

This resource list will help expand your programmatic options for the **Crossroads** exhibition. Work with your local library, schools, and daycare centers to introduce age-appropriate books that focus on themes featured in the exhibition. Help libraries and bookstores to host book clubs, discussion programs or other learning opportunities, or develop a display with books on the subject. This list is not exhaustive or even all encompassing – it will simply get you started.

Rural themes appeared in feature-length films from the beginning of silent movies. The subject matter appealed to audiences, many of whom had relatives or direct experience with life in rural America. Historian Hal Barron explores rural melodrama in “Rural America on the Silent Screen,” *Agricultural History* 80 (Fall 2006), pp. 383-410.

Over the decades, film and television series dramatized, romanticized, sensationalized, and even trivialized rural life, landscapes and experiences. Audiences remained loyal, tuning in to series syndicated on non-network channels. Rural themes still appear in films and series, and treatments of the subject matter range from realistic to sensational.

### FEATURE LENGTH FILMS

The following films are listed alphabetically and by *Crossroads* exhibit theme. Each film can be a basis for discussions of topics relevant to your state or community. Selected films are those that critics found compelling and that remain accessible.

#### *Identity*

##### **Bridges of Madison County (1995)**

In rural Iowa in 1965, Italian war-bride Francesca Johnson begins to question her future when National Geographic photographer Robert Kincaid pulls into her farm while her husband and children are away at the state fair, asking for directions to Roseman Bridge. Over the next four days, the two enter into a secret love affair discovered by Francesca’s children following her death. The story of Francesca and Robert brings to question themes of identity and ideas of persistence in rural America.

##### **Coal Miner’s Daughter (1980, also a song)**

This biopic of country superstar Loretta Lynn follows her life growing up in poverty in rural Kentucky and her marriage to husband Doolittle Lynn at the age of 13. Already a wife and mother of four by the age of 18, Loretta begins her tireless career of touring and playing shows while she struggles with her identity as a wife, mother, and musician in rural Kentucky, the movie culminating with Loretta’s biggest hit, “Coal Miner’s Daughter.”

##### **Lone Star (1996)**

In this murder mystery set in Rio County, Texas, sheriff Sam Deeds comes across a 40-year-old skeleton in the desert that seems to be that of corrupt former sheriff Charlie Wade. As Sam begins to investigate, he is forced to reckon with his father and former sheriff Buddy Deeds and

their strained relationship. This film explores themes of identity, land, and persistence through this small border town in Texas and a decades-old murder mystery.

### **Nebraska (2013)**

A classic father and son road trip film, *Nebraska* follows father Woody Grant and his son David on a trip from Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska, as the father wishes to receive his \$1 million reward that his son knows is a scam. As the two make a stop in their hometown, David begins to understand his father's past, including his parents' relationship as it relates to himself and his brother Ross, and why his father is the way he is.

### **So Big (1924)**

A silent film based on the Pulitzer-prize-winning novel by Edna Ferber, *So Big* (1924); was remade in 1932 with Barbara Stanwyck, and in 1953 with Jane Wyman. Following the death of her father and his fortune, Selina moves to a Dutch community in New Holland and takes on a teaching job. The film follows her life as she marries and loses her first husband, and begins her quest to grow high quality vegetables on her farm in a small town.

### **Stagecoach (1939)**

This is a classic Western, filmed on location in Monument Valley, Arizona, and features stereotypical western characters. A group traveling by stagecoach is placed in peril when they realize an Apache raiding party, led by Geronimo, is approaching their path. This film explores America's mythic ideas of rural identity, land, and community.

### **Sweet Home Alabama (2002)**

Melanie Carmichael, an up-and-coming fashion designer in New York City, must return to her hometown of Pigeon Creek, Alabama to ensure that her first husband signs the divorce papers she sent to him seven years earlier when she first left for New York. However, when she returns home she must grapple with her identity and her past, and decide who she truly wants to be.

