

Section 1 – Introduction/Welcome to Crossroads: Change in Rural America

Front side- main text

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.

But 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.

Subtitle:

Where people meet, ideas interest, and change is constant

Credits

Crossroads: Change in Rural America is a Museum on Main Street exhibition developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.

Curated by Dr. Ann McCleary and Dr. Debra Reid.

Brought to you by the [state humanities council]. Funded by the U.S. Congress.

[State] programming is supported by [state partners].

Panel Images:

Background Image:

Wood board texture

AVN Photo Lab/Shutterstock.com

Primary Image:

American landscape mural

David G. Miller

Section 1 back side – Tracing Change: What Are Your Choices?

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.

Is rural America endangered, thriving, or just scraping by? Do you see dwindling options or a bright future?

Subhead

At your own crossroads, which direction will you head—toward the countryside or away?

Quote: Our community won't get better with chance. It'll get better with change. —Minnesota teenager

Change Question Flippers:

Flipper 1: Education

Outside text: How can rural schools meet 21st century challenges?

Image:

Pleasant Grove School, Marlinton, WV. 1921.

Library of Congress

Inside text: In many states, rural schools embrace technology to improve educational opportunities for students.

Image:

Technology students, Anderson County, SC, 2015.

Museum on Main Street

Flipper 2: Access

Outside text: Do rural Americans have the same level of access to services that urban Americans enjoy?

Image:

Bookmobile, Rappahannock County, VA, ca. 1940.

Central Rappahannock Regional Library

Inside text: Rural communities and local governments work hard to ensure access to critical services, in spite of small populations and physical isolation.

Image:

Veterans Administration mobile health clinic, Mississippi, 2010.



Flipper 3: Commerce

Outside text: How do local retailers survive in an economy dominated by large businesses?

Image:

Country store in Wagoner County, OK, 1939.

Library of Congress

Inside text: Major retailers offer consumers a wider selection of products at lower prices.

But, as customers moved to larger stores, some long-established, locally-owned stores closed.

Image:

Closed businesses in Eureka, UT, 2017.

Heidi Besen/Shutterstock.com

Flipper 4: Agriculture

Outside text: What trends are emerging in agriculture?

Image:

A horse-drawn plow and tractor till a field in Shelby County, IA, 1941.

National Archives

Inside text: Agricultural mechanization revolutionized the economy but led many Americans to leave the land. Today, large farms feed America, while a growing number of small farms grow organic and specialized crops for consumers.

Image:

Modern tractor, 2010s.

Photo by Karim Shamsi-Basha, courtesy of Farm Life Magazine, an AGCO publication

Flipper 5: Infrastructure

Outside text: Do you think rural America is behind the times?

Image:

Laying sewer pipes, Kearney, NE, 1889.

Nebraska State Historical Society, nbhips 13068

Inside text: Rural communities nationwide see access to technology and infrastructure as an economic lifeline. But, high-tech investments are beyond the reach of some towns.

Image:

Laying fiber optic cable, Nome, AK, 2016.

Bob Hallinen/Anchorage Daily News

Flipper 6: Demographic Change

Outside text: How has immigration changed rural communities?

Image:

Street scene, Brunswick, MD, 1954.

Myer Kaplon Photograph Collection, Brunswick Branch Library, Frederick County Public Library

Inside text: Rural America has always had a diverse population, including American Indians and immigrants from many countries. Today, some rural areas have growing Latino, Asian, and African populations, but occasionally face difficulties in bringing people together.

Image:

Latina restaurant manager, Mount Vernon, OH, 2015.

Photo by Patricia Mota

Section 2 -- Identity

Front side- Main text

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.

Across generations, some Americans farmed, logged, mined, and built businesses and communities, fueling the nation's growth. Opportunities were not equal. Success was not guaranteed.

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.

Through an Artist's Eye

A romanticized vision of rural America, burnished by artists from 19th century painters to 21st century songwriters, celebrates the richness and beauty of the countryside and the hard-working people of rural America. This was where, some argued, the ideals of democracy took root. These interpretations sometimes gloss over the hard reality of rural life: tough work, cultural conflicts, and economic and environmental challenges.

