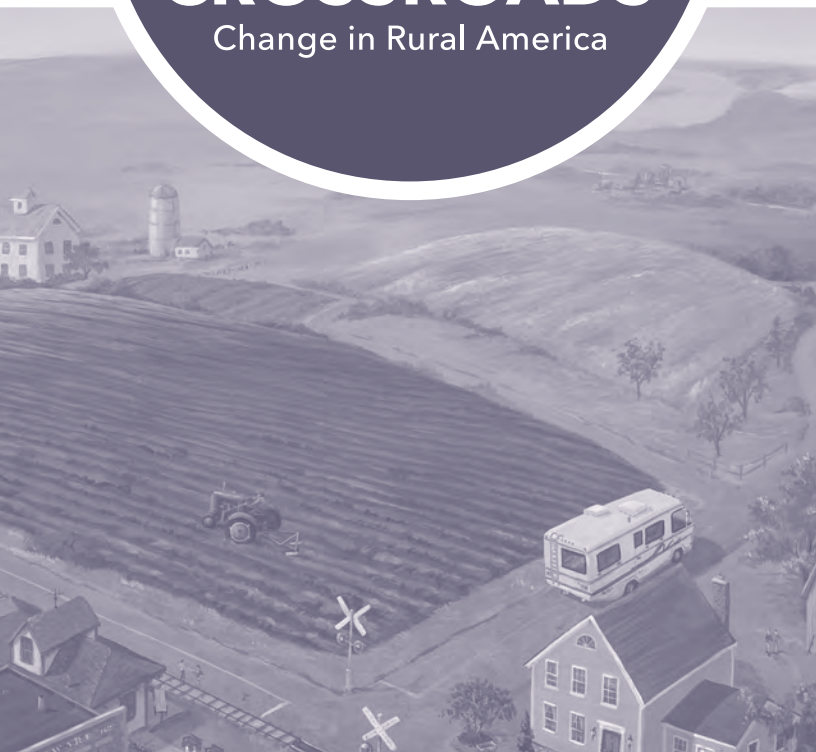


To learn more about the exhibition, visit our website at
www.MuseumonMainStreet.org/crossroads

Designed by Jodi Bloom/designfarm
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DOCENT HANDBOOK

Museum on Main Street

A partnership of the Smithsonian Institution and State Humanities Councils nationwide in service to America.



Smithsonian

Museum on Main Street (MoMS) is a partnership between the Smithsonian Institution and state humanities councils nationwide that serves small-town museums and their patrons. This innovative project provides one-of-a-kind access to Smithsonian exhibitions and educational humanities programs. Most importantly, MoMS provides community museums and libraries an opportunity to display their strengths and reinforce their meaningful contributions to small-town life. Like all MoMS exhibitions, **Crossroads: Change in Rural America** was specifically designed to meet the needs of small organizations.

Visit the exhibition website at www.MuseumonMainStreet.org/content/Crossroads.

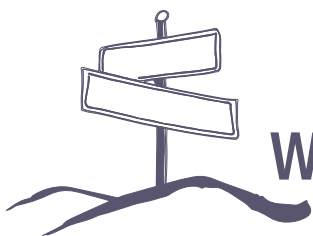
For information about other Museum on Main Street exhibitions, visit www.MuseumonMainStreet.org.

CROSSROADS is a Museum on Main Street exhibition developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, funded by the U.S. Congress, and brought to you by your state humanities council.



COVER: Mural depicting rural America by David G. Miller for Museum on Main Street

ABOVE: [FreelImages.com/Bettina Schwehn](https://www.freemages.com/Bettina_Schwehn)



WELCOME

Welcome! This docent handbook will assist you in helping visitors appreciate and enjoy **Crossroads: Change in Rural America**. The guide leads you through the exhibition—section-by-section—and offers ideas, themes, and questions designed to inspire discussion during your tours. Your job is to encourage visitors to think about the subject matter and invite them to share memories and personal connections to the exhibit.

Crossroads consists of six content sections. This handbook follows the same format. An overview text providing a synopsis of major concepts for each section's themes is followed by questions or suggestions in five categories: "Think About It," "Let's Talk," "Let's Watch," "Let's Listen" and "Get Interactive."

"Think About It" highlights points for conversation and reflection. "Let's Talk" offers questions to ask visitors. Most are open-ended; the answers to others are in the exhibition text. "Let's Watch," "Let's Listen," and "Get Interactive" ask visitors to view a video, listen to an audio clip, or engage with an exhibition component. *Crossroads* features two videos "What Does Rural Mean to Me?" and "Why Do I Choose to Live Here?" and a digital kiosk—"Life at the Crossroads"—with short videos and image collections. Encourage your visitors to sample the stories available in each presentation.

Review this handbook and the exhibition script, available online at www.museumonmainstreet.org, to become familiar with the exhibition. Remember, a docent is not expected to be an expert. You are here to initiate and lead a discussion.

Visitors in an organized group usually feel more comfortable speaking up; those who arrive individually and join a tour may require some coaxing. You don't have to ask all the questions in this handbook. Just one question can spark an animated discussion. You'll learn quickly which questions work best for different age groups and how long you need to spend in each section. Share what you learn on your tours with fellow docents. Your experience may help them with their tour.

Many issues in the exhibition are complex and may lead to debate. You may have visitors who disagree with one another or with the exhibition. That's okay! Foster a civil conversation by ensuring that all opinions are welcome. If debate continues, encourage visitors to resume their discussions at the end of the tour. They'll learn from you and from each other.

Helpful hints on being an effective and engaging docent are at the end of this handbook. While this handbook was specifically designed for **Crossroads**, we hope that you'll extend your skills to initiate discussions about related displays, artifacts, and wonderful stories about the changes your own community experienced over the past 150 years.



Welcome to rural America, a crossroads of change in a vast land. American Indians who were already here, those who came in search of a better life, and people who were forced to move all contributed to the development of rural America.

Throughout the 19th century, the majority of Americans lived in rural areas. They built their lives around the work of harvesting what the land could produce—the food, fuel, fiber, ores, and minerals crucial to a growing nation. They built communities at rural crossroads—small towns that became centers of commerce, politics, and culture.