## ***Land***

### **A River Runs Through It (1992)**

Set in 1920s Missoula, Montana, the film chronicles the lives of two brothers--Paul and Norman Maclean, the sons of a stern Presbyterian minister. Much of the film focuses on the rivers where the two brothers spend their afternoons fly-fishing while they deal with their upbringing and their strained relationship. The film suggests the power of land and identity.

### **A Thousand Acres (1997)**

Set on a rural farm in Iowa, this film follows the story of Larry Cook, a prosperous farmer who decides to deed his land to his three daughters--Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. Rose and Ginny take over the farm with their husbands, and must face painful truths about their father and their childhood.

### **Dances with Wolves (1990)**

A Civil War Lieutenant travels to a remote outpost and soon befriends wolves and a local tribe of Native Americans. After acceptance by the tribe, John Dunbar must soon decide whom he is loyal to as the Union Army begins to advance west. The film illustrates the strong connection between land and American Indians.

**The Descendants (2011)**

Matt King, a lawyer in Honolulu, owns land that has been in his family for generations on trust, which ends in seven years. Following a boating accident and the subsequent brain death of his wife Elizabeth, Matt brings his daughter Alex home from boarding school and realizes that his life is much more complicated than the death of his wife and the potential sale of his land.

**Field of Dreams (1989)**

Ray Kinsella is a farmer in Iowa who begins to hear a voice in his cornfield tell him "If you build it, he will come." Later, he has a vision that he must build a baseball field, in which the ghosts of former Chicago White Sox greats will come to play. The film centers on the relationship between Ray and his recently deceased father, all in front of the backdrop of an Iowa farm.

**Oklahoma (1955)**

Set in the Oklahoma territory in the early 1900s, this musical follows the budding relationship of cowboy Curly and Laurey Williams. In the backdrop is a fierce rivalry between the local farmers and cowboys over fences and water rights.

**Shane (1953)**

A weary gunfighter settles down in a small Wyoming town after the Civil War with a homestead family, intending to live out the rest of his days as a farmhand. However, as a rivalry between settlers and ranchers (lead by cattle baron Rufus Ryker) heats up, Shane is forced to step in.

**Community****Bad Day at Black Rock (1955)**

When John Macreedy steps off the train in Black Rock, Arizona, he is the first stranger in town in years. The hotel refuses him a room. He is also unable to rent a car to reach Adobe Flat to speak to Japanese-American farmer Kamoko. When he realizes that Kamoko's farm has been burned to the ground, Macreedy must then fight for his life against this community with a violent secret they are trying to protect.

**Charlotte's Web (1973 and 2006)**

Born the runt of a litter on Fern's family farm, a pig named Wilbur is a pet until Fern is forced to sell him to her Uncle Zuckerman. He is horrified to learn that at the end of the season, he will be slaughtered. Wilbur's friend Charlotte, a spider, vows to save his life. Through messages in her web, Charlotte brings the community together in their support of and love for Wilbur, successfully preventing his imminent slaughter.

**Dogville (2003)**

Grace, on the run from the mob, enters a small mountain town in Colorado. The community protects her in return for her services. As the pressure to find Grace mounts from the sheriff and the local authorities, the town ups the requirements for her protection, and her labor is akin to that of an indentured servant.

**Fargo (1996)**

In a small town in the northern United States, Jerry Lundegaard is in a financial jam and decides to hire two men from Fargo, North Dakota to kidnap his wife for ransom from her rich father. However, the kidnapping does not go as planned and soon three people are dead. Seven-months pregnant sheriff Marge is soon on the case, and is incredibly resourceful.

### **High Noon (1952)**

In this classic Western, Marshall Will Kane decides to hang up his badge for good on the day he gets married. However, he soon discovers that a man he sent to prison seven years earlier, Frank Miller, will be arriving on the Noon train to exact his revenge. Kane decides to remain behind and face Miller, but when he goes to the townspeople that he has protected and served for so long, they refuse to help him and he must face Miller and his gang on his own.

### **Holiday Inn (1942)**

Jim, Ted, and Lila were all popular New York nightclub performers until Lila decides she no longer loves Jim and decides to marry Ted. Jim then moves to a farm but after a while realizes the farm life is not for him. He then turns his farm into a Holiday Inn, only opening on holidays to perform a dinner show and hires an up-and-coming performer by the name of Linda. Ted soon returns after Lila has left him and the two men find themselves once more with a woman between them.