Keywords

Equality, Liberty, Opportunity

On the Other Side of a Lens

Photographers have long documented the changing nature of rural life. Many depict Americans at their best—demonstrating pride in their homes, work, independence and ingenuity. Others frame a different picture—one that exposes gritty working conditions, poverty, and inequality.

Quotes:

(left) “When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers, therefore, are the founders of human civilization.” – Daniel Webster, attorney and politician

(right) “What I stand on is what I stand for.” – Wendell Berry, historian and poet

Video:

What Does Rural Mean to You?

Panel Images:

Background Images:

Red barn wall

David Wayne Buck/Shutterstock.com

Red plank wood

Suti Stock Photo/Shutterstock.com

Through an Artist’s Eye images:

Notch of the White Mountains by Thomas Cole, 1839, oil on canvas.

Andrew W. Mellon Fund. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

American Gothic by Grant Wood, 1930, oil on beaverboard.

Art © Figge Art Museum, Davenport, IA. Successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo Credit: The Art Institute of Chicago/ Art Resource, NY

The Old Farm House by Currier and Ives, 1872, hand-colored lithograph.

Michele and Donald D’Amour Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA. Gift of Lenore B. and Sidney A. Alpert, supplemented with Museum Acquisition Funds. Photographed by David Stansbury

Indians Travelling by Seth Eastman, 1850, watercolor on paper.

The Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN. Gift of the W. Duncan and Nivin MacMillan Foundation

Emigrants Crossing the Plains by Albert Bierstadt, 1867, oil on canvas.

National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, OK. 1972.019

Music is Contagious (Dance of the Haymakers) by William Sidney Mount, 1845, oil on canvas.

The Long Island Museum of American Art, History and Carriages, Stony Brook, NY. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1950

The Fall of the Cowboy by Frederic Remington, 1895, oil on canvas.

Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.230

Snap the Whip by Winslow Homer, 1872, oil on canvas.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Gift of Christian A. Zabriskie, 1950



Employment of Negroes in Agriculture by Earle Richardson, 1934, oil on canvas.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor

On the Other Side of a Lens images:

Family cooking in a Missouri home, 1938.

Library of Congress

Lettuce farm worker in California, 1972.

National Archives

Logger transports logs to market, Newago County, MI, 1887.

National Archives/U.S. Forest Service

Long-distance truck driver, 2012.

Photo by Desiree Wood

Computer technician, Broken Bow, OK, 2015.

Photo by Lance Cheung, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Japanese American farm worker, Centerville, CA, 1942.

Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, BANC PIC 1967.014 v.61 GC-320—
PIC

Woman working on her farm, Putnam County, GA, 1941.

National Archives

Sugar beet field workers in Colorado, 1972.

National Archives

Coal mining in Missouri.

Photo by Chad Douglas, U.S. Bureau of Land Management

Livestock auction in North Dakota, 1988.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Section 2 back side – Constant Change, Resilient Americans

Life at the Rural Crossroads

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.

Quotes

[left] “‘Rural America’ is a deceptively simple term for a remarkably diverse collection of places.” – Kenneth Johnson, Newsweek, 2017

[right] “My sense of who I am is once more affirmed. Living close to the land ... does that for me.” – Jerry Apps, Wisconsin historian

Keywords

Identity, Persistence, Community, Diversity

Object case

Time magazine cover, February 1985 issue

Panel Images:

Background Image:

Landscape in rural Washington.

Trong Nguyen/Shutterstock.com

Top band images:

Cloth flour and feed sacks.

Photo by Lori Kennedy

Chinese American owners of Lace House Dry Goods store, 1909.
National Archives

African American farm family, Humphreys County, MS, 1996.
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Change Category images (second band):

Communities

American Indian village of Pomeiooc

Theodor de Bry engraving, 1580s

Settlement

Land advertisement, 1870s.

kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society

Mechanization



Combine harvester in Washington, 1916.
Library of Congress

Industry
Magnolia Cotton Mill in Mississippi, 1911.
National Archives

Transportation
Women traveling in Ford Model T, ca. 1920.
Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer

Depression
Dust storm, 1937.
Courtesy of Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Grace E. Ray Collection #252

Electrification
Rural Electrification Administration poster, date unknown.
Special Collections, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library