However, conditions favorable to robust rural communities changed. Early in the 20th century, growing urban populations shifted economic investment and political influence from the counties to the cities. Since then, the pace of rural change has accelerated.

Today, rural communities are at a new crossroads—a meeting point of ideas where they can chart their own future. With their innovations and creative spirit, rural Americans are helping to define and shape the future of the country.

Where people meet, ideas
intersect, and change is constant



THINK ABOUT IT

Point out the statement “Where people meet, ideas intersect, and change is constant” to visitors. Does this describe your community? Ask visitors to describe how communities in your area are facing major changes today. Would they say that means those communities are at a crossroads? How are people responding?

LET’S TALK

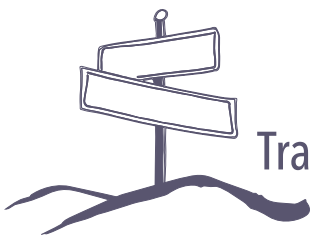
Get visitors to examine the mural of rural America in the exhibition. Why do they think the artist selected the elements featured in the mural to portray rural America? What elements would they add?

Why do you think this exhibition is titled *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*? When you think of rural America, do you think of change? If so, what changes come to mind?

Ask visitors to think beyond their own community. In what ways does rural America generally appear to be at a crossroads? What seem to be the most significant issues that are having an impact on rural places? Are they economic, cultural, or political? Why is it important for all Americans, whether they live in rural places or not, to consider changes happening in rural America?



ABOVE: Farmer using technology in tractor. Photo by Karim Shamsi-Basha, courtesy of Farm Life Magazine, an AGCO publication



Tracing **CHANGE**

Every rural person and place has a story. Change is part of that story. Rural people may live in the same place for generations and may agree on the rewards of rural life. But they each experience distinct challenges and may seek different solutions to questions with no clear-cut solutions.

Some grew up in the countryside. Others left and then returned. Newcomers may relocate to rural areas seeking a lifestyle change. Many who call the country home invest financially and emotionally to improve their quality of life. Others may feel trapped without the means to leave.

THINK ABOUT IT

Ask visitors to think about all of the different ways in which your community and other rural places in your state have changed over the past century. Which of those changes had the greatest impact? Ask visitors who may have experienced that change to talk about how it affected their own lives by sharing their stories. How does that change still affect day-to-day life in your town?

Point out the questions shown at the end of the text panel: Is rural America endangered, thriving, or just scraping by? Do you see dwindling options or a bright future? Ask visitors what they think of those questions. Are they appropriate questions for rural communities to ask themselves? Are they fair? Return to these questions at the end of the tour to see if views of the questions have changed.





Anderson County, SC. Museum on Main Street

Our community won't get better with chance. It'll get better with change.

Minnesota teenager

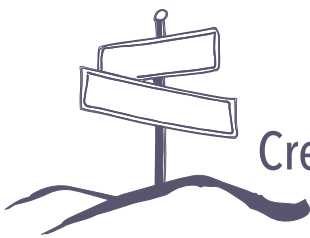
LET'S TALK

Read the quote by a Minnesota teenager to visitors.
In what ways do they agree or disagree with this young person's statement?

Get visitors to compare and contrast the images on the flipper panels. These panels show areas where rural places have seen significant changes—agriculture, education, access to services, commerce, infrastructure, and demographic change. Which of these changes have most affected your town? How have people in your area responded to the change?

Point out the statement on the exhibition panel: "At your own crossroads, which direction will you head—toward the countryside or away?" Ask visitors what they think about that statement. Have they ever thought about how their lives would be different if they left their community? Name three things they would miss about this community if they had to leave.

On the other hand, if they would stay, what factors would entice them to stay? If they feel that improvements are needed, what changes would they make? If you were mayor, what would you do?



Creating IDENTITY

Rural identity—so deeply rooted in the land—has profoundly shaped American identity. During the 19th century, rural ideals captivated the minds and imaginations of philosophers, politicians, historians, artists, and writers. They glorified farmers, framing them as quintessential Americans who embodied notions of personal liberty, economic opportunity, and equality.

Rural Americans have always been a diverse community. American Indians were the original inhabitants. Through the centuries, people of many different cultural backgrounds—including those who already lived on the land or were forced to labor on the land—contributed to the development of rural America.

People experienced rural America in different ways, and their experiences helped shape our rural culture. Family farms and bustling Main Streets became icons of a rural identity that still resonate at the core of American identity.

LET'S WATCH

Get visitors to watch the video “What Does Rural Mean to Me?” The people interviewed in the video define “rural” in different ways. In what ways do you think their own personal or professional experiences shaped their answers? Are there similarities in some of their answers? Ask visitors what “rural” means to each of them. What themes or experiences mentioned in the video fit with their definitions of rural? How do they differ? In what ways are visitors’ own identities connected to place-based stories or memories?





THINK ABOUT IT

Ask visitors to look at the different depictions of rural America. How do the depictions on the left in the gold frames differ from the ones on the right in wooden frames? Ask each visitor to choose three depictions: one they think accurately reflects their experiences, one that does not, and one that raises questions. Why do they think that the artists and photographers chose those particular scenes, places, people or moments to show a slice of life in a rural place? In what ways are their depictions fair or unfair?

LET'S TALK

Read the three words at the bottom of the panels to visitors. Ask them how these words fit with their ideas of what rural means. What other words would they use to define rural?

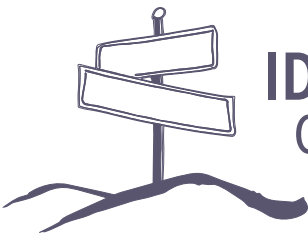
Ask visitors what words they used to describe rural are also used to describe "American." In what ways does rural America play a role in defining what it means to be "American?"

What role did agriculture play in developing our views of rural America? Ask visitors if they think that agriculture still defines rural places today. If not, ask them to describe how the nature of their communities changed.

Which cultural or political figures have the most significant impact on how we perceive rural America?

