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Viewpoint ■ by Raymond R. Beneke

Progress Comes Dressed in Strange Clothing

Struggling and toiling during the frontier years to create a New Eden in the Midwest left highly visible evidence of accomplishment that lifted the human spirit. But now, progress is more difficult to discern and sometimes comes dressed in strange clothing. Changes have transformed in painful ways the community which I knew. On the other hand, modern farm life involves for the individual less drudgery, greater challenges to the mind, and greater freedom to know and enjoy the world in which he or she lives. The benefits to those who consume the low-cost abundance of rural America are less visible but are enormous when viewed in the context of the total economy.

The close of the Midwest frontier

The thirty years following the close of the Midwest frontier at the turn of the century was a time of consolidating the momentous developments of the frontier years. Land was no longer abundant and cheap. The work of draining and developing the virgin prairie was now complete. Residents of the area could turn their attention to building better roads and schools and to improving the accessibility of medical and recreational facilities. The rural landscape of the Midwest in 1930 consisted of hundreds of vibrant, effective, and proud communities.

The Great Depression slowed the development of Corn Belt agriculture, with farm operators striving to hang on during a period of hardship and adversity unfathomable in earlier years. World War II followed in the 1940s and with it price controls and rationing. During this period there was almost a complete cessation of the manu-

facture of new tools and the implements of production. The technology of Corn Belt agriculture had changed little in the years from 1925 to 1945, but waiting in the wings was an avalanche of new concepts that had been building through the depression and war years.

The postwar years

Following the war came new technologies, new inputs, and larger and better machines. One fundamental change that took time for farm operators to fully comprehend and to adjust to was the increasing cost of labor relative to all other inputs. Part-time help, freely available in the prewar years at less than one dollar per hour, vanished as opportunities in nonfarm employment improved. In a few short years, mechanical power in ever more massive units replaced horse power completely. In the postwar period the public sector, through the experiment stations and the extension service, invested heavily in the improvement of technology. At the same time, the private sector shifted into high gear in developing new and improving old inputs used on the farm. On the fertile soils, crop yields increased dramatically in the last half-century. Bushels of corn harvested per acre have tripled since 1946, and soybeans just beginning to enter the cropping system a half century ago now have doubled their 1946 yield.

Those involved in making decisions at the farm level, the operators themselves, were a group different from those who had settled the frontier. The same was true of input providers and money lenders. Many involved were sons and grandsons of the frontier immigrants and had more education and were more sophisticated than their predecessors.

Where the frontiersman were often skeptical and even hostile to science-based improvements, farm operators of the postwar period thirsted for new ideas and adopted new technology eagerly. A major impact of much of this technology was to increase farm output. The amount of field work that a fully equipped operator could accomplish increased by leaps and bounds. Cropping activities were the first to be impacted by the revolution in technology, with livestock enterprises undergoing profound modifications fifteen years later. The most conspicuous impact of this empowerment of human effort has been a decline in the number of farms. Using Iowa as an example, the numbers of farms fell from 200,000 to 90,000 in the forty years following World War II.

Diversification no longer the gospel

Conventional wisdom of the last half-century insisted that crop and livestock diversification would reduce risk, make fuller use of crop and animal by-products, and keep the operator busy year-round. But specialization has its advantages—most importantly in the narrower range of demands made on the expertise of the manager. As a result, specialized enterprises could be given more intensive management, an advantage that became increasingly important as technology grew more complicated.

Livestock production has been transformed into a factory-type activity. Beef feeding in the past two decades has migrated from Corn Belt farms to huge specialized lots. Poultry production long ago left the Corn Belt farm. Sheep are rarely seen on Midwest farms. The

swine-producing enterprise, linked to corn production for decades, with present-day disease control technology can now be conducted in large concentrations. Gargantuan swine producers, weary of present restraints and fearful of those yet to come, search aggressively for a friendlier environment. Their search will be in vain unless new technology is developed which will deodorize concentrated hog production so that rural residents can tolerate its presence.

The transformation

The prairie areas, which constituted half or more of the Midwest farms, were particularly well adapted to the post-war changes that swept across the midlands. The transformation of this area into a New Eden has contributed mightily to the abundant, low-cost, and secure food supply now enjoyed by the American consumer. But the impact of these changes on rural communities dependent upon the land has been devastating.