Communication
Television pamphlet, 1950s
Farm family listening to radio, 1920s.
Library of Congress

Civil Rights
Protest march for racial equality, 1964.
Library of Congress

Migration
Lettuce harvesting in California, 2013.
Photo by Bob Nichols, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Change
Solar powered barn in Oklahoma, ca. 2012.
Chad Collins/ Sun City Solar Energy

Family images (center/third band):

Tobias family, Custer County, NE, 1886.
Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. Nebraska State Historical Society, nbhips 104132

Bogel family, Charco Larco Ranch, TX, ca. 1914.
University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu; crediting Marfa Public Library

American Indian family riding in wagon, date unknown.
The Grace Nicholson Photograph Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, photCL 56 (1224)

Natsumeda family, California, 1927.
Los Angeles Public Library

Kelly family portrait, California, 1909.
San Diego History Center

Lee family portrait, California, 1912.
Los Angeles Public Library

Mexican American family, California, 1918.
Los Angeles Public Library

Gutierrez family, California, ca. 1935.
Los Angeles Public Library

McClintock family, near Sumterville, AL, 1940.
Library of Congress

Andersen family, Clear Creek, UT, 1904.
Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah

Japanese American family, California, early 1900's.
Department of Special Research Collections, UCSB Library, University of California, Santa Barbara

Bottom band images:

“B'ayette,” Navajo blanket, ca. 1881.
Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, E220190-0

African American Bible quilt, made by Harriet Powers, Clarke County, GA, ca. 1886.
National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution

Farm workers, Ventura County, CA, 1937.
Los Angeles Public Library

Poultry processing plant in Mississippi, 1970s.
Photo by Joe Valbuena, U.S. Department of

Pieced quilt made by Lucy Mingo, Gee's Bend, AL, 1979.
Courtesy of the Volckening Collection, Portland, OR

Family cooking in Taos County, NM, 1939.

Section 2 tail wing front side

Read About Rural

Cultural interpretations from artists, authors, and musicians have played an important role in conveying the identity of rural Americans. Whether they tell stories of hard work, struggles and conflicts in rural life, migration, or the joys of living close to nature, these writers have given us indelible impressions of what they believed rural life to be. Select a book and explore these authors' interpretations, from both past and present.

Callout text

How have views of rural America changed over time?

Panel Images:

Background image:

Veteran in a New Field by Winslow Homer, 1865, oil on canvas.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot (1876-1967), 1967.

Section 2 tail wing back side

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. But 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. Many people define a place's rural nature based on their daily experience or by what they see and sense when they visit. 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."

Callout text

Is rural a state of mind?

Songs About Rural Life spinning interactive

Songs About Rural Life

Rural environments appear in many songs. Musicians who grew up or lived in rural areas often write about their experiences, revealing how those communities shaped them in positive and negative ways. Spin the wheel to see how some musicians have described their relationships with rural places.

Song lyric 1

Well, it's always we rambled, that river and I
All along your green valley, I will work till I die
My land I'll defend with my life if it be
'Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free
—Woody Guthrie, from “Pastures of Plenty”

Song lyric 2

Where the air is so pure, and the zephyrs so free,
The breezes so balmy and light,
That I would not exchange my home on the range,
For all of the cities so bright
—Brewster M. Higley, from “Home on the Range”

Song lyric 3

Yeah, I'm proud to be a coal miner's daughter
I remember well - the well where I drew water
The work we done was hard
At night we'd sleep 'cause we worked hard
I never thought of ever leaving Butcher Holler
—Loretta Lynn, from “Coal Miner’s Daughter”

Song lyric 4

A little old town in Tennessee, it's called
Quiet little old community, a one-horse town
You have to watch what you're puttin' down
In old Nutbush, they call it Nutbush
—Tina Turner, from “Nutmash City Limits”

Song lyric 5

It's the way of life in the real West
'Neath the Prairie moon that's Heaven blessed
And a tall boot shuffle on a wooden floor
It's a clean white shirt on a Saturday night
And a long cold beer that's pure delight
And if you heard me say it, there's a whole lot more
—Tish Hinojosa, from “In the Real West”

Panel images:

Top band images:

Red Wing, MN streetscape, 2016.