LEFT: Lettuce farm workers in California, 1972. National Archives

ABOVE: Computer technician, Broken Bow, OK, 2015. Photo by Lance Cheung, U.S. Department of Agriculture



IDENTITY

Constant Change, Resilient Americans

Change has always shaped rural life, including migration, business growth and decline, school consolidation, and conflicts of class, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Rural families juggle multiple jobs. Some depend on seasonal labor opportunities to make ends meet. Most farm families have more off-farm than on-farm income. Many may be just one accident or family trauma away from economic jeopardy.

It can be a hard life. Why would someone choose to stay? Love of the land. Community spirit. Persistence and commitment. Family and personal relationships.

These are just a few of the many motivations that have helped rural and small-town Americans maintain resilience in the face of uneven opportunity.

THINK ABOUT IT

Point out the strip of photos beneath the title "Constant Change, Resilient Americans." These photos form a basic timeline of major developments in rural America from American Indian settlement to contemporary technological innovations. Ask visitors how these developments brought change to their communities. How did people living there at the time deal with the changes? What were the long-term consequences? Ask visitors to



share a memory from their own experience of the change or perhaps the experience of a family member or friend. Did any of these changes lead to people in your area making the decision to leave their community? Did change actually help people grow more resilient?

LET'S TALK

Along the bottom of this panel are five words: "Identity," "Persistence," "Community," "Diversity," and "Change." Which of these words best describes your community? Do any of these words capture an issue with which your community may be struggling?

What words would you use to describe rural Americans? What words characterize them? How do you think rural Americans differ from people who live in other places? What characteristics do they share?

People of many different cultural and national backgrounds came to rural America to build new lives, and established homes and communities. And, they continue to do so today. In what ways does the history of your community reflect that cultural diversity? What brought people to your community?

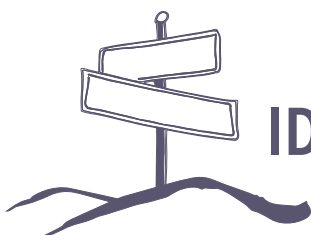
In what ways is the demographic makeup of rural Americans changing? Do you think rural America differs from the rest of the country? Who makes up your community, and how could that change? Are there new cultural groups moving to your community? Describe your town in ten years. Who will be living there and why?

Looking at the historic photographs of families living in rural areas, why do you think they all continued to forge a life in a rural community despite rough conditions? What challenges could they have faced? Why do you think they might have wanted to stay? In what ways are people living in your community today similar?

Initiate a conversation: What comes to mind when you hear the words "constant change?" Does that describe the nature of change in your community? How is your community changing now? What changes would you like to see in your community?



Truck in dust cloud, OK, 1930s. Courtesy of Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Grace E. Ray Collection



IDENTITY

What is Rural?

How do you define “rural” or “country?” Do you simply know it when you see it?

The U.S. Census Bureau defines “rural” as any area that is not “urban.” The bureau defines “urban” as cities and towns with at least 2,500 people. However, if you live in a community with a population of 2,500, chances are, you do not consider yourself an “urbanite.” Many other agencies and organizations have their own definitions based on elements ranging from population density to land use.

Those statistical definitions do not incorporate our human connections to rural places. An individual’s definition of “rural” and that same person’s identity are informed by experiences, memories, and local culture. Everyone—rural residents, visitors, artists, authors, and musicians—carries a unique perspective of what is “rural.”

THINK ABOUT IT

It is difficult to establish a firm definition of “rural” because the word can take on different meanings to different people. To many, “rural” has adopted cultural significance beyond population size and land use. Ask visitors what elements of rural life make it unique to them.

Ask visitors to look through the books on the “Read About Rural” bookshelves. Have they read any of these books before? Which book is their favorite? What were the authors’ interpretations of rural America? How can these books teach us about how views of rural America have changed over time?

BELOW: Downtown Red Wing, MN; Heather Foster Shelton



LET'S TALK

Initiate a conversation with visitors. Ask them if they could add a book to “Read About Rural” bookshelf, which would they add? What other books provide interesting perspectives on who or what is rural? Are there any books written about your community? If you wrote a book about your community, what would its title be?

Read the lyrics from “Small Town USA” to visitors. Ask visitors if the song accurately describes rural communities in their area. What line from the song is the most interesting to visitors? Have any of them wanted to leave or move to a rural community, and why?

GET INTERACTIVE

Point out the interactive element featuring song lyrics about rural places. Ask different visitors to read the lyrics of each song aloud. Have they heard these songs before, and where? What emotions are conveyed through these songs? Which song is their favorite, and why? What song best describes their town or their own experiences? Why do they think the artist chose these words to describe rural places? If you wrote a song about your town, what would you call it?



ABOVE: Iowa farmstead; Photo by Don Graham, Redlands, CA



LAND

Sense of Place

Land has always been one of rural America's prime assets. To some, it represents open space for a capital investment—a place to build homes, farms, businesses, and a sense of worth. Land is also a sacred resource recognized as integral to American Indian cultures. For others land is a critical element in environmental sustainability. Historically, many Americans tended to see land ownership as a path to economic independence. These divergent views continue to shape how we understand rural lands today.

We also have strong connections to land, based on our memories and experiences, and on our senses. A sense of place exerts a powerful, almost spiritual, hold on many rural people. Even if they leave, it draws them back, sometimes to stay. It has inspired many to work and advocate for preservation of natural lands so that others can experience their wonders.

THINK ABOUT IT / GET INTERACTIVE

Ask visitors to look at the stories in the “Rooted in Place” flipbook. Which stories most resonate with them? Ask visitors to share their own stories about how they are connected to places. Why are those places special or memorable? Are your memories positive or negative? Are your connections personal, community-based, or job-related? What other elements of life can be linked to a place?





LET'S TALK

Along the bottom panel are three words: "Inspiration," "Spiritual," and "Wonder." Do any of these words resonate with you, or remind you of a memory connected to land? What other words might capture the awe felt for the American landscape?

Many artists, authors, and musicians are inspired by land and other natural features and include those places in their creations. What places inspire your creativity? How would you depict or describe that place in your creation? If you wrote a poem or a song, what would you want to tell people about your town?

