchen in her apartment has a ceiling panel missing where water leaked from upstairs, a broken window pane that had been covered with cardboard for months, and paint peeling from the walls. Outside the apartment, Sandra fears for the safety of her children and finds neighborhood social problems, sometimes exacerbated by alcohol and drugs, "depressing." But now she is frantic because "there just isn't anything else around that we can afford."

New State Prisons Spur Rapid Community Change

In the extreme north of New York State, local political, business, and economic development leaders had eagerly sought a state prison for the jobs it would bring to their depressed area. As spring mud turned to the dust of summer, one new prison at the edge of town was open, a second under construction. The entire village appeared to be a construction site: Main Street was completely torn up as part of a major project to ease the traffic congestion related to the new prisons. A lifelong resident looked out of the window of the just-completed new county office building and commented thoughtfully on the meaning of all the construction in the streets below. "This town's growing so fast now. The speed of its growth makes it seem like *everything* is changing. They tell us that as soon as Main Street construction is done, in two years, we'll be back to the way we were. But we won't; I know we won't. Too much is changing for things ever to go back to the way they have been. And it will take a long time for this county to get used to all these changes."

Rural Lands at Risk, Rural People Protecting Their Space

In the southwestern end of New York State on a wintry night in 1989, 5,000 people, 10 percent of the county's total population, showed up at a small-town high school for a public meeting. Farm families and college professors, businesspeople and school youngsters, local government officials and long-term unemployed residents—all were concerned and angry. The state of New York had just announced that some overgrown farmland in this county was being considered as a potential site for the state's low-level radioactive waste dump. This night marked the start of a long and active rural protest movement.

These five items taken from field observations indicate the span of this book: the whole array of changes occurring in and affecting rural communities in several regions of New York State in the late 1980s. Dairy farms were going through a very difficult period, and many family farms were lost. At the same time, the national trend of offshore manufacturing and the transition from manufacturing to service employment was delaying and weakening economic recovery after the recession, hitting hard in some unsuspecting rural communities. For rural people lacking up-to-date education and job skills, inadequate income increased their vulnerability in a tightening rental-housing market. In some communities, new state prisons were being sought and welcomed, though their social impacts made many residents uneasy. And some

communities suddenly found that their rural spaces were wanted by outside forces as a repository for dangerous materials. Although not all of these changes are occurring in any one community, most of them can be found in virtually every rural county of the state. Together, they are transforming the physical and social environment in which rural people live, the lives they lead, and their perceptions of their communities and themselves.

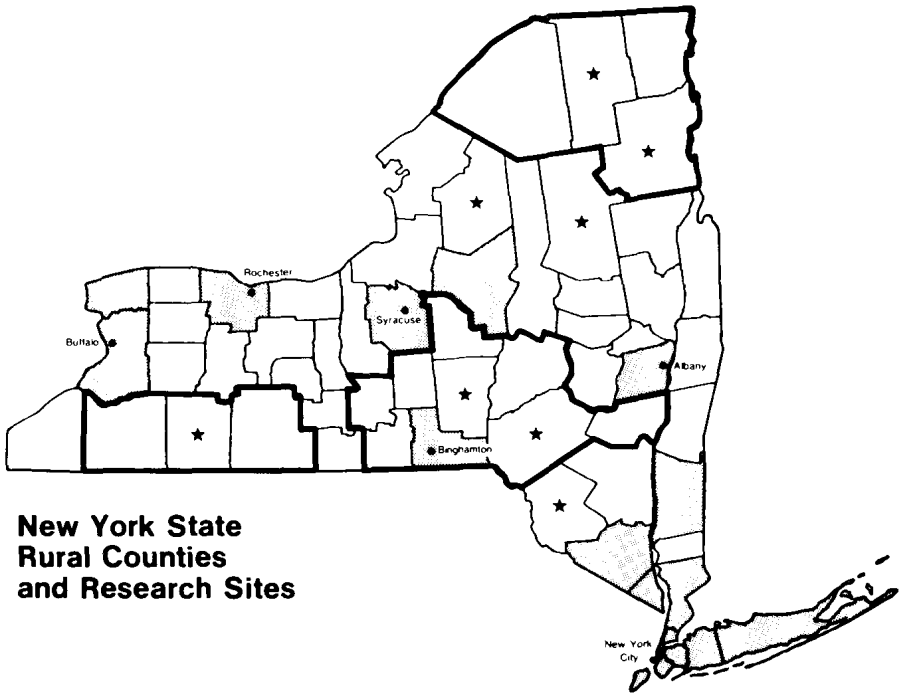
RURAL NEW YORK IN A TIME OF CHANGE

What Is Rural New York?

