

# Reaping What We Sow:

## Community and Rural History

### ORVILLE VERNON BURTON

One thing I learned on the farm: when you slop the hogs, if fewer hogs come to the trough to eat, you put out less slop. So, you are getting the short version (or less slop).

I have spent so much time thinking about my role in this association that for a while I seemed to eat, drink, and sleep agricultural history. I realized that I had been thinking a little too much about our organization when I awoke in the middle of the night, turned to my wife, and asked if she would like to do something significant to help the Agricultural History Society.

A lot of this thinking came from a challenge by a colleague recently. He asked how, in this day when the profession is interested in transnationalism, I can justify teaching U.S. rural history, how I can emphasize local community studies. As I see it, people all over the globe are part of a community. There is a sense in which (as Charles Joyner has reminded us) all history is local history—someplace. All too often, scholars address history at what we think of as the national or transnational level without consciously realizing that these “higher, broader” levels are in fact intellectual constructs rather than

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Orville Vernon Burton, President, Agricultural History Society, 2001–2002

concrete realities. Still, it is also true that no history, properly understood, is merely local.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us interested in doing rural history might be inclined to ignore questions and criticism about our field of inquiry. We enjoy doing rural history, and we know that the study of agrarian society is important. But we need to ask ourselves if we have been engaging the rest of the historical profession with our work. We need to be critical of our own work and be able to explain the significance of studying rural America. Upon reflection I think that rural historians have a lot to offer the public as well as historians who are waging wars about which history is the right kind of history, whether it is political, economic, or the new cultural history—what my generation was calling the “New Social History.” An examination of the relationship between social and cultural history as domains of historical inquiry could help in this regard.

My colleague’s remarks about rural history held the clear implication that the study of agricultural society is provincial, out of step with the current profession of history. Underlying his challenge is the heady intellectual excitement of the last decade when the profession has been arguing over postmodernism, deconstruction, globalization, its new literary turn, and the “New Cultural History.”

Let me address the importance of this new cultural history. Happily some historians of rural society have not neglected this exciting approach. Indeed, according to David Vaught, “The core premise of the new rural history has been to ‘put the culture back into agriculture’—to examine farmers (be they populists, slave owners, or otherwise) on their own terms, by what they said and what they did.” Others may look at certain aspects of rural society within larger cultural studies. Ted Ownby’s study of anti-agrarianism in African-American autobiography, for instance, looks at how the four writers W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston have treated rural values. Ownby has noted how these writers used their inclusion, “sharing essential characteristics with African Americans who

1. Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), xvi.

worked on farms,” and their exclusion, being professional scholars and writers, to give their work “a twist that was in part emotional, in part analytical.” In addressing the nature of rural life, Ownby writes, “Each of the four writers had something positive to say about farm life, or at least rural life.”<sup>2</sup>

Cultural history analyzes the symbols, images, and ideas that are generated in the process of connecting people to broader collectives. It explores power relationships and boundaries that seem natural but are in fact constructed. Cultural history deals with identity, with language and representation. Some might say that cultural history is simply the meaning that people give to things, and in that sense all history would be cultural. British historian Antoinette Burton has suggested that “we might consider the ways in which it is possible to do a cultural reading of ‘the social’ or a social reading of ‘the cultural’—procedures which underscore the dialectical relationship between the two categories as epistemological domains and historical as well as historiographical practices.”<sup>3</sup>

Just as the new social history was inspired by theories and practices from other disciplines, the ethos of social history can be integrated with that of the new cultural history to produce compelling new ways to study community. I believe Jack Greene has an approach for doing just that. He has called for an examination of “social and cultural capital,” by which he means the elements of culture that are passed from one generation to the next and which the younger members of the community then “perpetuate, modify, discard, or reconstitute in new places.” He wants us to see cultural conditions in structural terms. Greene’s concept holds fresh hope for a true integration of historical methods. Joseph Amato hopes that “fresh work in cultural history, particularly in modern and contemporary European histories, can offer novel themes and angles” to the study of history. Janel M. Curry has explored cultural analysis as one way to look at rural geography. She finds significance

2. David Vaught, Listserv message in H-Rural, <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~rural>, 5 October 1999; Ted Ownby, “‘A Crude and Raw Past’: Work, Folklife, and Anti-Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century African American Autobiography,” in *African American Rural Life in the Twentieth Century, 1900–1950*, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, in press), 37 of manuscript copy.

3. Antoinette Burton, “Thinking Beyond the Boundaries: Empire, Feminism and the Domains of History,” *Social History* 26 (January 2001): 69.

in “the construction of meanings associated with rural landscapes and the social construction of ‘rurality.’”<sup>4</sup>

Rural and agricultural history have a lot to tell us about the meaning of symbols and identity. If we are what we eat, then agriculture defines our identity. If identity comes from the place where we grew up and that we call home, then our community defines who we are as a people. Rural history includes practicalities and metaphysics. It brings to the profession the capacity to challenge a historiography and methodology that now tends toward the study of ideas and ideologies, discourses and cultural stances. Agricultural history encourages us to see with new eyes the material foundations on which culture is constructed. People in the past spent most of their time, energy, and thought in this material world. Historians today may be blinded—as producers of paper and ideas and consumers of culture and entertainment rather than soybeans and corn—to think that this has always been so. The bottom line is this: we cannot take that material foundation for granted as self-explanatory. Rather we have to come to terms with its complexity before we can explain culture, to see the frame into which culture fits, to gauge words and thoughts within the material context from which they were generated. And, at the same time that cultural historians reflect and theorize on the discipline of history, many of us who practice the craft of rural history could use some theory and reflection. Both approaches have validity.

Of course, all history is constructed. Let us not forget the story of “The Three Little Pigs.” When we are doing the construction, it makes a difference what the story is constructed out of.