What is your favorite rural place? Why does it appeal to you? What are the elements that make it special? How often do you go there? Or is it home?

What attracts people to land? Does living in a rural community mean that people have a different relationship with land? In what ways do rural people view land differently from people in urban places? Or do they?

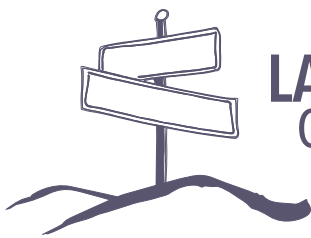
Look at all of the images of different landscapes represented on the exhibition panels. What types of landscapes are represented? Which landscapes evoke positive emotions? Do some evoke negative emotions? Which one is most like your community? How might each of these landscapes appeal to someone?

LET'S LISTEN

Play the "What Does Rural Sound Like" audio component for visitors. Initiate a conversation by asking: Do you recognize any of these sounds? Where have you heard these sounds before? How does hearing these sounds make you feel? Do you associate any of these sounds with a place, a person, or an event? Describe the places that these sounds help you recall. What are the sounds of your community?

LEFT: Canoeing the Magalloway River, NH. Photo by William Durr

ABOVE: Photo by Steve Hillebrand, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



LAND

Owning and Using Land

Land can be a fulcrum around which social classes and cultures clash. Land occupied by American Indian nations was often viewed by the U.S. government as prime open space suitable for development and investment—a view sharply different from the indigenous practice of shared use and ownership.

Private land ownership was to become an essential element in American concepts of economic independence, personal autonomy, and political influence. These ideas remain important to many people today.

THINK ABOUT IT

Why is land ownership important to some Americans and not to others? How did European American views of ownership differ from American Indians? How have views of land ownership changed over the past 100 years? Ask visitors to review the quote from author Willa Cather. What do they think of Cather's thoughts on land ownership?

Why do you think the exhibition curators say that "Land can be a fulcrum around which social classes and cultures clash?" Consider the ways in which people in your area have been welcomed into or perhaps prevented from entering places because of land ownership or local land use policies. How have people reacted to that?

LET'S TALK

Has the landscape of your community changed over time, from either natural or human-made causes? How has that had an impact on land use and local policies? How has it had an effect on people's relationship with the land?

Americans do not always see eye-to-eye in matters that concern land ownership and use. That may happen when water rights, mineral rights, and rights of way are disputed. How has your community handled the complex nature of land ownership and use? Have there been significant land disputes in your area? How has your community used the land's natural resources? How is land divided between public and private uses? How are local residents involved with the stewardship and management of the land?

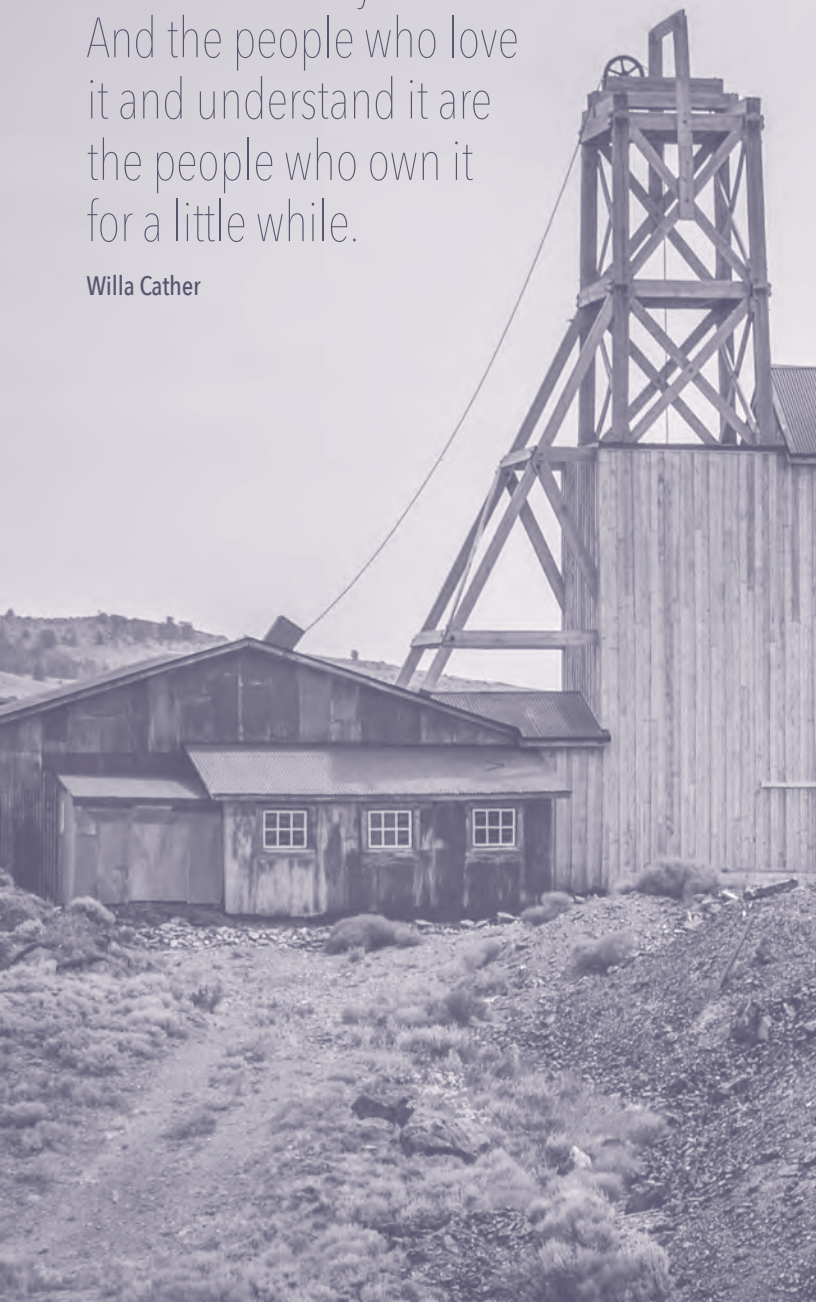
Describe the important role that land, and access to it, played in the development of rural America. How did people in your area make a living by working on the land or using resources from the land? What jobs in your community rely on the land? Ask visitors to share their memories of working on the land.