Photo by Heather Foster Shelton

Center band images:

U.S. counties that are not in metropolitan areas, 2013

Utah landscape

Trudy Simmons/Shutterstock.com

Bottom band images:

Wheat field

Vladyslav Daniln/Shutterstock.com

Section 2 tail wing end cap

Song lyric

Around here people break their backs just to earn a buck
We never get ahead but we have enough
I watch people leave and they come right back
I never wanted any part of that
I'm proud to say that I love this place
Good ole small town U-S-A
– Lyric by Justin Moore, from “Small Town USA”

Panel images

Top band image:

Old Sheldon by Ment Nelson, 2015

Center band image:

New Road by Grant Wood, 1939, oil on canvas mounted on hardboard.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Bottom band image:

Ploughing It Under by Thomas Hart Benton, 1934, reworked 1964, oil on canvas.

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR, 2006.73. Photography by Edward C. Robinson III

Section 3 – Land

Front side

Main text:

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.

European concepts of private land ownership shaped settlers’ ideals from the beginning of the nation. This contrasted sharply with indigenous views of the land as a communal resource upon which they depended for their livelihood. 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.

Today, rural America is a patchwork of both private and public land. Nothing stirs passions like different ideas about land and access. Land disputes of every kind mark our history—conflicts over broken treaties with American Indian nations, litigation over ownership of lands used by African American farmers and southern sharecroppers, contractual battles over access to resources on or under the ground, and environmental concerns.

Keywords

Inspiration, Spiritual, Wonder

Callout text

What emotional connections do you have to rural places?

Inspired by Land

Clear skies and dramatic natural features, and the characteristics of open land provide a creative environment for artists and authors. Whether describing the spirit of a landscape in a novel or building a site-specific sculpture, we are inspired by land and the environment.

Inspired by Land images:

Spiral Jetty, created by Robert Smithson in 1970, is a 1,500-foot rock installation on the shores of Great Salt Lake, UT.

Museum on Main Street

Artist at Pigeon Point Lighthouse, CA.

Photo by Mila Zinkova

“What Does Rural Sound Like?” Audio Component

Push the button below to hear some of the unforgettable sounds of rural life.

Audio component image:

Photo by Steve Hillebrand

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Sense of Place subtext:

When you smell fresh-cut hay, or salt on a sea breeze, or even hog manure, or when you hear the songs of familiar birds or a bawling calf, or feel the bluster of a desert wind, does the experience stir emotions connected to a particular place?

If the answer is “yes,” chalk it up to a “sense of place”—that very real, but difficult to define, attachment to a particular landscape, environment, or community.



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.

But a sense of place is not always a positive feeling. For some, rural life leaves memories of isolation, exclusion, and hard, unsatisfying work.

Rural Recreation

Think of the things you like to do most. How many of them involve recreation in a rural place? We flock to rural America to enjoy its rugged mountains, waterways, glorious views, and quiet forests. Many urban and suburban residents experience rural areas through their leisure activities. Millions of Americans choose to live close to these wild places.

Panel images:

Top band images:

Smith Rock Mountain, OR.

Photo by Thomas Shahan

Storm over a Kansas wheat field.

Photo by James Hal Watkins

Children playing in a field.

Backwoods hiking in Yosemite National Park, CA.

Photo by William Durr

Mount Shuksan, WA.

Photo by JoAnn Zheng and Michal Osmenda

Center background image:

A rural road in Kansas' Flint Hills.

TommyBrison/Shutterstock.com

Center band images:

Canoeing the Magalloway River, NH.

Photo by William Durr

Campers near Denmark, ME, date unknown.

Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS 77259

Rural church near Junction City, KS.

Library of Congress

Soil



mikeledray/Shutterstock.com

Farmstead near Murray, NE

Bottom band images:

Coastal landscape

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

California landscape.

Tree planting, TN

Library of Congress

Cracked soil

Asian images/Shutterstock.com

Hikers at Pine Ridge, SD.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Miller's Swimming Hole, Ginger Hole, MO, 1902.

Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS 77519

"Rooted in Place: What Connections Do You Have to Rural Places?" flipbook

Cover image:

Kayaker

Photo copyright Eric Vance, used by permission

Flipbook pages 2-3

"Never Give Up; Never Give In"

Nearly one million women in the United States are working in agriculture today, a fact that may surprise many Americans. Traditionally considered masculine work, more women are taking over family businesses and there is evidence that they are more willing to experiment with sustainable agricultural practices. "Women make great stewards of the land," says Tootie Bland of Noodle, Texas. "They are in touch with and tuned into nature, and live by the cowgirl code of 'Never give up; never give in.'"

Image:

Rancher, near Yakima, WA.

Photo by Amanda Ray, Yakima Herald-Republic

Flipbook pages 4-5

Embracing Agricultural Roots

Rural Arkansas is a world away from Laos in Southeast Asia but according to Hmong farmer Koua Thao, when agriculture is in your blood, the desire to work the land is not so different in any part of the world. Thao received a USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Guaranteed Farm Ownership loan to start a hen farm



in 2005. He is continuing to expand with cattle because, “The cows keep the grass down and I hope they help out financially.”

Image:

Koua Thao manages his cattle, 2017.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Flipbook pages 6-7

Teaching the Importance of Land and Place

Today, growers and culture bearers recognize the importance of their interdependence. Examples of this abound across rural America. Only 19 of Vermont’s 7,300 farms are African American owned. The Clemmons Family Farm has been one of them since 1962. In 2016, the family turned its 148-acre farm into a multicultural center devoted to providing a place where the African American community can experience connections to land and take ownership of their history. The farm is part of the Vermont African American Heritage Trail and its programs include everything from dance performances to culinary demonstrations.

Image:

Maasai storytelling program, 2017.

Clemmons Family Farm

Flipbook pages 8-9

Inspired by Majestic Landscapes

New Yorker Paul Bransom’s life changed when he fell in love the scenery of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The alpine wilderness influenced his famous illustrations and he returned every summer for sixteen years. He helped the local arts to flourish and befriended ranchers who allowed him to paint the mountains and “tall pine trees, forming ever-changing patterns of cool shade and brilliant sunlight on the warm dust.”

Image:

Bransom leads a Teton Artists’ Association outdoor class, ca. 1947, Jackson Hole, WY.

Photo by Herb Pownall. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Flipbook pages 10-11

Connecting Communities to the Land

“In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history,” explains writer and Turtle Mountain Nation member Louise Erdrich. The Straw Bale Home Project, operated by Montana’s Red Feather Development Group, collaborates with first-time American Indian homeowners to design housing that creates those important connections to the land by using locally sourced, sustainable building materials. Community and land are linked, empowering indigenous communities across the West.

Image:

Straw bale home under construction.

Photo Courtesy of Red Feather Development Group

Section 3 back side—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.

Ownership might not prevent others from using private land. Disputes erupt when non-owners claim access to private land or when an owner’s ability to control land use is challenged. That may happen when eminent domain rights are asserted or when water rights, mineral rights, and rights of way are disputed.

Callout text

How has your community handled the complex nature of land ownership and use?

Quote

“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

Keywords

Independence, public, controversy

Forced from the Land

American Indian nations had thriving cultures and communities long before European settlers arrived. They used extensive trails and waterways to trade with others, and many moved seasonally. Some hunted and fished on the land while others raised crops and livestock. As European settlers moved west, millions of American Indians were forced to move onto reservations, often far from their traditional lands. Related broken treaties are still being litigated in the courts between the U.S. and sovereign tribal nations.

In Indiana, several American Indian nations were pushed off their ancestral lands in the early 1800s. The Lewelling family settled on land in 1818. They built their home in an area where Miami, Wea, Potawatomi, Eel River, and Delaware peoples previously lived.

Forced from the Land images:

Canoe Race Near Sault Ste. Marie by George Catlin, 1836-37, oil on canvas.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

Potawatomi leaders met with U.S. government officials prior to their removal.

Painted by George Winter, 1837. Courtesy of the Glenn A. Black Laboratory of Archaeology, Indiana University, Bloomington

Families, like the Lewellings, preserved historic photographs of the homesteads built by their ancestors.
Photo date unknown.
Courtesy of Ann McCleary

After removal, many displaced Potawatomi rebuilt their communities in the Great Plains. Pisehedwin, a Potawatomi, at his Kansas farm, 1877.
National Archives

Land Deed Flipper

Outside text:

Many families like the Lewellings purchased land formerly claimed by American Indians and built homes (shown at left). Lift the panel below to learn how the U.S. government obtained the land the family purchased.