With this in mind, I would like to reflect on the history profession over the last several decades. Some are calling the “New Cultural History” a revolution in the way we think about our history and the past. Well, I and many of

4. Jack P. Greene, “Social and Cultural Capital in Colonial British America: A Case Study,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (Winter 1999): 491–509; Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 7; Janel M. Curry, “Community Worldview and Rural Systems: A Study of Five Communities in Iowa,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90 (December 2000): 693. David Herr applied this sort of analysis in his study of early nineteenth-century North Carolina yeomen in “Common Paths: Rural Common Whites, Slave Society, and Community in the Northern North Carolina Piedmont, 1740–1840” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2002).

my generation were also part of a revolution in history, the so-called “new social history,” which fundamentally altered historians’ understanding of the nature of their discipline and influenced how many in my generation do rural history. Let me revert briefly to nostalgia and talk about what we tried to do with the new social history in the 1960s and 1970s and what some of us are still doing today. Less interested in a narrative story, new social history employs systems, comparisons, and analyses to explain human behavior. Unique people or situations are of less concern in social history than patterns of change over time. As presented decades ago, the new social history had the following guidelines: (1) a quantitative emphasis on the use of records and on statistical presentation; (2) the explicit use or refinement of social theory; and (3) a focus on the lower social strata, “history from the bottom up.”<sup>5</sup> I would add a fourth characteristic as essential to differentiate between old and new social history: Whereas earlier social history explored neglected areas of American history on a broad national or regional scale, much of the new social history focuses on community studies as an important tool to investigate social change.

As with all revolutions, has the one in new social history run its course? In *Thinking Back*, C. Vann Woodward quoted Henrik Ibsen with approval: “A normally constituted truth lives . . . as a rule, seventeen or eighteen years; at the outside twenty, seldom longer. And truths so stricken in years are always shockingly thin.” Disillusionment with the results and direction of the new social history can be gauged from comments from several prominent American Historical Association presidential addresses in the 1980s. Philip Curtin lamented that the focus on communities and small groups had caused “an intellectual splintering that has been going on for decades.” Bernard Bailyn argued that the “greatest challenge that will face historians in the years ahead . . . is not how to deepen and further sophisticate their technical probes of life in the past . . . but how to put the story together again.” Storytelling became the code word of the counterrevolution. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian William S. McFeely proclaimed, “Our job is to tell a good story.” Lawrence Stone, who had earlier championed quantitative techniques, warned of a

5. Laurence Veysey, “The ‘New Social History’ in the Context of American Historical Writing,” *Reviews in American History* 7 (March 1979): 1–12.

“collapse into trivia.” Even sociologist Charles Tilly was accused of producing similar chirping. In some ways these criticisms helped lead to the new dominance of cultural history over social history.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, our generation of social historians, particularly those of us who study rural communities, have some things of value to say to this generation of cultural historians, the new revolutionaries. For one thing, we can contribute a warning.

Since much of rural society shares a storytelling tradition—and I come from a part of the country where it is part of the culture—I would like to offer a cautionary tale. Whatever its origins, I can verify that this story was told around my hometown of Ninety Six, South Carolina, in one form or another since before World War I. One teller of the tale was Carl Campbell, whose son Ben has given me permission to tell the story in the first person, the way all good Southern stories are told. However, I do want to make sure in light of the publicity about Doris Kearns, Michael Bellesiles, Joe Ellis, and Steve Ambrose, however, that you know I am “borrowing,” “constructing,” and “contextualizing” this story for the occasion.

Franky Davis and I had worked the graveyard shift in the mill and had gotten off work at eight in the morning. We had planned to do some rabbit hunting before we went home and headed straight to the farm of Mr. Barry McAdams near Chappels, S.C. Mac was the choir director of our church, and I had worked for him plowing and bushhogging since I was eleven years old. He had always let us hunt his property. As a courtesy, though, I always stopped by the house on the way and informed Mac that we were hunting. I left Franky napping in the car and went up to the door. Mac said of course we

6. C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 3; Philip D. Curtin, “Depth, Span, and Relevance,” *American Historical Review* 89 (February 1984): 19; Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 87 (February 1982): 23–24; William S. McFeely, Comments on the session “Exploring Large Questions in Small Places” (at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, New Orleans, La., November 1987); Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of the Narrative,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 3–24; Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 97–100; Eric H. Monkkonen, “Lessons of Social Science History,” *Social Science History* 18 (Summer 1994): 161–68 and Monkkonen, ed., *Engaging the Past: The Uses of History Across the Social Sciences* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

should enjoy ourselves, and he hoped that we got a bunch. I promised to bring him a couple of rabbits cleaned.

Then he said, "Vernon, I need a big favor from you. My mule, Old Red, is in bad shape. I did not think he would make it through the night. When you head out, could you put Red down for me? I just can't bring myself to do it."

"But Mac," I protested, "I don't want to shoot Red. You know I have ridden that old mule many a day."

Mac pleaded that Red was suffering and needed to be put out of his misery. Reluctantly I agreed. As I got back in the car, I decided to have some fun with Franky. I stomped on the gas in the old '54 Chevy and squealed down the long dirt driveway. Franky woke up. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I am just so mad! Do you believe it, Mac said that with all these new government regulations and rules, he can't allow us to hunt his land any more."

About this time we came up on Old Red in the cow pasture, who was barely hanging on. I slammed on the brakes. I told Franky, "Well, I will teach him a lesson. I am going to shoot his old mule." I grabbed my shotgun, got out of the car, walked out into the pasture, and shot Red.

Then I heard another gun, "Boom! Boom!" And then Franky yelled. "And I killed his cow, too!!!"<sup>7</sup>

My warning to the new cultural historians is this: Be more careful than many of us were who took part in the new social history revolution; when putting down the old, worn out mule, do not shoot the productive cow as well. We should not discard the older methods of study that still work. The use of community, so much a part of the new social history, is one of those cows that should not be killed with the sick mule. Community, in both its definitions and in methodological approaches, is a way that we still learn much about rural America, whether we approach it as narrative, culture, politics, or even the old "new" social history.

7. This story has become "urban legend" with many versions; one included baseball players—Mickey Mantle playing the trick on Billy Martin. See Billy Martin and Peter Golenbock, *Number 1* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1980), 119. Jan Harold Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 382; Jan Harold Brunvand, *Curses! Broiled Again! The Hottest Urban Legends Going* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 138–41.