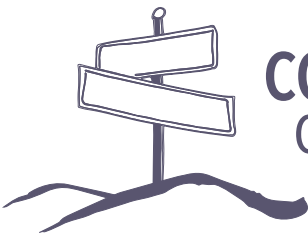
Show visitors the deed for the Lewelling family's land in southern Indiana and then lift the panel to show how the land was transferred from American Indians to the government for later sale to settlers. What was the experience of American Indians in your area? How was land obtained and made available for settlement in your area?

Get visitors to examine the Protecting Public Lands object case and look at the images associated with the text on Debating Land Use. What public lands are available in your area? How is the land used? What are the differences between how local people use the land versus people who are visiting the area? How are those spaces protected? Have there ever been disagreements about the management of shared land? How were those disputes resolved?

We come and go, but
the land is always here.
And the people who love
it and understand it are
the people who own it
for a little while.

Willa Cather





COMMUNITY

Gathering at the Crossroads

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, communities formed at rural crossroads where lives intersected and common interests emerged. Some villages and hamlets grew into full-fledged towns. They formed around agricultural industries like milling and fishing, extractive industries like mining and logging, or along transportation arteries like railroads.

In these places, families built a dynamic community life. Often self-reliant by necessity, people also had to rely on one another. They formed local and county governments. They built schools and civic and religious organizations. They opened stores and businesses and attracted new industries, like manufacturing and agricultural processing plants. In many communities, rural people shared ideas, worked toward common goals, and built toward a common future. Events of the 20th century affected crossroads communities significantly: some disappeared, many diminished, but some found new ways to thrive.

THINK ABOUT IT

How did “crossroads” communities and nearby rural areas work together or help each other? How did that relationship work out in your area? How do your town and the surrounding areas remain interconnected today? Why do you think “Main Street” became such an enduring symbol of small-town America?



Main Street, Blackfoot, Idaho.



LET'S TALK

Encourage guests to examine the display case under the “Main Street” sign. What activities and events and organizations or businesses are represented in the objects? Start a discussion about the activities in your town: What do people like to do here? Where do people gather to interact? How do people decide what is important to everyone? How do you celebrate things that are important to the community? On the other hand, what kinds of things are not available and have to be accessed by traveling to another place? How would life be different, in positive and negative ways, if those activities were available?

Notice the postcards on the side panels of this section. They are historical representations of small town main streets. These images may seem very familiar, or old and antiquated. What do you think the purpose of creating these postcards was? If you designed one for your town, would it follow this template or represent something new?

GET INTERACTIVE

Encourage visitors to try their hand at making their own Main Street in the “Build a Community” activity. Initiate a discussion about why visitors are including certain businesses or organizations in their model town. Why do you think it is important to include that business? Why do you think that particular organization is critical to the town’s success? Maybe they will want to recreate a town landscape from history, build their current community, or envision a scene for the future.

Take a look at the group of buildings at the top of the exhibition. What local businesses and institutions are shown here? [*pharmacy, library, fire station, bank, museum, and a restaurant*] How does this Main Street compare to your own, or to the one you might have created in the interactive community building section. How are they similar? Or, what makes them different from your town?

LEFT: Church service in Clarksdale, MS, 1968. Photo by William Ferris, William R. Ferris Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

ABOVE: Postcard of Blackfoot, Idaho



Sustaining COMMUNITY

In the early 1900s, some rural Americans began to leave the countryside for new economic opportunities in the city. Those who stayed in small towns and on the farm worked to modernize their businesses and homes and to improve their quality of life, including schools and cultural opportunities. Some people believed rural America needed to modernize—to adopt what some perceived as the more modern lifestyle of urban Americans.

Sustaining communities in rural America became a national project. Local people and state and federal government agencies worked together to address these difficulties. But not all Americans benefited from these reform programs and some received unequal treatment. Efforts worked best when they meshed with the ideas and intentions of rural people, and when rural people were involved in the process.

THINK ABOUT IT

What infrastructure or services are essential to your community? What are some of the examples depicted here? [*mail, water/sewer, agricultural extension, schools/education, professional development, fire protection*] How were those services developed and how did they change people's lives in your town? What stories can you tell about how you or your families used those services? How can your town maintain them into the future? What would life be like without them?



Mail car, 1910. Smithsonian's National Postal Museum



4-H students display their sheep, 1949. Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M

LET'S TALK

Can you think of any specific challenges or needs that your town has confronted? How did people work together to identify and implement solutions – as individuals, families, neighbors, and as a community?

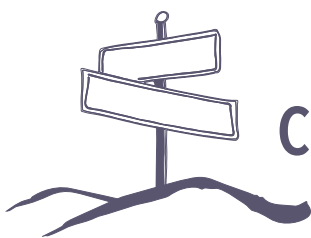
Point out the New Deal Stories flipbook. How were farmers and other workers in your area affected by government relief programs? Are there stories from your family or friends that you can share? What other impacts did those programs have? Are there any parks, buildings, public works, or art projects in your community that were produced by workers during the Great Depression? How are those buildings or projects used today?

Take a look at the documents and pamphlets in the Help for Farm Families object case. Consider the role that cooperative extension programs, 4-H and Future Farmers of America, land grant universities and other educational organizations played in helping rural Americans. What kinds of education and training did these sources promote in your community? What roles do these services and organizations fulfill today? Have you or your family benefited from similar training or education? In what ways?

How do we work together to make things better for all? There can be small examples, like doing a favor for someone, or big things, like starting a business to address a need in the community. You might try to brainstorm some examples of how communities sustain themselves and what you may still have left to do.