Image:

The Bureau of Land Management preserves all deeds, but descendants of families often treasure the historic documents as proof of ownership and pride in family heritage.

Courtesy of Ann McCleary

Inside text:

This Schedule of Indian Land Cessions shows the treaties and land transfers by the U.S. government with American Indian nations. Lands were sometimes surrendered under pressure or sometimes purchased.

The text below mentions the five American Indian Nations that were parties in the Treaty of Grouseland, negotiated in 1805. Included in the land transfer was the property that the Lewelling family purchased in 1818.

“The Delaware release the U.S. from the guarantee given in the treaty of Aug. 18, 1804, as to the ownership of the country between the Ohio and White rivers...”

“The Miamis, Eel Rivers, and Weas cede the U.S. all that tract...”

“The U.S. agree to consider the Miamis, Eel Rivers, and Weas as joint owners of all the country on the Wabash...”

“The Putawatimics, Miamis, Eel Rivers, and Weas acknowledge the right of the Delawares to sell the tract of land conveyed to the U.S. by treaty of Aug. 18, 1804...”

Image:

Page from Schedule of Indian Land Sessions document

Land Provides Work

The land and products gathered, mined, or manufactured from it provides opportunities for many American workers.

Land Provides Work images:

American Indian woman harvesting hops in Washington state, ca. 1900.



Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, WA. Anders B. Wilse Collection, 1988.33.139

Crew of miners with coal wagon, Pittston, PA, 1911.

National Archives

Sharecropper and plow, near Laurel, MS, 1938.

Library of Congress

African American woman working in a textile plant, Tennessee, ca. 1970s.

Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Southern Labor Archives, Box 14, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, Memphis-Jackson Joint Board records, L1992_11_91

Sharing Land subtext

Even though the vast majority of Americans do not hold legal title to rural land, they share the right to access the nation's public lands—and their unique natural resources—in the form of local, municipal, state, and national parks, conservation areas, forest preserves, and wildlife refuges. The taxpayers have a voice in the management of these lands.

Sharing and managing public land means much more than accessing recreation areas created for our enjoyment. Governments invest public monies into land stewardship for the general welfare of all, including educational facilities, highways, and civil defense. Governments also manage the use of public lands, determining how they can be used for water rights, grazing, mining, and timber production.

Public access to heritage areas, national monuments, and other rural attractions draw tourists, diversifying local economies and widening the circle of public awareness of land as a national resource.

Protecting Public Lands object case

Several government agencies are responsible for administering and protecting public lands and natural resources. From law enforcement officers to park rangers to wildland firefighters, many professionals invest their skills and energy in preserving the lands. In addition, millions of Americans volunteer their time to help clean and maintain public spaces.

Objects: Uniform patches from Federal land management agencies, firefighting gloves, and barbed wire.

Protecting Public Lands images:

Map of federally managed lands in the United States.

Map generated from data from the US Bureau of Land Management.

In 2018, the U.S. Forest Service had 193 million acres of land under its management. Sign welcoming visitors to Routt-Medicine Bow National Forest, CO.

Photo by Robert Mandje

Debating Land Use

The management of land resources can lead to passionate debate. Some work to shield both public and private land from energy exploration or environmental damage. Some believe that public lands should be more accessible to use by ranchers or other business interests. Owners of private lands often fight against encroachments on their properties. These differing viewpoints can lead to public demonstrations and conflict.

Debating Land Use images:

Demonstrators gather to protest U.S. Bureau of Land Management policies, Recapture Canyon, NV, 2014.

Photo by Jonathan P. Thompson

Supporters of access to public lands rally to protest proposed cuts to national monument acreage, 2017.
Andrew Nicla/Cronkite News

Protests against construction of an oil pipeline near Standing Rock Sioux nation reservation lands, sacred sites, and waters, near Cannon Ball, ND, 2016.

Photo by Tim Yakaitis

Panel Images:

Top band images:

Soil

mikeledray/Shutterstock.com

Fenced land in Colorado.