Over half a century ago, William Faulkner discovered that his “own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about” and that he “would not live long enough to exhaust it.”<sup>8</sup>

The study of community is like that. I study community; my interest is rural community in all its abundance and complexity. One problem faced by my generation in the study of U.S. rural society is that urban historians, particularly those interested in mobility, limited the idea of community. In general, they followed scholars of colonial America in their implicit and normative definition: “community” meant the ideal New England town and its midwestern stepchild. Communities were considered compact settlements of people united by bonds of culture and purpose. Nearly all the models for social history were those of urban studies. The 1960s were a time of urban unrest, riots, and concern with the cities. With funding available for investigations like the Philadelphia Social History project, and the studies of Newburyport, Boston, and other cities, rural studies lagged behind. Hence it was no surprise in 1982 when Tim Breen complained that despite all the good work of community studies and the New Social History, the studies of early rural America showed that “men and women formed families, obtained land, joined churches, participated in town meetings; they did almost everything *except* work in the fields.”<sup>9</sup>

For too long we have let urban-history models drive our own methodology in rural studies; we have come at our studies of American society backward. Which reminds me of another story, actually the trademark story of Benjamin Ryan Tillman, a racist agrarian leader and demagogue who earned the nickname “Pitchfork Ben” with this tale:

In the South after the war, a merchant became wealthy and, on a hill at the edge of town, he built a grand home surrounded by a white picket fence. He

8. “Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel,” *Paris Review* (Spring 1956); reprinted in *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), 255. Don Doyle’s study of Lafayette County examined a very particular place that looms larger because it was adopted by a great fiction writer whose fictional community now stands for all southern communities. Historical events seem all the more real for their connection to Faulkner. Don H. Doyle, *Faulkner’s County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

9. T. H. Breen, “Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the Study of Agricultural Work in Early America,” *Pennsylvania History* 49 (October 1982): 243.

also bought a pedigreed bulldog from England, the fiercest-looking animal he could find. This merchant enjoyed sitting in his rocking chair on the veranda, sipping a mint julep, and smoking a fine cigar with his bulldog beside him. The merchant particularly enjoyed watching the spectacle on Saturday mornings as a horny-handed farmer drove into town with his wagon and a mule that had lost an eye.

As the farmer came by the merchant's home, the bulldog would tear down the lawn to the road, and the mule, whose bad eye was on the house side, would give the farmer a fit of a time as it bucked and turned in fear of the vicious dog. The dog stopped at the closed gate, and the merchant would have a good belly laugh at the show. But one Saturday the gate was not closed. The bulldog raced through the open gate and lunged at the farmer. The farmer pulled out a pitchfork, holding it out for protection, and the dog impaled himself on the tines. The merchant screamed and ran down the hill crying out to the farmer, "You have killed my pedigree bulldog! Why oh why didn't you hit him with the *other* end of the pitchfork!" The farmer replied, "Why didn't he come at me with his other end!"<sup>10</sup>

I have often thought that our studies of American society and social history might have been much different if we had come at them from the other end. The French and the *Annales* school and other European traditions certainly worked to understand rural society and culture before turning to the city. Although the United States was on its way to becoming an urban nation, it began rural and remained so for a long time.

My own contribution to the new social history and rural community studies was a book in which I tried to define what community meant in the

10. This story was told to me by Julius Gunter of Ninety Six, who heard it from his father and uncles. We do not know where Tillman got the story. A similar story of a pitchfork and a fierce dog is attributed to Abraham Lincoln. In John Ford's film, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), Henry Fonda as Lincoln tells this story. It would be interesting if Tillman, a voracious reader, had learned of the story through writings on Lincoln, but it is more likely that he read or heard it elsewhere and simply adopted it in the southern storytelling tradition. Speculation is that Lincoln, and perhaps then Tillman, might have read the versions of a similar story in *Joe Miller's Jests* (1739): 59 and *Harper's Weekly* 2 (June 1858): 398; Paul M. Zall, ed. *Abe Lincoln Laughing: Humorous Anecdotes from Original Sources by and about Abraham Lincoln* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 118–19; David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 55–56, maintains that Tillman created the story to enhance the "pitchfork" image he had cultivated by threatening bourbon lawyers with "the pitchfork end."

nineteenth-century rural South.<sup>11</sup> This detailed look at community in Edgefield, South Carolina, explored in depth the interplay of family, household, religion, race, class, and gender. It might be easier to describe a community in 500 pages than to come up with a definition of community. Yet, by doing community history in such large scope, I hoped that the reader would distill broad themes about Southern society from the community's complex formulations. It was probably too subtle, and many told me that I made a mistake in not having a succinct definition of community. So here are some definitions:

Ralph B. Brown writes about a "Sense of Community" as a shared ideology. "It is a human experience or a social condition that can occur in certain places and at certain times. 'Community,' therefore, is different than 'a community,' the latter being the place itself, the former being an experience that may be identified with a place."<sup>12</sup>

Robert N. Bellah has written, "*Community* is a term used very loosely by Americans today. We use it in a strong sense: a *community* is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain *practices* . . . that both define the community and are nurtured by it." Communities have a history and also "a *community of memory*, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past." Storytelling, he has said, is an essential aspect in the memory of a community—stories about people and about the community itself.<sup>13</sup>

Anthropologist Robert Redfield has defined community as a "two-dimensional" set of social relationships. One dimension exists within the confines of a particular locality; the other dimension links people in the local community with a larger universe.<sup>14</sup>

11. Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

12. Ralph B. Brown, "Sense of Community," in *Encyclopedia of Rural America*, ed. Gary A. Goreham, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 117.

13. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 333, 153.

14. Robert Redfield, "Civilizations as Societal Structures? The Development of Community Studies," in *Human Nature and the Study of Society* (Papers of Robert Redfield), ed. Margaret Park Redfield, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 375–91.