LET'S LISTEN/GET INTERACTIVE

Show visitors the Tune in radio box. Listen to the stories about changes brought by rural electrification projects. How did the arrival of electricity have an impact on your town? How did electricity change day-to-day life? Are there stories in your town about those changes? In many communities, residents themselves joined together to become owners of electric cooperatives that brought in power. Does that system remain in place in your community today? What other types of services can you imagine would quickly and permanently change the way people live in your community? Are there utilities and services that your community needs that it cannot afford to develop? *[for example, broadband data services]*



COMMUNITY

Accelerating Change

After World War II, change in rural America accelerated. The war and wartime industries drew people away from farms and rural communities. Many young people moved to cities and suburbs for jobs, leaving rural communities with aging populations. The total number of rural Americans remained relatively stable.

After the war, American business and industry boomed. Some businesses left rural areas and consolidated in urban industrial zones. Machines replaced millions of laborers in farm fields across the country. The quality of life in rural communities changed as economic opportunity diminished.

The civil rights and counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s also rippled through rural America, challenging long-held beliefs and bringing more changes to the fabric of small towns and farm life. Change came from multiple directions and came fast. Many people claimed that rural America was in crisis.

THINK ABOUT IT

Ask visitors to look at the photos of economic and cultural changes experienced in rural communities over the past 50 years. The pictures in this part of **CROSSROADS** show a diverse set of challenges and opportunities—economic, political, and cultural—experienced by people and institutions in rural places. How do you think those communities responded to the changes? What stories can you share about how similar changes were handled in your town? Is your story represented in these images? What might be missing?



Sometimes initiating or undergoing change can create controversy. Do you remember a drastic change sweeping your region? Think about how people reacted, and what your response was. Did you take an active role in pursuing or managing that change? How did local residents seek common ground? If conflict emerged, how was it resolved?

What changes do you see happening right now in your community or in your state? How would you describe that change? Is it good, bad, neutral, or perhaps inevitable? How has it affected you? In what ways do other people in your community view that issue differently?

Look closely at the people in the photos. Can you imagine how they feel based on their facial expressions—are they hopeful, for example, or sad? Perhaps they are scared or perhaps they are energized. How do you feel when you think about changes happening around you?

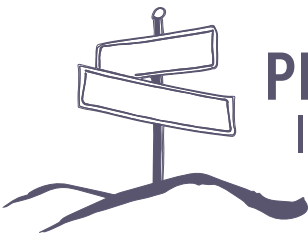
What factors led to the decline of many rural communities in the mid-to-late 20th century? What has your community lost that most matters to you and why?

How did national social change movements have an impact on rural places? In what ways did the rural experience mirror urban areas? How did it differ in rural places? What legacies of those reforms do you see in rural America today?

Social and educational organizations offer critical services in many rural communities, providing assistance to counteract poverty, diminishing educational resources, or health and wellness issues. If you were granted one wish, what change for good would you make in your town? What are the things that people need most in your community?

BELOW: Abandoned factory, Yorklyn, DE, 2014. Photo by Stephen J. Duncan





PERSISTENCE

Innovation and Resurgence

Rural Americans believe in their communities. Many seek solutions to problems rather than abandoning the places where they live. Every community is different and each has unique challenges and opportunities. Some residents form partnerships and utilize local resources to survive.

Some leverage their particular assets to attract new businesses, industry, and tourism. Some re-think their methods and marketing. Main Street associations revitalize downtowns and stimulate growth. Challenges may seem daunting, but country life remains inspiring for many, and people persist.



Farmers regularly use technology to make their work more efficient.
[iStock.com/cstar55](https://www.iStock.com/cstar55)

THINK ABOUT IT

How have rural areas and small towns used historic preservation and cultural tourism to create interest and economic development? Ask visitors to review the stories in the Creative Persistence flipbook. Which stories of local revitalization efforts stand out to you? Has your community attempted projects like this? Which ones were successful? In what ways does your community work to make itself more attractive to non-rural people? How does your community attract visitors?



Visitors to the annual Main Street Car Show, Taylor, TX. City of Taylor, Texas

LET'S TALK

What industries are most associated with your community? Has that always been the case? If agriculture was a commercial catalyst in your region, how has farming changed? Are there fewer people working in farming and related agricultural industries? Or, are opportunities growing?

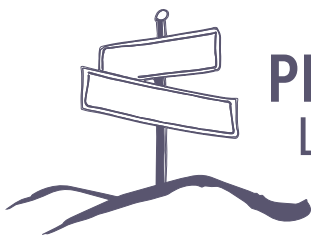
Local businesses and industries are the backbone of a region's economy. Do you know the oldest business or farm in your town? How long has it been operating? You might also discuss new or emerging industries; have they arrived from elsewhere, or started here? How have outside influences shaped the economy?

Think about how people's jobs have changed: do people move here or away for new opportunities, start their own businesses, or switch industries? Why do you think that happens? What types of work do most people in your community do today? How does that compare to 50 years ago or 100 years ago? Ask visitors to name a few common jobs and compare their careers to that of their parents or grandparents.

How have historic preservation efforts improved the quality of life in your town? Ask visitors to identify buildings and places in your area that need to be protected or rehabilitated. What do visitors think are the most important things about local buildings, their homes, or local landscapes or natural resources that should be preserved? If the community put together a time capsule today to be opened 100 years from now, what should it contain? What would you add to tell others what your town was like today?

GET INTERACTIVE

Many communities use their own unique cultural attributes to build economic opportunities. Get visitors to look at the Traditions Build the Future interactive to learn how some towns focused attention on their craft and art traditions to bring in tourists. What traditions in your area make it unique? Which ones do you think could attract visitor interest? Which ones could create educational and commercial opportunities? Share anecdotes of your own experiences with these traditions. Are any new traditions emerging that could draw people to your town? What would you call a festival that celebrated these traditions?



PERSISTENCE

Loving the Country Life

For some people, the countryside is a place to rejuvenate. They connect with the country by visiting parks, recreation facilities, and rural retreats.