### **It's a Wonderful Life (1946)**

George Bailey has spent his entire life giving to the people of Bedford Falls, and protecting the town from takeover by the corrupt and cruel Mr. Potter. After George's employee loses the \$8,000 for his loan business, George realizes he will be held responsible and sent to prison. Out of desperation, George contemplates suicide, but an angel appears to show him what the town would be like if George were never born after many prayers from people throughout the town are heard.

### **The Last Picture Show (1971)**

Anarene, Texas seems to be on its last breath in the lull between World War II and the Korean conflict, as its citizens continually leave for the big city. Friends Sonny and Duane have just graduated high school and must decide what to do with the rest of their lives as they spend their days in the run-down pool hall and cinema. The time soon comes that the last picture show will play as the theatre shuts its doors for good. Sonny and Duane must finally decide if they wish to remain in their dying small town, or leave for the big city to chase their dreams.

### **The Music Man (1962)**

Con-man Harold gains his money by wooing music teachers in small towns throughout the country and convincing the town to donate money for uniforms, music, and instruments only to leave town soon after. Upon arriving in River City, he encounters the tough and suspicious Marian and finds her increasingly more difficult to woo than the previous women he had conned. What is unexpected is that he begins to fall for Marian, who herself is seen as an outsider in River City and thus not accepted by the townsfolk. This musical explores the nature of small-town community life in the early twentieth century.

### **Ode to Billy Joe (1976)**

Based on the 1967 Bobbie Gentry song of the same title, this film follows the story of two young lovers, Bobbie Lee and Billy Joe in a small Mississippi town in the 1950s. Bobbie Lee cannot date until she turns 16, but Billy Joe pursues her regardless. Grappling with themes such as love, sex, and community, the film follows Bobbie Lee and Billy Joe's forbidden romance as it eventually turns tragic.

### **Pleasantville (1998)**

Twins David and Jennifer find themselves zapped into the world of Pleasantville, David's favorite TV sitcom, after a strange TV repairman hands them a supposedly magic remote. Everything in Pleasantville is just that--pleasant, but despite his efforts of blending in, David's

sister Jennifer does whatever she wishes and soon they begin to see the consequences. The more that the two twins break the rules of the community, the more that Pleasantville begins to change, turning from black and white to color.

### **Shotgun Stories (2006)**

The film follows a feud that erupts between two sets of half-brothers following the death of their father. Set against the backdrop of rural southeast Arkansas, the brothers discover the lengths to which they will go to protect their families.

### **Small Town Saturday Night (2010)**

Set in a rural town, the film follows the lives of different citizens of Prospect throughout one day, all culminating in the final performance of local musician Rhett before he leaves for Nashville to try his luck in country music. The stories of the different townspeople seem disconnected at first, but as the film progresses, the citizens of Prospect realize they are more connected than they initially thought.

### **State Fair (1933, 1956, 1952)**

The Frake family attends the days-long Iowa State Fair, and each has their own reason for doing so. The film centers around the children, Wayne and Margy, as they encounter new love interests from the big city, who are vastly different from their own experiences on the farm. As the fair ends, the question that remains is whether Wayne and Margy's new relationships will survive.

### **To Kill A Mockingbird (1962)**

Set in a small town in Alabama during the Depression, lawyer and widower Atticus Finch is raising his two children, Jem and Scout, on his own. As he defends a local black man accused of rape, Atticus must teach the local townspeople and his children about prejudice and injustice, coinciding with his daughter Scout's obsession with their reclusive neighbor, Boo Radley.

### **Waiting for Guffman (1996)**

A mockumentary about a fictional small town in Missouri, the film centers around the town's upcoming sesquicentennial celebrations that will culminate in an original play put together by off off off Broadway director Corky St. Clair. Waiting for the arrival of a Mr. Guffman, a representative of the prestigious Oppenheimer Organization, the cast and crew of the play grow ever more excited and anxious for their opening night.