Taking a communitarian view, sociologist Amitai Etzioni has defined community by two characteristics: first, “a web of affect-laden relationships” and second, “a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity—in short, to a particular culture.” Eric Freyfogle’s recent book highlights various dimensions of community. One of my favorite agrarians, Wendell Berry, has written: “By community, I mean the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living in a place and wishing to continue to do so. To put it another way, community is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature.”<sup>15</sup>

Scott Russell Sanders has written, “The elements of my kitchen scene—loving company, neighborliness, inherited knowledge and good work, shared purpose, sensual delight, and union with the creation—sum up for me what is vital in community.”<sup>16</sup>

These definitions might sound a little too much like Garrison Keiller’s Lake Wobegon. No mention that communities are also islands of distrust, jealousy, prejudice, drunken fathers, and neglectful mothers. And where are the African Americans in these communities? Many rural communities that once had significant African-American populations no longer do. Someone needs to explore why that happened. One of my students is using a comparative community study to examine the Ku Klux Klan, looking at why some communities were receptive to the KKK and some were not. Shawn Lay has noted “few topics in the American past more clearly demonstrate the validity of the famous dictum that ‘all history is ultimately local history’ than the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s.”<sup>17</sup>

I have found that communities refer not only to particular places, but to human networks such as family and kinship groups, market systems, church

15. Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 127; Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 119–20; quoted in Eric T. Freyfogle, *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001), xxx.

16. Scott Russell Sanders, “The Common Life,” in Freyfogle, *New Agrarianism*, 217.

17. Masatomo Ayabe, “The Ku Klux Klan in Illinois” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, forthcoming); Shawn Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 9.

membership, and voluntary associations. Jon Lauck has pointed out the importance of “social capital” in a study of community. The term, though similar to Greene’s “social and cultural capital,” to Lauck meant “the degree of participation in civic life” and “the existence of strong community institutions . . . that bring people together.” He lamented that the academics who are bound by a particular interpretation miss this very real aspect of community life. A more complete picture involves starting with individuals and then moving outward toward an examination of their various affiliations, associations, and perspectives. Sources may not be as easily attainable, but this larger exploration would mean a better understanding of interactions among individuals. With those informal patterns of contact, the concept of community takes on new meaning and significance, and the historian interested in studying communities can move beyond the examination of locally bound social aggregates and investigate a whole array of communal networks. Sociologists and historians have long pointed out the “diversity that characterizes the rural population.” Cornelia Flora has found that some rural counties are among the most diverse in the country, others among the least. “Fourteen of the thirty most diverse counties are rural . . . [H]alf of the fifty counties that are the least diverse are located in just two states, Nebraska and Iowa.” Larger communities often include several smaller ones, such as a Japanese-American community within a rural town or an older farming population in a newly suburbanized area. In his study of the rural Middle West, Jon Gjerde has noted that community members who felt aggrieved would sometimes come together to form a faction. Conflict thereby caused reshaping of the community, “a process of continual internal definition and redefinition.”<sup>18</sup> Conflict, often ignored in romanticized views of community, also can affirm and reveal community bonds.

Modern usage of the term also includes such examples as “the scientific

18. Jon Lauck, “‘The Silent Artillery of Time’: Understanding Social Change in the Rural Midwest,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 19 (Fall 1999): 252; Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870–1970* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 10; Cornelia Butler Flora et al., *Rural Communities: Legacy & Change* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 10; Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 106.

community” or “the intelligence community,” devoid of any grounding in a specific place. And here today, as we are gathered together, we are all part of a community of agricultural historians, a “community of scholars.” As such, it behooves us to examine some of the underlying theories of community. Robert Wiebe has argued that “by the 1870s the autonomy of the community was badly eroded.” Ellis W. Hawley has contended that “the land that had idealized yeomen farmers and rugged individualists was becoming a land of corporate organization, bureaucratic systemizers, and associational activities.” This theme of community collapse, so prominent in the writings of American historians, has far less historical validity than the view that community has undergone a series of transformations since the colonial period. Invoking the terms *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, originally introduced by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies, Thomas Bender argued that scholars have misinterpreted Tonnies when they say that *Gemeinschaft*, associated as it is with “intimate, private, and exclusive living together,” would be inevitably displaced by *Gesellschaft*—“an artificial aggregate of human beings characterized by competition and impersonality.” Rather, Bender maintained, Tonnies always believed these two modes of living could exist side by side. Bender therefore concluded: “By viewing communal and non-communal ways as two elements in a bifurcated society, the historian has an adequate framework for observing the changing structure and meaning of community over time.”<sup>19</sup> Bender’s suggestions are borne out for rural community’s adaptations.

Rural communities today, although experiencing dramatic social and economic changes, nevertheless continue to show, as Ralph Brown has pointed out, “a creative resilience in sustaining their sense of community.” One way they have done this is through community activism and local voluntary organizations. Midwife Onnie Lee Logan, for example, one of a long line of midwives in Marengo County, Alabama, continued in that career

19. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), xiii; Ellis W. Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917–1933* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 9; Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 5, 17–18, 34–35, 40–43, 108, 136.

partly because of her family tradition and partly because she saw a need in the community. Sometimes the citizens of a rural American town erect at its entrance a sign that proffers a unique piece of Americana concerning their town (such as “The garden spot of history,” “The world’s first all-steel bridge,” or “Home of the first pony express”). Such signs show pride in the locale and that the town has something to offer the country. Pride in the community remains in spite of losing residents and local downtown businesses. According to anthropologist Sonya Salamon, residents of rural communities continue to “believe that their small communities provide a supportive, quiet, neighborly, friendly, family-oriented, slow-paced, relatively egalitarian, and safe place to live.” Salamon has also suggested that the mobile home park is becoming a new form of rural community.<sup>20</sup>

Having said how important community is to the study of history, let me make another point. I believe that community studies, even those social scientific in theory and quantitative in methodology, can still tell a good story. Indeed, just like the good stories contained in William McFeely’s biographies, communities experience events that make for good retelling.