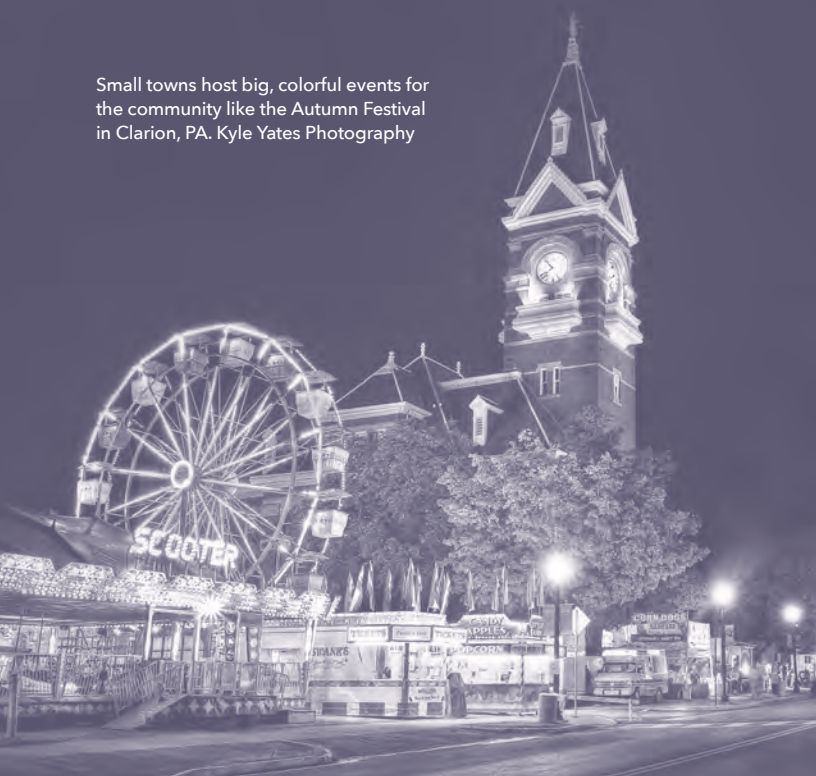
Others relocate to the countryside. Current “back-to-the-land” movements reflect personal investment in a healthier lifestyle that some associate with the country. They want to grow their own food, or live on their own land.

People invest financially and emotionally in crossroads communities. Whether in open country or on Main Street, it takes a community of long-time residents and newcomers to sustain the crossroads and the rural features and attractions people desire. The interests of newcomers sometimes clash with the goals and values of “old timers.” Change brings challenges. Attraction brings change. What attracts you to country life?

LET’S WATCH / THINK ABOUT IT

Point out the question “What attracts you to country life?” and then ask visitors to watch the video “Why Do I Choose to Live Here?” Which stories shared by people in the video stand out most? What do the stories have in common? Ask visitors what “country life” means to them and why they choose to live in their community. What are the benefits of living in a rural community? What are the challenges of living in a rural place? Encourage visitors to share their stories about why living in their town is important to them.

Small towns host big, colorful events for the community like the Autumn Festival in Clarion, PA. Kyle Yates Photography





Roadside produce stands are a familiar sight for highway travelers, near Silverthorne, CO. Gates Frontiers Fund Colorado Collection within the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

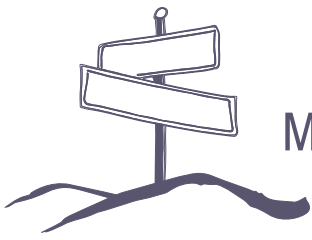
LET'S TALK

Ask visitors how long they have lived in the community or if they are visiting. Why have people who have lived there for a long time chosen to remain? For those who have moved there in recent years, what attracted them to the community? For people who moved away and then returned, what brought them back? For people who are visiting, what brought them there? Ask them to give their reason in one word. Which words are used most? Do the reasons people share change based on the length of time spent living in the community? If so, why? How do they think that their reasons for living here are similar or different from those of people who lived here 100 years ago or 50 years ago?

Encourage visitors to imagine how people who have never visited your town might perceive it. How do the realities of life in your town compare to popular media and culture conceptions of rural America? In what ways is life better? In what ways is it more difficult than those popular notions?

Get visitors to look at the items in the "Country Sells" object case. Which of these items best reflect the lives and experiences of rural Americans? In what ways are the depictions these items bring to mind incorrect or incomplete? Why do you think that country themes or products are desirable in popular culture, media and marketing? What is it about these items that appeal to people, whether they live in a rural place or not?

What do you think people should most know about your town? What are the things that you think local residents should not take for granted? In what ways are those things tied to your community's identity and its ideals?



Managing **CHANGE** Let's Talk

Rural Americans contribute to the nation's economic and cultural wealth with their knowledge, hard work, and creativity. It is important for the people who live in and care for these places to survive and thrive. Rural areas are the primary source for food, fiber, oil, gas, and other critical natural resources. They are home to some of our most treasured landscapes, to ancient sacred spaces, to thousands of species of wildlife, and to ecosystems upon which all life depends.

Change, good or bad, is inevitable. Managing change is crucial. In the 21st century, as in the past, all Americans have a stake in the future of rural America. Conversations about managing change are important to all of us. What role can you play?