### **Hoosiers (1986)**

Based on a true story, the film follows the story of a basketball coach with a torrid past and the former star player turned alcoholic as they attempt to lead the town's basketball team to a state championship in 1950s rural Indiana. Facing hurdles from the community throughout the season, the coach and town drunk are able to mold the undisciplined players into state champions.

### ***Persistence/Managing Change***

### **Best Years of Our Lives (1946)**

Three World War II veterans return to their small, rural hometown and discover that re-adjusting to life after the war is infinitely more difficult than any of them had anticipated. The film follows the lives of three men: Al, a banker who finds it difficult to be a hard-hearted businessman with his fellow ex-servicemen; Fred, an ordinary working man who finds it difficult to return to work or

repair his marriage; and Homer who had both of his hands burned off in the war and now worries his fiancée remains with him out of pity rather than love.

### **Breaking Away (1979)**

The film follows four friends as they graduate from high school and must choose how to move forward with their lives in the small college town of Bloomington, Indiana. The town itself is divided between the “cutters”, whose families worked in the limestone quarry for years, and the students of Indiana University, who view themselves as better than the locals who built their college. The main character Dave, a “cutter,” becomes the focal point of the story as he pretends to be Italian and begins dating an IU student who is from an entirely different social class than he and his friends.

### **Citizen Kane (1941)**

Following the death of newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane, journalists begin to investigate his life in an effort to make sense of his last words: “Rosebud.” The film centers around this investigation and the truth of Kane begins to unravel: beginning his life as a loving, idealistic man, the more power and money he obtained, the more of his soul he lost, which is a reflection of the America that Kane’s character represents.

### **Fried Green Tomatoes (1991)**

Based on the book *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* by Fannie Flagg, the film revolves around Ninny Threadgoode regaling Evelyn Couch with stories of her childhood growing up in Whistle Stop, Alabama in the 1920s and 30s. Ninny’s recollections center around her sister-in-law and friend Iddie, who tossed aside all gender roles in this small southern town, and allow Evelyn to reflect on her on life and marriage.

### **Freedom Song (2000)**

This movie follows the life of a young man in a small town in Mississippi during the 1960s. In the Jim Crow Era south, and in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, *Freedom Song* follows the efforts of the local black community as they stage sit-ins to protest their right to vote and the harrowing ordeals that they endure in order to gain access to their rights as citizens.

### **Gone with the Wind (1939)**

Margaret Mitchell’s classic turned film follows the story of southern belle Scarlett O’Hara and her beloved plantation of Tara from the antebellum days all the way through the siege of Atlanta. Utilizing the Lost Cause Mythology, this film is a classic that explores how rural communities big and small persist through incredible changes.

### **Ghosts of Mississippi (1996)**

Following the assassination of African American Civil Rights Leader Medgar Evers in 1963 rural Mississippi, white supremacist Byron de La Beckwith is tried twice for the murder, both times resulting in hung juries. More than 30 years after the murder, attorney Byron de Laughter works closely with Medgar’s widow to finally convict the man responsible for her husband’s assassination. Fighting against his own family and the community, Laughter puts his political aspirations aside to do what he feels is right in searching for justice.

### **Harlan County U.S.A. (1976)**

In the summer of 1973, coal miners strike against the Brookside Mine of the Eastover Mining Company in Harlan County, Kentucky after the company refuses to sign the contracts of miners who joined the union. This documentary follows the battles and escalating violence that ensued between the gun-carrying company men and the miners. The director frames the story by

providing historical context of the miners' lives and the heightened emotions that brought back memories of the Great Depression.

### **Inherit the Wind (1960)**

Based on the real-life "Scopes Trial" of 1925, this film follows the story of a high school science teacher, B.T. Cates, indicted for teaching evolution in his classroom. Famous lawyer and atheist Henry Drummond is Cates' defender. The prosecutor is famous evangelist Matthew Brady. What ensues is a public trial in a rural town in Tennessee over whether or not teachers should be allowed to teach Darwin's theory of evolution in a public school setting.

