

# RURAL SOCIAL WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

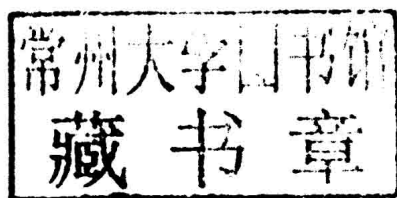


MICHAEL R. DALEY

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**Rural roots: the author's father (left) and siblings in the Arizona Territory 1909.**

# Preface

Rural social work is an important practice arena that can make a significant and positive difference in the lives of both clients and workers. Popular beliefs to the contrary, the rural population is increasing, and a significant minority of society still lives in smaller communities. Yet rural social work is often overlooked, even by the social work profession. Perhaps this is because of social work's urban roots, which gave the profession a focus on where there is greatest need. Or it may be that it is naively assumed that rural communities are idyllic places with few social problems. And it just could be an "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon. Indeed, it was many years before the field of social work seriously turned its attention to the needs of rural people and communities.

As the title suggests, this is a book about rural social work as a field of practice. It was written to address what appeared to be a gap in the literature, and it aims to provide an overview of the field to serve as starting point and a resource. Indeed, there are several excellent works about rural social work that currently exist, yet the major resources in this field still consist primarily of collected readings and individual articles. Given the diversity of authors and viewpoints reflected in those, it is sometimes challenging to decide where to start or to get a clear perspective about rural practice. The book provides a survey of the field and is not intended to replace what

already exists. Indeed, many existing resources were used in preparing the finished product. But it does provide an overall perspective that incorporates much of the existing literature.

*Rural Social Work in the 21st Century* does attempt to provide enough specific information to prove useful to students and professionals alike and to guide further study. It is intended for social work students at any level and may be used in a freestanding course on rural social work or as a companion to other courses to add rural content. It can be used as an introduction to the field and can provide a framework for the use of articles and chapters about rural social work. Certainly individual articles and books of collected reading provide more specific detail on selected topics, and the reader is encouraged to explore the many sources used for this book to learn more. But ultimately this book is about the big picture of rural social work, and if it succeeds in providing a foundation for learning more about the field, or in sparking further interest in rural social work, then its primary purpose will have been achieved.

Scholarly work was used as the platform for preparing the material. But the language used here is often informal, direct, and earthy. This may strike some as a little odd or a bit unscholarly. But such is the nature of rural language and rural people, and the book is designed to give a bit of that flavor. This was a conscious decision. In reading drafts of the early chapters, the language did not ring true for a volume on rural social work. In some ways a more formal voice did not get at the true character of rural people. It is my hope that by adding folksy language that the reader's experience is enhanced in terms of giving a better idea of rurality than might otherwise be the case.

Over the past century there have been times when rural social work and the needs of rural people have experienced long periods of neglect. Yet over the past four decades social work has revitalized its interest in rural practice, and as a result the rural literature has expanded considerably in terms of depth and richness. Several good books and articles have been generated to help expand what we know about the field. The logical question, then, is, why another book on rural social work?

The decision to write this work is based on the sum of my experiences over more than thirty years of being involved in the field and trying to teach rural content to students. My first teaching position introduced me,

urban born and raised, to living and working in a small rural community. It did not take long for me to learn that I was like a duck out of water. To adapt to this new environment, and especially to teach social work students to effectively work in it, learning about rural practice was essential.

The real question was, where to start? Many fields of practice had a book written by one or more authors that covered the field. Child welfare, school social work, and mental health all had books that surveyed the field and provided a platform for both introduction and further learning. There were books about rural social work, but they were primarily collections of readings around general areas and written by many authors. These were wonderful materials, and very helpful. But they made it challenging to get the big picture.

Moving to the present, the past decade has produced a revival of sorts for rural practice. Several new publications in the field and the emergence of the new journal *Contemporary Rural Social Work* have arrived to provide social workers vital information to strengthen their work. The transformation of rural social work that has occurred as a result of the twenty-first-century resurgence is certainly a positive step, because the work is becoming more challenging as service funding continues to shrink while the rural population continues to grow. Moreover, rural social work is one of the fields of practice in which significantly more social workers are needed. Yet still too few schools of social work provide coursework to prepare graduates for work in rural communities.

To provide an overview of such a broad field of practice was a bit of a challenge in terms of organizing the considerable amount of information. The organizational structure chosen was based on social work competency and content areas. For example, there are chapters on social work practice, human behavior in the rural environment, diversity and culture, policy services, and history. This provided a workable structure for covering the major issues in the field that was flexible enough to address the audiences of students and practitioners.