LET'S WATCH / THINK ABOUT IT

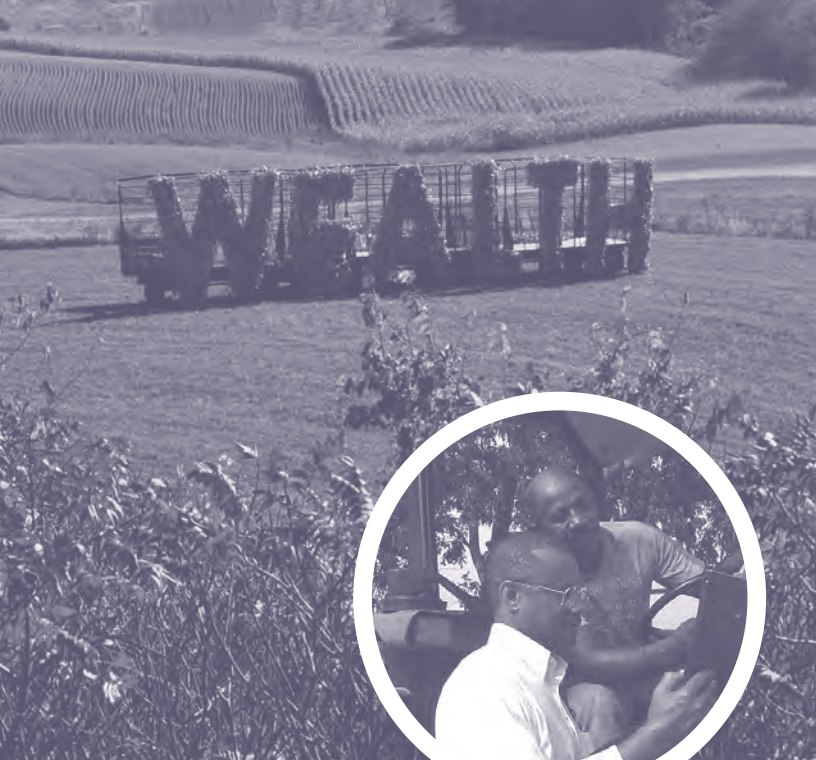
Let visitors view some of the resources in the "Life at the Crossroads" video kiosk to learn more about stories from across the country, regional initiatives that help people manage change, statistics, and fun facts about rural America. Talk with visitors about how these resources show how rural Americans are exploring the importance of identity, land, community, and persistence in their areas. What is the big picture? Can you define what rural life means today? How do the stories told by people in the kiosk resources mirror or differ from your own story or those of people in your community?

You aren't wealthy until you have
something money can't buy.

Garth Brooks

First Fruits Homestead farmer's market stand run by the Sweitzer and Calandrilla families, Charleston, IL, 2017.





ABOVE: Art installation near Reedsburg, WI.
Photo from Wormfarm Institute

INSET: An extension agent consults with a local farmer, Peach County, GA.
Courtesy of Fort Valley State University Cooperative Extension Program

LET'S TALK

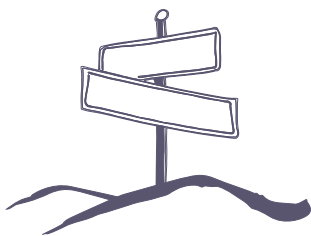
Point out the image of the “Wealth” art installation and read the quote by Garth Brooks. Why do visitors think that the artist used crops to spell out the word “wealth?” Talk with visitors about the idea that wealth is about much more than just capital and hard assets. What are other things that can be part of a community’s measurement of wealth? [people, experience, natural resources, and more] What are the things that “money can’t buy” that are most critical to your community’s prosperity? How can your community capitalize on those things?

Thinking beyond your area, what are rural America’s best assets? What are rural America’s most critical issues? In what ways can rural Americans build on the changes, both positive and negative, that affect their communities?

Earlier in the exhibition, you may have asked visitors a question from the Introductory panel: Is rural America endangered, thriving, or just scraping by? Do you see dwindling options or a bright future? How have visitors’ thoughts on those questions changed over the course of viewing the exhibition, seeing stories from other communities, and hearing from other visitors? What do you believe is the future of rural America?

GET INTERACTIVE

Invite visitors to share their thoughts, questions, and ideas from the exhibition with one another. Show them the mailbox and encourage them to answer a question on a postcard and drop it in the mailbox. Let them know that all visitors are welcome to share their thoughts. Why is it important for rural people to engage in discussions about the future of their communities? What do you think is the most important issue facing your community that people need to discuss?



Tell your #RuralCrossroads story on Stories from Main Street!

Docents, visitors, and other community members are welcomed to visit the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street website to upload personal stories they recalled as they visited the exhibition, or they can simply share their story on social media with the #RuralCrossroads tag.

This is a free opportunity for you and your visitors to participate in an exciting initiative called Stories from Main Street, a Smithsonian repository for stories from rural America. Our website at www.MuseumonMainStreet.org provides a place where the Smithsonian, state humanities councils, host organizations, and the general public are working together to create a permanent home for important stories, images, oral histories, and videos that document life in small and rural communities.

What Kinds of Stories Does the Initiative Collect?

If it happened in small-town America, we want to hear about it. Visitors can add stories in categories like:

- Favorite food traditions
- Experiences living in a small town
- Work
- Travel and migration
- Local music traditions
- Sports in your town
- Family life
- Military life

Why Should People Participate?

The Smithsonian will review the stories contributed to the website. And, great stories will be regularly featured on the website, in featured articles, on social media, and in future exhibitions.

How Can My Community Help?

Ask your visitors to tell their stories to the Smithsonian. Remind your visitors to explore www.MuseumonMainStreet.org!

Tips for Being an Informed and Effective Docent

Introduce yourself and make sure each visitor in your group feels welcome.

Tell visitors that CROSSROADS was created by an innovative partnership that brings Smithsonian exhibitions to rural towns. Each exhibition is specifically designed to be small and flexible.

Orient your visitors to the exhibition, and give them a starting point from which you'll begin the tour. Give your visitors an idea of what to expect—how long the tour will last (30 minutes is a good average), whether there are seating areas along the way, where facilities are located, etc.

Assess your audience and structure your tour accordingly. Younger visitors often relate to technology, popular culture, and references to today, while older visitors relate to historical content and personal memories. Be prepared to provide information to any visitors that may not be able to access the exhibition due to a disability.

Be familiar with the exhibition and the information provided. Feel free to carry your handbook on tours, but avoid reading directly from it. Aim for comfortable and conversational exchanges with your visitors.

Encourage visitors to ask questions. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," but try to find out the answer before the visitors leave.

Avoid focusing on questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no." Ask open-ended questions like: "What do you think ...?" or "How do you feel about ...?"

Give visitors time to think about and answer questions. Usually someone will speak up in about 10 to 15 seconds.

Be sure to practice your tour with museum staff, other docents and volunteers, and your family and friends. Remember, if you're relaxed and having a good time, your visitors will enjoy themselves too. Have fun!

As representatives of the museum, docents are often asked all sorts of questions. BE PREPARED!

Know the museum's name, address, phone number, hours of operation, and the location of the gift shop, restrooms, water fountains, and seating areas for all visitors, including those with disabilities.

Be familiar with dates and times of programs and special events associated with CROSSROADS, and with other exhibitions in the museum.