One reason to study communities is to gain new knowledge of behavior—to learn how people lived, how they reacted to and treated others, and what their lives meant to them. Local studies deal with all the people in the community, all their ambiguities and contradictions, all their negotiations across lines of race, class, gender, and power. We need to reveal the complexity of people without reducing them to simplicity. Joseph Amato uses local history as a way to examine a “background of change, turbulence, transformation, and metamorphosis.” Local studies are a way to explore Gjerde’s community with its “curious amalgam of cultural retention and cultural change, tradition and modernity, authority and freedom.” Local studies, or community histories of rural America, offer a connection among the diverse approaches to doing history. In local studies historians can best merge older,

20. Onnie Lee Logan as told to Katherine Clark, *Motherwit, An Alabama Midwife’s Story* (New York: Dutton, 1989), 6; Brown, “Sense of Community,” 118; Sonya Salamon, “Community Ways,” in *Encyclopedia of Rural America*, ed. Gary A. Goreham, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997), 170; Katherine MacTavish and Sonya Salamon, “Mobile Home Park on the Prairie: A New Rural Community Form,” *Rural Sociology* 66 (December 2001): 487–506.

time-tested methods with quantitative ones as well as ask questions about culture. Some local studies stem from movements to preserve the cultural environment of a particular community or region and may combine the talents and energies of academics and community activists. Others use the community as a laboratory to test hypotheses on the social science model, such as frontier democracy or assimilation. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. We need the diversity.<sup>21</sup>

Local historical study has the potential to illuminate behavior in a given community and to provide perspective for understanding behavior in other communities. As Eudora Welty suggested, “One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction.”<sup>22</sup>

A historian brings order out of chaos and in doing so constructs an artificial presentation that makes sense out of the chaotic past. A study of communities allows us to approximate the total truth of the complexity and confusion of the human experience. One of the greatest values of local studies as a genre is the holistic view taken, the insight into real-life experience writ large. A comprehensive portrait of American society must include the culture and daily existence of elite and ordinary people. One needs to know about daily routines of household, work, play, church, and school. Thus, the historian can look at society in the microcosm of the community. As Maurice Stein has emphasized, “every community study is to be viewed as a case study . . . of the effects of basic processes and historical events on changing social patterns. . . . Every good community study is a study of transitional processes.” Such processes include transnational networks, such as the diaspora of enslaved Africans or the settlement of various emigrant groups. Transregional networks should also be included, such as movements between town and country with the concomitant mixing of rural and urban values (guns, land use)—the great migration of African Americans from the

21. Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 3; Gjerde, *Minds of the West*, 130.

22. Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Random House, 1978), 128–29.



countryside to the cities of the South and then to the North following World War I, and the travels of migrant workers.<sup>23</sup>

An interesting approach to local studies is the two-dimensional scheme suggested for American colonial communities by Darrett B. Rutman and Richard Beeman. Adopting the conceptualization of anthropologist Robert Redfield, Rutman has divided the social relations of a given community into vertical and horizontal dimensions. The latter are social patterns that dominate the simple, self-sufficient, subsistence-oriented hamlets, those homogenizing sources of individuals and kinship relationships. Rutman's horizontal dimensions resemble David Potter's depiction of the rural South as a folk society, which he defined as direct relationships between man and man, and man and land. Since then, of course, we have become enlightened enough to include the other half of our population; relationships with and among women would be part of this dimension. Vertical dimensions, on the other hand, include economic, political and social commitments of the community to external entities. This heterogeneous, impersonal dimension involves a loss of the isolated and self-dependent community.<sup>24</sup>

Beeman also adapted Redfield's scheme in his comprehensive research design for the study of early American communities. Beeman has called for study of "public, readily observable scenes of social activity" to "grasp the norms and values that order the lives of a particular people." Beeman intro-

23. Maurice R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community: An Interpretation of American Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 99; Orville Vernon Burton, "The Rise and Fall of Afro-American Town Life: Town and Country in Reconstruction Edgefield County, South Carolina," in *Toward a New South? Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 152-92 and Orville Vernon Burton, "The Modern 'New' South in a Postmodern Academy: A Review Essay," *Journal of Southern History* 62 (November 1996): 767-86, and Orville Vernon Burton, "Race Relations in the Rural South Since 1945," in *The Rural South Since World War II*, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 28-58.

24. Darrett B. Rutman, "The Social Web: A Prospectus for the Study of the Early American Community," in *Insights and Parallels: Problems and Issues of American Social History*, ed. William L. O'Neill, (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1973), 57-89, and Darrett and Anita H. Rutman, *Small Worlds, Large Questions: Explorations in Early American Social History, 1600-1850* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994); Robert Redfield, *The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) and *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

duced Victor Turner's proposal to view contrasting societal types (folk-urban, *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft*) as "parts of a dialectical process rather than as extremes at either end of a unidirectional continuum." The feature of Turner's conceptualization most salient to Beeman's discussion was his notion of "communitas," the folk-like state of society in a liminal or transitional phase of a dialectical transformation from one set of structured relationships to another. Rhys Isaac's studies of revolutionary Virginia used local sources to get larger meanings as subcultures symbolically interacted. In the work of Beeman and Isaac, we can see how cultural history grew naturally out of the new social history and how effective it is in the context of community and locale.<sup>25</sup>

Another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, believes that historians should strive "somehow to grasp and then to render" an understanding of "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit." It takes local studies to render this kind of "thick description" of relationships in the community. Just as Robert Darnton popularized Geertzian insights in France, historians of rural communities have opportunities to observe the "Balinese cockfight" analogies in the societies we study, for example, the ritual hog-killing day that still flourishes in some rural communities.<sup>26</sup>

Local studies are a way to get at Geertz's "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures," compiled as they are one upon another. Take family history as an example. The tools of family history add significant depth and credibility to a local comparative study. Structural analysis of the family can

25. Richard R. Beeman, "The New Social History and the Search for Community in Colonial America," *American Quarterly* 39 (Fall 1977): 422–43; Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), and "Dramatizing the Ideology of the Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774–1776," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (July 1976): 357–85, and "Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 125–56.

26. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), see esp. "Workers Revolt" 75–104.

join with traditional sources to give evidence about the quality of family life and connect family structure and behavior to outside events. Through community studies cultural historians can help us understand the meaning that society gives to family and how the family ideal has worked in rural society. Using community as a place to view families as part of a broader network builds a bridge between the rural and urban, agricultural and industrial.<sup>27</sup>

The study of any local community enables scholars to understand larger human concerns regarding the development of systems, institutions, and social change. Local studies can include more than the locale, and more than family, community, mobility, or assimilation; they can probe religion, capitalism, racism, and other processes that intricately involve the people of every community. To achieve this end, the research must be informed by three elements of sound theory: (1) functionality, or the blending of personal experience and intuition with abstract knowledge; (2) continuity, or the recognition of the interrelationship of human experience in all its complexity; and (3) predictability, or studying long periods of time in one place to reveal a pattern hidden in the past.

Since behavior is in part determined by environment, the selection of a community as a case study is critical. We need a systematic typology of communities that accounts for size, spatial organization, degree of urbanization, rate of growth, economic function, voting behavior, and even different ideologies. In this regard historians can borrow from other disciplines such as geography. Town and hinterland can be classified and ordered along the principles of Walter Christaller's "central place theory." With its typologies of hamlet, village, town, and small city, central place theory can help us make comparisons in rural areas themselves. Some population clusters are more isolated and inward-oriented; others are more trade or outward-oriented. Using categories and criteria would result in more viable, comparable divisions of communities. At the same time, we need to reject any unilinearity in this schema and not assume that the normal course of social development is

27. This has been done in Gilbert G. Gonzales, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994) and Tobias Higbie's study, *Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, in press).

away from traditional, communal, rural societies toward complex, cosmopolitan societies.<sup>28</sup>

Practitioners of community studies can also use aggregate published data from censuses and vital records to measure the variance or standard deviation of the averages of a particular local area from state, region, or national means for other variables germane to investigations of racial, ethnic, and demographic composition; agricultural production; literacy; educational and religious institutions; and industrialization. Community sampling is one key to the success of local history.

One of the values of local studies is the combination of separate approaches that are social, political, economic, legal, and cultural. Most social-history community studies have focused on structural analysis, which still has a place. (Historians should not leave structural analysis only to economists.) But historians need to go one step beyond structural analysis and tell the story of the community that includes the development of the area's *mentalité*. A community-wide look at politics or religion or at race relations, for example, could use the new cultural history approach to examine symbolic meanings attached to these constructs. This would enrich our understanding of American culture. To this end, the historian could adopt the method of ethnographers, who have recorded in detail the context of act and symbol as part of community studies. An excellent example of legal history is the work of Christopher Waldrep who has used grand jury indictments to show how ordinary people relied on grassroots constitutionalism—ideas about law, justice, and morality. Waldrep has argued that communities may ignore some laws and vigorously pursue others, crafting a kind of code of conduct that reflects the community's "personality."<sup>29</sup>

28. For bibliographical references on central place theory, see Brian Joe Lobley Berry and Allen Fred, *Central Place Studies: A Bibliography of Theory and Applications* (Philadelphia: Regional Science Research Institute, 1965), and supplements. For an historical application of central place theory, see Randolph Dennis Werner, "Hegemony and Conflict: The Political Economy of a Southern Region, Augusta, Georgia, 1865–1895" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1977).

29. Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); *Roots of Disorder: Race and Criminal Justice in the American South, 1817–1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), and Waldrep and Donald G. Nieman, eds., *Local Matters: Race, Crime, and Justice in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

The community study then is an attempt to see each aspect, as James C. Malin urged long ago, “in relation to the cultural totality to which it belongs.”<sup>30</sup> This union of social and cultural history, as well as traditional (political) and quantitative research and analysis, offers a holistic view.

Pierre Goubert has suggested that local studies are important because “they establish certain proofs, limited in some instances but proofs nonetheless; their statistics compiled with a safety-margin, challenge some of the ‘general’ ideas, prejudices, and approximations that had held sway in the absence of more precise investigation.”<sup>31</sup> This call for proof, for evidence we might say, leads to another aspect of the new social history, and that is quantitative techniques. History as a discipline has long been divided as to whether it belongs to the humanities or to the social sciences. In the 1960s and 1970s, when some historians began using the computer for quantitative analysis, other historians despised quantitative techniques as antithetical to traditional narrative. It is ironic that now, because computers have opened exciting opportunities for historians to work with texts in new and comprehensive ways, the history profession has moved firmly under the rubric of the humanities and away from the modeling and quantitative techniques generally associated with the social sciences.<sup>32</sup>

Computers have become so flexible that historians no longer have to alter their methods of inquiry to accommodate the technology. The technology can actually help answer real questions as historians use computers in creative ways to pursue new and previously impossible avenues of inquiry. Increasingly, the hardware and the software are more suited to all kinds of research, whether qualitative or quantitative. Computing and the World Wide Web offer so much data and are so much easier to use than they were in the heyday of quantitative techniques that I hope and see some evidence that the new technology might just revitalize interest in structural questions for historians.

30. James C. Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History* (Lawrence, Kans.: published by the author, lithoprinted from author’s typescript by Edwards Brothers, Ann Arbor, 1947) and “The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 4 (November 1935): 339–72.

31. Pierre Goubert, “Local History,” in *Historical Studies Today*, ed. Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 304.

32. Orville Vernon Burton, “Introduction: The Renaissance,” in *Computing in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 1–15.

A vital area where rural historians need to use the computer is with maps. With geographic information systems we now have the capability to analyze place and people's interaction with a community over time as never before. Another example of where the computer and quantitative techniques need to be used by agricultural historians is collective biography or prosopography (multiple career-line analysis in the social sciences). In collective biography people are studied by class and status group rather than by location. Thus prosopography establishes a universe to be studied—for instance, a group of farmers. Through it, one can look at what lies beneath the political rhetoric to make sense out of political action and to explain ideology or culture changes. One can find the basis of movement within the society and answer questions such as who were the populists or who were the proponents of the Progressive Era's "Country Life" movement. Lawrence Stone has asserted that prosopography has the potential to recreate a "unified field" out of independent topics, to connect political and social history, and to reconcile history to sociology and psychology. I would add cultural history to this mix.<sup>33</sup>