### **Ma and Pa Kettle (comedic film series, 1947-1957)**

These films follow the lives of Ma and Pa Kettle and their fifteen children as they rise from poverty to wealth and fame after Pa wins a slogan contest with the King Henry Tobacco Company. Long seen as an eyesore on the town, the mayor and others within the community are thrilled when the Kettles are awarded a modern home and are finally able to leave their "rat trap" of a house.

### **Matewan (1987)**

Set in Mingo County, West Virginia in the 1920s, the film follows the story of miners who are fighting against the mining company and their gun thugs in order to establish a workers' union. Blacks and Italians are brought in by the company in order to break up the strikes, but one man from the UMWA vows to bring all three groups together against the company.

### **The Magic of Ordinary Days (2005)**

Set in 1944 small town Colorado, the film follows the life of Livy, a young, educated woman who became pregnant out of wedlock as she is pressured by her father to enter into an arranged marriage with a lonely farmer. Ray, the farmer, utilizes the work of Japanese-Americans who are kept at a nearby internment camp on his farm and Livy soon befriends two well-educated Japanese-American women who work on the farm. Livy and Ray must learn to navigate their lives against the backdrop of WWII-Era America and the racial concerns that surrounded Japanese-Americans at the time.

### **Mississippi Burning (1988)**

Two FBI agents arrive in rural Mississippi to investigate the death of three local Civil Rights Activists and encounter incredibly hostility with the local police force. The two agents must reconcile their differences in order to solve this disappearance before the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan burns down the home of every African-American in the community, without any help from the locals either black or white.

### **Norma Rae (1979)**

Norma is a southern textile mill worker and decides to unionize her mill after hearing a rousing speech from activist Rueben. Complications ensue as she fights against her employers and her own fiance Sonny to ensure better working conditions and pay for herself and her fellow mill workers.

### **O'Brother Where Art Thou (2000)**

This retelling of Homer's "Odyssey" by the Coen Brothers is set in Depression-Era Mississippi, and follows the adventures of three men after they escape from a chain gang. As they attempt to return to their leader Everett's home to recover buried loot from a bank heist, they encounter a barrage of strange characters and obstacles along the way.

### **Places in the Heart (1984)**

Edna Spalding finds herself alone, raising her children on a rural 40-acre farm in the midst of the Great Depression after her husband the sheriff is killed in an accident. A black man, Moses, helps her to plant cotton and she takes on a blind man, Mr. Will, who lost his sight in the first World War in order to ensure she makes her mortgage payment.

### **The River (1984)**

A farming family faces challenges as they struggle to keep their farm in eastern Tennessee running. The Garveys must contend with a local senator who continues to buy up all of the farmland surrounding the river in order to build a dam that will flood their land, the bank who wishes to repossess their farm, and the river itself as it continues to flood their crops.

### **Selma (2014)**

This film follows the true story of three tumultuous months in 1965 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a dangerous campaign to secure equal voting rights in the face of violent opposition. The march from Selma to Montgomery culminated in President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, one of the most important victories in the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Souder (1972)**

Based on the award-winning children's novel, this film follows the Morgans, a black sharecropping family in Louisiana during the Great Depression. David's father, Nathan Lee, is sent to a prison camp for petty theft, and some months later David is sent to visit his father. His journey becomes a bit of an odyssey in this coming-of-age story as he contends with many obstacles and makes friends along the way.

### **Winter's Bone (2010)**

Against the backdrop of rural Ozark backcountry, 17-year-old Dolly must hunt down her absent, drug-dealing father in order to prevent her home from being repossessed if he does not show up for court in a week's time. Told time and time again to just give up, Dolly refuses and pushes on regardless of the obstacles that appear in her path along the way.

### **10,000 Black Men Named George (2002)**

This film depicts the efforts of union activist Asa Philip Randolph to organize the black porters of the Pullman Railway Company in the 1920s.

## **TELEVISION SHOWS**

These televised series featured rural themes. The summaries indicate prevalent themes most relevant to Crossroads discussions, but most feature rural families persisting and rural communities surviving. During the 1960s, rural melodramas experienced their heyday. CBS programming included a line-up featuring **Green Acres**, **The Beverly Hillbillies**, and **Mayberry RFD** until 1971. At the end of that season, CBS cancelled these shows, a move described as a "rural purge." These rural dramas might seem stereotypical and noncontroversial, but they conveyed predominately white impressions of rural identity, community, and responses to change.