The phrase "rural New York" may strike some readers as an oxymoron, but it really is not a contradiction in terms. True, New York is undeniably an urban state, with one of the world's largest urban areas. New York City dominates the perception that most Americans, including many New Yorkers, have of the state. Nonetheless, the state still contains a lot of rural territory and many rural people, most of them spread over a vaguely defined region called "upstate," which also contains several metropolitan areas. Forty-four of the state's sixty-two counties are officially classified as "rural" (see Map 1.1). These officially rural counties contain 3 million people, representing 17 percent of the state's population. But rural New Yorkers for the most part are more densely packed than rural people in other states, and their greater proximity to metropolitan areas has major consequences in hastening and magnifying some of the changes now affecting rural life.

This large state contains many small places. There are 727 townships in rural New York, each with a governmental structure and municipal functions and responsibilities, and 324 incorporated villages. Some municipalities contain very small populations: One township has under 100 people; over 180 villages have populations under 1,000. One whole county contains only 5,000 people, and thirteen more have fewer than 50,000 people. And despite waves of consolidations forced by financial considerations, state pressures, or both, there are still ninety-one hospitals in the forty-four rural counties, and around 300 rural school districts, including some with fewer than 300 children in the entire school, kindergarten through twelfth grade. The small populations of these places, their small-scale governmental units, and their small institutions definitely convey a sense of rurality.

Ruralness in New York is not just a matter of numbers of people or communities, however, but also a matter of space and the uses of space. Over a quarter of the state's total land area (28 percent, or 8.5 million acres) is farmland. Agriculture composes a major sector of the state's economy, and New York ranks third in the nation in milk production and at or near the top in the production of several dairy products. Rural New York has much undeveloped countryside, including mountains,

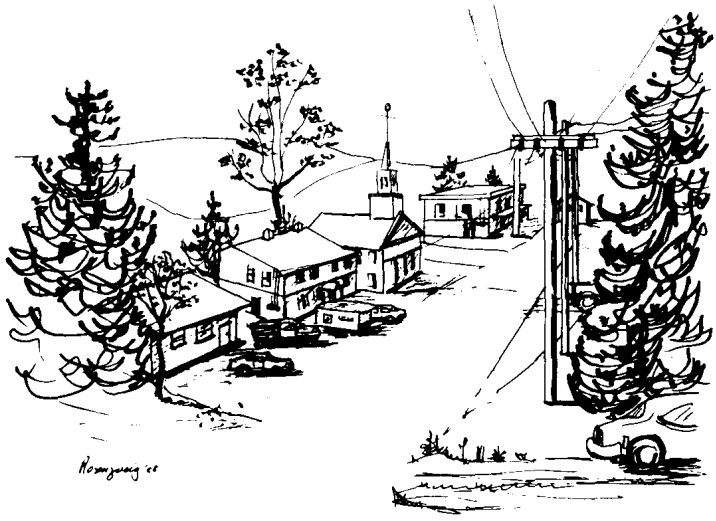


The 44 unshaded counties are officially 'rural' counties.
★ indicates the 8 counties classified as 'most rural' (Eberts and Khawaja 1988).
Bold outlined areas indicate the 16 counties where research was conducted.
The 18 shaded counties are metropolitan counties.

MAP 1.1

forests, and remote wilderness. Throughout upstate New York, there are miles and miles of back-country roads without any houses. More than 60 percent of the state's land is in forest cover, much of it actively maintained and harvested, some state owned, and some simply overgrown former farmland. In the 1980s, however, it suddenly became apparent that many chunks of undeveloped rural space were becoming developed—either for recreation and retirement homes or for new uses, such as waste disposal.

Ruralness in New York is also an identity, a way of life, and a state of mind. Residents of the small places continually refer to themselves as rural people and their communities as rural places. The ingredients of rurality vary with the territory, and "ruralness" is relative to whatever else is nearby. However, whatever it means to be part of "rural" in New York is now changing and becoming even less clear in the face of the many changes currently taking place.



Researching in Rural New York, Generalizing to Rural America

In focusing on research settings within New York State, we are examining rural areas that exist within the context of the highly urbanized Northeast, and within a diversified state with a relatively healthy economy and reasonably strong rural education, roads, and services. The case presented here is certainly not a worst-case scenario of rural America, but in many ways it can be considered a harbinger for rural America. Rural New York is experiencing now some of the economic, demographic, and sociocultural changes that are or will soon be affecting rural places in other regions. Understanding the impacts of change on communities in rural New York may help us understand what is happening in and to rural America at large.

The selection of a single state for research does not eliminate diversity, however. From community to community in rural New York, there are fundamental differences of a geographical nature, differences in topography and terrain, in climate, in soils, in proximity to urban areas, and in layout of settlements. In some rural areas, signs of growth and development are everywhere: new houses, either singly or in subdivisions, active construction of vacation homes, and farms that appear prosperous and well kept. In other areas the familiar signs of rural depopulation dominate: overgrown fields, abandoned and falling-down barns, large rural cemeteries with more people buried in them in any nineteenth-century decade than are currently living in the area, consolidated schools out in the countryside bearing generic or hyphenated names on their buildings, and empty stores along village Main Streets.