Quantitative techniques have never been the end-all of historical inquiry. Within the history of education, for example, school has been shown to be an important variable in social mobility, but simply counting up schools has never been enough. The preoccupation with the quantity of education obscures the profound impact of the educational system as a social control mechanism, as an expediter of assimilation for immigrants, and as an indicator of equality under the "Separate but Equal" judicial ruling. Community historians need to be aware of more than just the proliferation of schools. They must explain how public education has affected ethnic and religious

33. For excellent examples of the use of maps, see Herr, "Common Path"; Miller Handley Karnes, "Law, Labor, and Land in the Postbellum Cotton South: The Peonage Cases in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, 1865–1940" (Ph.D. diss. University of Illinois, 2000), 203–09; Terrence R. Finnegan, "'At the Hands of Parties Unknown': Lynching in Mississippi and South Carolina, 1881–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1993). Lawrence Stone, "Prosopography," in *Historical Studies Today*, eds. Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971) 107–40. See also David R. Reynolds, "The Making of Buck Creek: Country Life Reform, Religion, and Rural School Consolidation," *Annals of Iowa* 58 (Fall 1999): 351–87; Jeffrey L. Gall, "Presbyterians, Warren Wilson, and the Country Life Movement," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 76, no. 3 (1998): 215–31; and William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900–1920* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974).

identities, especially in rural communities. Excellent models are James D. Anderson's study of African-American education and Robert Swierenga's study of the immigration of the Dutch, their rural dispersion, and the influences of both religion and education.<sup>34</sup>

There is a danger to such a holistic approach; it is beyond the capacity of any one scholar because of the time, energy, money, and expertise needed. To go beyond studying one issue or one ethnic group when trying to integrate social science theory, test hypotheses, interpret the culture, and explain the history of a locale is overwhelming. The issues and questions of local history are so bountiful and the sources so detailed that individual historians must specify a theoretical focus and limit historiographical debate. One reason some community studies seem more satisfactory is because they limit their focus. Yet, this limited focus usually means less historical content. This strategy loses some of the richness to which a local study lends itself. Furthermore, overwhelmed by the mass of data, historians will need to sample or limit the database. Until we can join with other researchers and engage in joint projects of cooperative efforts, the staggering costs of studies that integrate analysis of the physical environment and material culture with the social, cultural, economic, and political history of a community will remain impossible.

Those who have worked on a quantitative local study and total history appreciate the incredible time and effort involved in just the mechanics of such a study. The technical execution of the quantitative materials simply to get precise numbers is equivalent to the time most scholars use to write a traditional monograph. And that is before the actual writing begins. Many scholars who did quantitative analysis in the 1970s and 1980s questioned whether the payoff was worth the effort. For those of us who get to read the results, it certainly is. But life is short, and that is not an easy career decision to make. Yet, as stated above, new technology and the availability of data already in digital form offer a changed and more promising future for these

34. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Annual Reports, Van Raalte Institute, Hope College, Holland, Mich. These annual reports summarize Robert Swierenga's work and provide brief quotations (see especially the Annual Report of 2000–2001) <http://www.hope.edu/vri/>.

endeavors. I am hopeful that the technology will provide seeds for a future crop of local studies.<sup>35</sup>

So we see that community studies have emerged from the pioneering days and have weathered more than one revolution. Amid the increasing methodological and theoretical sophistication, we do not want to forget the initial excitement scholars must have felt in relating people to movements and events.

In conclusion, I want to mention a recent show on public television called "The Biography of America." It declared that the 1900s was the century of the city, the visionary and energetic city. In 1900, four out of ten people lived in the city; in 1990, nearly eight in ten did. In South Carolina, which I study, 75 percent of the people lived in rural areas in 1940 and that decreased to 45 percent in 1990. The South in 1990 remained the most rural section of the country, but, whereas 82 percent of southerners lived in rural areas in 1900, only 31.4 percent of them did in 1990. Moreover, from the last available census data for the 1990s, farmers accounted for less than 8 percent of the rural workforce. Their population was nearly twice that in 1970. And although survey polls show that Americans say the most desirable place to live is on an acreage in the country, just out of sight of their neighbors, this is not actually where people choose to live. In the farm-dependent counties of the Great Plains, small-town decline was over 80 percent in the decade from 1980 to 1990.<sup>36</sup>

Scholars have written about this demographic change and its significance. Philip Nelson's study of Louis Bromfield examines more than Bromfield's interest in agricultural techniques, soil fertilization and conservation, and new crops. Nelson brings out the importance of Bromfield's belief that the rural way of life held the "spiritual and ethical health of American culture." He writes that Bromfield "believed in scientific agriculture, but wanted it to support his ideal of rural life, not industrial agriculture and its de facto abandonment of the small community." Jack Temple Kirby has written about the

35. See S. Max Edelson, "Planting the Lowcountry: Agricultural Enterprise and Economic Experience in the Lower South, 1695-1785" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998).

36. See table in the 1990 Census of Population and Housing Population and Housing Unit Counts (cph-2), Table 4 (U.S. Bureau of the Census Washington, D.C.), <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cph2/cph-2-1-1.pdf>



collapse of rural southern life. He described its passing as “poignant” because living and working at home was a “shibboleth” in American culture.<sup>37</sup>

As we are losing rural populations, those of us interested in agricultural history and rural society must conduct oral history projects. We have seen the last generation of real southern tenant farmers (as opposed to the millionaire tenant farmers of the Midwest, agrarian also, but a different sort of tenant), and we need massive projects like the New Deal’s WPA interviews to get the stories of the family farms. Pete Daniel has been working on oral history projects at the Smithsonian, and others also have been collecting as many of these stories as they can.<sup>38</sup> My mother’s death recently has reminded me just how important it is to record our own stories.

Many of us who study rural society can see these changes in our own family histories. My mother and father grew up on farms in rural Georgia, and I grew up in a farming community in South Carolina. My cousins from Georgia always thought they were coming to the city when they came to visit Ninety Six. When I was a boy, nearly everyone who did not farm worked in the cotton mill. Nowadays pine trees have replaced cotton and corn, and there is no cotton mill; the largest employer in Ninety Six is Fuji Film. My cousins stayed on the land in Georgia, but my children grew up in a midwestern city. The cousin who farms made his living teaching shop so he could keep the farm going. The other became an auto mechanic and hauls and races cars. These cousins take pride in maintaining their rural values even when they relate less and less to the work of agriculture.