Throughout this volume several concepts emerge with some frequency. The strengths-assets perspective that has been added to the rural literature is an important concept that offers a more positive approach to practice and is used extensively here. Approaching rural communities in terms of what they lack may be helpful in identifying problems, but it can

lead to a negative view that is less helpful in developing solutions. And rural communities do have many assets, which are frequently overlooked.

*Rural Social Work in the 21st Century* employs the perspective that rural communities and people represent a distinct culture that should be learned and treated with sensitivity. This culture goes with them wherever they go, and rural social work is work with rural people, no matter where they may live. This liberates the field from being constrained by narrow and somewhat arbitrary definitions of rurality based on a specific population figure, thereby considerably expanding the scope of practice. The idea of rural social work as being place bound and confined to small towns, villages, and the countryside has been traditional. Still, it ignores the substantial patterns of migration that have occurred over the past hundred-plus years as rural people have moved to the city in large numbers and congregated in new communities. And substantial numbers of people who have rural backgrounds currently live in the city, where they may come into contact with social workers.

This is a book about rural social work, and rural communities are not static. Indeed, rural populations are in transition; thus, today's rural environment is no longer the rural community that our parents experienced. Better communication; improved transportation networks; and widespread movement of people, goods, and services into rural areas have changed and are changing traditional ways of life. Some of these changes do create additional challenges for rural people.

Another theme is the richness, diversity, and resiliency of rural people. The importance of community and the interactions of individual, family, and community in assessing needs and developing social work interventions is discussed in many contexts. Many rural areas emphasize a more collective, personalized view of social interaction than in an urban context. Another concept discussed here includes the fact that one-size-fits-all does not work for rural communities, as they vary in size, culture, economics, and cultural beliefs and practices. Another important theme relates to the availability of services, which vary locally to create issues of access, adequacy, and specialization for people in the community.

A final theme is social work and social workers in a rural context. Rural social work can be rich and rewarding, and it requires professionals who are flexible, creative, and generalist in their approach. Rural social

workers can and do become an important part of the community, and effective intervention requires learning about the culture and people while responding sensitively to them.

Although this book is ultimately my work, it would not have been possible without the contributions of many others. Long associations and frequent conversations with many rural social workers have helped not only in providing important information but also in the formulation of ideas. In this regard, I would like to give special thanks to my rural colleagues who have provided support and given comments on drafts of this work. These include Freddie Avant, Ginny Majewski, Richard Osburn, and Peggy Pittman-Munke. Special thanks to my wife, Vickey, who has provided me with many ideas, insights, and examples, and to my editor, David Follmer, who has encouraged and guided me through the process. I would also like to thank the staff at Lyceum Books, especially Katherine Faydash, whose editing added a great deal to the quality of the text. All of these folks have helped to point me in the right direction and at times have lent a sympathetic ear.

Coauthors who have collaborated with me on prior work have also played an important role in guiding my views of rural social work and deserve thanks as well. They are Freddie Avant, Michael Doughty, Sam Hickman, and Barbara Pierce. Two other colleagues contributed more indirectly over the years, but their influence was important nonetheless. Will Scott and Leon Ginsberg have provided guidance and support that proved extremely valuable. All of these folks are great people and colleagues, and I am lucky to have them. Without the influence and help of them all, this work could not have been completed. At one time or another we all met as members of the Rural Social Work Caucus and discussed rural social work. The caucus is a committed group of professional social workers, without which this work might never have been undertaken.

Capturing the depth and breadth of rural people and rural social work in a way that captures the rich diversity was a formidable task. Rural social work is an important subject that demands an appropriate treatment. It is my hope that to some degree this has been accomplished here. I hope too that readers feel free to embrace the rural experience, and perhaps will develop as much interest in rural social work as I have. Welcome to rural social work in the twenty-first century.



**Distance and road conditions are an important feature of rural life and rural social work. Photo of a covered bridge in Indiana.**

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## C H A P T E R   O N E

# Rural Communities and Social Work: An Introduction

**R**URAL SOCIAL WORK has been with us since the early 1900s and remains a significant and vital part of helping individuals and families, and addressing community problems. Despite the fact that the population of North America has been becoming increasingly urban for more than a century, a significant minority of the population still resides in rural areas. Although we are no longer primarily a rural or agrarian society, rural people, their culture, and their economic contributions remain an important part of our society.

Rural people experience challenges like the rest of society, and sometimes their needs rise to the level of requiring professional help; that is where social workers enter the picture. People from rural communities experience mental health problems; their children need protection from maltreatment; individuals and families are victims of crime or family violence; or people are poor and need assistance in accessing economic resources and health care. But because rural people are a minority and can be less visible because they live outside major urban and media centers, it is often easy to forget their unique needs and wants.

Frankly, even when services may be available, the one-size-fits-all, depersonalized model of service of the twenty-first century, designed to