### **Deadwood (2004-2006)**

The series features the trials and tribulations of community formation in the mining town of Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1876.



**Green Acres (1965-1971)**

New York City lawyer, Oliver Wendell Douglas, and his wife, Lisa, seek different lifestyles. Mr. Douglas prevails, and the couple moves to a farm in need of repairs near the fictional location of Petticoat Junction. The pig, Arnold, three handymen (one of whom is a woman), an agricultural agent, and other community residents kept viewers laughing at rural schtick.

**Petticoat Junction (1963-1970)**

Kate Bradley and her three daughters operate the Shady Rest Hotel, located midway between a railway line that connected two small towns, Hooterville and Pixley.

**Beverly Hillbillies (1962-1971)**

Jed Clampett, after getting rich from selling drilling rights for oil on his property, moves his daughter, and mother-in-law, to a mansion in Beverly Hills, California. His cousin's son accompanies them. The kinfolk retain their country ways.

**Hee-Haw (1969-1971; 1971-1993; 1996-1997)**

Broadcast on CBS until 1971 and syndicated thereafter, the series combined country music and comedy skits and slang ("Kornfield Kounty"), scantily clad women ("Hee Haw Honeys") and men in bib overalls.

**The Middle (2009-2018)**

The series features the Heck family, solidly middle class and middle western, with three children, a ranch house, and day jobs in Orson, Indiana (based on Jasper, a county seat in southwestern Indiana).

**Little House on the Prairie (1974-1983)**

Based on the Laura Ingalls Wilder book series, the show featured a big, close-knit family learning large- and small-life lessons together in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, in the 1870s and 1880s.

**The Waltons (1971-1981)**

This program showed the struggles of a Depression-era family living in the rural Virginia mountains and clinging together to help each other and neighbors survive the tough times. Related programs include Spencer's Mountain by Earl Hamner and the Homecoming, which was the pilot show for the Waltons.

**Leave it to Beaver (1957-1963)**

This program portrayed an idealized American family with a strong, hard-working father, a supportive and loving mother, and two growing boys in the fictional community of Mayfield.

**Wagon Train (1957-1965)**

This show depicted brave pioneers on a trek from Missouri to California struggling to settle the frontier in the early West. It starred Ward Bond as wagon master Major Seth Adams.

**The Lone Ranger (1949-1957)**

This series chronicled the good deeds done by fictional masked former Texas Ranger who fought outlaws in the American Old West with his Native American friend, Tonto.

**Daniel Boone (1964-1971)**

Set in Boonesborough, Kentucky, before, during, and after the American Revolution, this show told the story of the legendary frontiersman, played by Fess Parker

**Davy Crockett (1954-1955)**

The miniseries, also featuring Fess Parker as its star, related the legend of Crockett, the frontiersman, Congressman, and settler who died defending the Alamo against the Mexican army. The show kicked off a Davy Crockett frenzy in which every boy in America wanted a coonskin cap.

**The Andy Griffith Show (1960-1968)**

Andy Griffith played Sheriff Andy Taylor, who raised his young son Opie with the help of his Aunt Bea and wacky deputy Barney Fife (played by Don Knotts) in the fictional rural town of Mayberry, North Carolina.

**Mayberry RFD (1968-1971)**

This sequel to The Andy Griffith Show included some of the original cast and appearances of characters portraying an African American family.

**Happy Days (1974-1984)**

The Cunningham family enjoyed small-town American life, while teenagers, even the leather-jacketed, duck-tailed Fonzie, led clean-cut and innocent lives.

**Bonanza (1959-1973)**

Set in the 1860s, "Bonanza" told the story of the Cartwrights, a family living on a ranch called the Ponderosa in Virginia City, Nevada. Widower Ben Cartwright always fought for the right thing as he raised his three sons, Adam, Little Joe, and Hoss.