37. Philip J. Nelson, “The Ideal of Nature and the ‘Good Farmer’: Louis Bromfield and the Quest for Rural Community,” *Ohio History* 110 (Winter/Spring 2001): 41; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 116.

38. Good examples of the use of these interviews are Pete Daniel, *Deep’n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). The classic use of oral history to understand southern agricultural history is Theodore Rosengarden, *All God’s Dangers: A Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974); see also William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001). In addition to the better known WPA interviews with former slaves, there is the Federal Writers’ Project, *These Are Our Lives: As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939; reprinted New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

Over the last century, farmers have “gone from majority, to minority, to subminority within the minority.” As the United States has moved from a predominately rural, farming society to an urban and suburban society, we are fascinated by rural community and the symbolism that rural community evokes for what our country is all about. We celebrate rural values. Not long ago there was an interesting exchange on H-Rural about romanticizing rural America. Are the virtues of the agrarian society noble? Are they real? Hal S. Barron has written about traditional rural values of localism, independence, republicanism, and how rural people have dealt with encroaching urban society. He found that the agrarian transformation with its “emerging consumer culture” might shake our “long-standing faith in the superiority of rural, as opposed to urban, life.”<sup>39</sup>

U.S. history claims as part of our heritage the agrarian ideals of Thomas Jefferson, who firmly believed in the superiority of country life. At the same time, Jefferson and his agrarian culture believed in slavery. Jefferson, while certainly a theoretician of agricultural life, in reality made a living from the blood, sweat, and tears of enslaved African Americans.

I would like to suggest that Jefferson has overshadowed another agrarian, John Adams. A fervent abolitionist, John Adams was a farmer who tilled the ground himself and harvested the crops with his own hands. These two founding fathers can serve as metaphors for those of us in rural history today. A premium is currently placed upon theory, but we cannot forget the importance of the actual practice of history. Indeed, like the second and third U.S. presidents, we need both theory and practice to make a history that will stand the test of time.

So, are those of us interested in rural history like vultures, interested in something already dead? Far from it! Rural history is thriving. Among many others, the issues of land use, water rights, food production, the environment, and government subsidies are of dire consequence today. In parts of the South, migrants from the North have moved to rural areas, turning them into suburbs and complaining about the tractors in the yards and the smell of the

39. David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 262; see H-Rural logs for April–May 1999, <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~rural>; Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 243.

farms.<sup>40</sup> Agrarian society and rural history have a lot to tell us about who we are as a people and what is important to us. Because symbols of rural life are found in all our arts, I would like to conclude with some excerpts from poems.

Poetry can help us get at some of the values of rural society. A poem by A. R. Ammons, for example, is entitled, "If Anything Will Level with You, Water Will."<sup>41</sup> There you have honesty and, for the agrarians, the value of water.

One of James Dickey's poems talks about where a person gets strength. This poem about a person walking in the country is called "The Strength of Fields."<sup>42</sup>

Ishmael Reed's poem, "Home Sweet Earth," concludes with "You give us something to stand on."<sup>43</sup> (A plug for evidence)

Maya Angelou, in "A Georgia Song," celebrates the joy of plants and of hard work:

Tender evening poignancies of  
Magnolia and the great green  
Smell of fresh sweat,  
In Southern fields <sup>44</sup>

40. Janken Myrdal has pointed out to me that vultures have an important role in the ecosystem. Myrdal writes about agricultural history and is interested in the "everyday brilliance" of working farmers. See his impressive "report," *The New Production The New Task: The Future of Agriculture In A Historical Perspective* (Stockholm: Department of Agriculture, Government of Sweden, 2001). Environmental history is the best known example of the increasing interest in offshoots of agricultural history. President Emeritus of the Agricultural History Society Jack Kirby has been encouraging the members of the society to pursue the environmental aspect of rural history. See, for example, Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). See also William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); although dealing with Chicago, this study examines extensively its outlying regions. Agricultural history will continue to be relevant; as historian Douglas Hurt has pointed out, each new solution brings its own set of problems. The promise of biotechnology, for example, also threatens "to create a Pandora's box from which new ills would escape to trouble the land and society." R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History*, rev. ed. (West Lafayette Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2002), 383.

41. A. R. Ammons, *The Selected Poems* (expanded ed.) (New York: W. W. North, 1955), 85.

42. James Dickey, *The Whole Motion: Collected Poems 1945-1992* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 378-79.

43. Ishmael Reed, *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 226-27.

44. Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994), 187.

James Still in “Burned Tree” chastises people who have a careless disregard for the forests:

I raise my seared branches to the sky  
In silent condemnation.<sup>45</sup>

In one of Alice Walker’s poems, “South: The Name of Home,” she combines her faith and love of the land with the problem of racism:

all that night  
I prayed for eyes to see again  
whose last sight  
had been  
a broken bottle  
held negligently  
in a racist  
fist  
God give us trees to plant  
and hands and eyes to  
love them.<sup>46</sup>

Agrarian Wendell Berry, who worships farming and venerates the farmer, writes in his poem, “The Man Born to Farming”:

The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,  
whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,  
to him the soil is a divine drug.<sup>47</sup>

Or here’s one that gets at some rural values. Sung by rock country group Alabama, it is called “Down Home”:

Down Home where they know you by name and treat you like family  
Down Home a man’s good word & a handshake are all you need  
Folk know if they’re fallin’ on hard times they can fall back on

45. James Still in *From the Mountain From the Valley: New and Collected Poems*. ed. Ted Olson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 28.

46. Alice Walker, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965–1990* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 99.

47. Wendell Berry, *Farming: A Hand Book* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 3.

Those of us raised up Down Home

...

When I was a boy I couldn't wait to leave this place

But now I wanna see my children raised

Down Home.<sup>48</sup>

48. Rick Bowles and Josh Leo, "Down Home," *Pass It On Down*, Alabama, BMG Special Products.