A lifestyle worth preserving

Swan Lake, my home farm in Iowa, was more than 160 acres of land, a house, and a set of farm buildings. It was more than its gently rolling terrain and its magnificent view high above the old lake bed. It was a special place, tranquil and secure, a value system and, later, a bundle of pleasant memories. For years I could retreat to that haven in my thoughts when life became tumultuous and burdensome. Indeed, much of me remained there in spirit for years after I had left the scene in search of greater economic opportunity.

During the past six decades I have

returned many times to my roots in search of the real world, where people were what they seemed, where you knew and helped your neighbor, and there was little ambiguity about the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. It was a world where the rhythm of planting, growing, and harvesting in the spring, summer, and fall and the struggle with snow, frigid temperatures, and bleak days of winter gave evidence that man was not fully in charge and that the universe no doubt was unfolding as it should.

Now I can drive from Ames to Pocahontas County a distance of 100 miles on first-class highways by a dozen

distance three newly constructed clusters of shiny steel buildings destined to house hogs that will never breath fresh air but will foul the countryside with their disagreeable odor.

One meanders through a string of villages that have been dying for decades. Dilapidated store fronts along main street hide structures that sit empty and forlorn. In many small towns one sees only a tavern, a post office, and a half dozen homes with a lived-in look. There are few signs of life on main street aside from one or more well-worn pick-up trucks parked in front of the tavern, suggesting that the merchandising of beer remains a viable activity.

Will economic forces continue to push such dramatic changes upon the rural Midwest? The harsh but realistic prospect is for decades more of relentless pressure. We can expect changes in the next half a century more dramatic than we have yet witnessed. Narrowing our focus to Swan Lake Township in



Pocahontas County, the Iowa area in which I grew up and which I still know well, we can expect that no more than a dozen aggressive and well-capitalized operators, fully knowledgeable of the new technology, will be ready and able to cultivate all of the land in the township. Before the changes that have already been set in motion run their course, the number of farms in Pocahontas County will have shrunk from 2,000 in 1950 to less than 200.

We are not anticipating that huge corporate units will own and cultivate the land. The system which now domi-

nates the rural landscape is one of small, family-owned farms. I can see in the



Dean Mather

nates the scene, skilled operators farming their own land and that of three or four absentee owners, will continue to expand. Such a scenario is no longer speculation because the technology is here, along with an abundance of competent operators.

Farm and trade centers will face continuing problems which will grow out of the abandonment of livestock production and depopulation of rural areas. The decline or disappearance of schools, churches, medical services, retail establishments, and recreational facilities will continue. The years from 1880 to 1920 were years of full-blown optimism. The positive outlook coupled with a booster spirit caused many more small towns to be formed than the economic base of the community could support and brought financial hardship and wounded the spirit of many loyal

citizens of these communities. Many of the towns established in that era are gradually withering and dying. In Pocahontas County, Havelock, Plover, Ware, and Varina are cases in point. To a lesser degree the same thing is happening to Fonda and Rolfe. Laurens and Pocahontas, although not destined to become cities, should continue to exist for the next fifty years.

Farm consolidation in Iowa currently produces at least 2,000 cases of farmstead demise each year. The process of farmstead decay takes years (perhaps two or three decades), so in any one year there are thousands of Midwest farmsteads in a state of unsightly decline. This rural landscape projects the illusion of carelessness, despair, and failure on the part of Midwest agriculture in spite of its present vibrancy and prosperity. Such a clutter demeans the rural

lifestyle and depresses the human spirit.

Many like me feel that the rural environment brings out the best in the human species. Some may regard this scenario I have painted as too dark and pessimistic. I, too, hope my assessment is exaggerated. If efficient resource use ordains that rural communities must wither, we must make their decline more humane. America needs more rural residents. Decaying farmsteads should not become a symbol of dying rural institutions. The challenge communities face is to maintain the rural setting as a superior environment in which to live and work, and one which is inviting to potential residents who treasure proximity to the land. Present-day transportation means that distance from the workplace need no longer be a barrier for many to a cherished lifestyle close to the land. We need to modify the impact of unfriendly change by encouraging more rural industry and service activities. Each year new economic activities develop which do not require location in a heavily populated area to be efficient. We need such activities in rural areas to help maintain rural schools, churches, and medical services. A thirty-minute commute in rural areas is surely less wearing than one of similar duration in a congested city. ■

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Findings Citations

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Note: *JARE* is the *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, *LE* is *Land Economics*, *JAAE* is the *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, *JA* is *Journal of Agribusiness*, *ARER* is *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review*.