Comstock/Getty Images

National Forest sign

Colorado Public Radio/Rachel Estabrook

The National Park Service was established in 1916. In 2018, 417 parks covered more than 84 million acres of land. National Parks promotional poster, 1936.

Library of Congress

Carbon County, WY.

Library of Congress

Center background image:

Iowa farm

Natalia Kuzmina/Shutterstock.com

Bottom band images:

Oil worker checking pump.

Zoran Orick/Shutterstock.com



San Ardo Oil Field, Monterey County, CA.
Loco Steve

Homes along Carlyle Lake, IL.
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Farrell's Ranch gates, La Salle County, TX.
Billy Hathorn

Straw
Wora Citizen/Shutterstock.com

Carissa Mine, WY.
Photo by Melissa Kopka

Hands planting crops.
showcake/Shutterstock.com

Cattle roundup on ranch land.
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Logging truck near Estill, SC.
Raymond Clarke/raymondclarkeimages

Section 4 – Community

Front Side – Main text

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.

Callout text

Rural life is community life.

Community Gatherings

Neighbors gathered at local institutions and events where deep, lasting relationships formed. Country stores and churches served as meeting places. Picnics, parades, and sports focused attention on shared interests.

Community Gatherings images:

General store, Gordonton, NC, ca. 1936.

Photo by Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress

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

Basketball game between players from Oak Grove, AR and Blue Eye, MO, 1915.

Museum on Main Street

Community picnic in Colorado, early 1900s.

Charles S. Lillybridge Collection, Ph. 00259, History Colorado

Tourists from a cruise ship tour downtown Skagway, AK.

Ruth Peterkin/ Shutterstock.com

Hometown Entertainment object case

What do you like to do in your spare time? Play sports, hunt or fish? Catch a movie? Act in a play? Or, perhaps show your community spirit at a parade? Many rural Americans invest in leisure and recreational activities in their communities. And even small towns have a wealth of entertainment options to offer. How do people have fun in your community?

Objects: Fair ribbons; promotional fans; Future Farmers of America chapter jacket; church cookbook; program from Tibbets Opera House, Coldwater, MI; 4-H beanie; pins from local Lions, Woodmen of the World, Ruritan, and Elks clubs; and a Rotary club banner

Hometown Entertainment background image:

Painted brick wall

Shevelev Vladimir/Shutterstock.com

Main Street subtext

Main Street remains an enduring symbol of American crossroads communities. In many communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rural people created bustling streetscapes lined with stylish commercial buildings. "Main Street" became a symbol of small-town commerce. County seats and towns along railroads and the emerging highway system grew. Theaters and opera houses enhanced cultural life. Parks provided stages for local band concerts. Schools and libraries offered a range of educational opportunities.

Many towns, particularly those away from transportation arteries, began to fade in the mid-20th century. Some communities struggled to adapt to changing demographics and social dynamics. But many of America's small towns persisted, and even thrived, due to the imagination and sheer commitment of their residents.

Main Street images:

Residents celebrate Pendleton, South Carolina's 225th anniversary on its town green, 2015.
Ken Ruinard/Anderson Independent Mail

Shoppers enjoy a sidewalk festival in Marietta, OH.
Marietta Main Street. Photo by Cristie L. Thomas

Rural farmers often sell their crops and other products at farmers' markets in towns large and small, here in Olympia, WA.
Library of Congress

Accordionist Nathan Williams leads his Zydeco Cha Chas in a Mardi Gras parade, St. Martinville, LA.
Photo by Philip Gould

Window and red brick (background)
Songquan Deng/Shutterstock.com

Callout text

What stories do Main Street tell in your community?

Panel Images:

Top band images:

National Road Museum, Boonsboro, MD
Museum on Main Street

Pharmacy, Dyersburg, TN.
Photo by Brent Moore

Bank, Brunswick, MD.
Museum on Main Street

Fire station, Jerome, AZ.
Photo by Tom W. McKinnon

Public library, Union, SC.
Photo by Kevin Dietrich, Newberry, SC
Church, Sharpsburg, MD.
Museum on Main Street



Center band side images:

Postcards of historic Main Streets

Bottom band images:

Main Street, Grundy Center, IA, about 1908.

Library of Congress

Festival at the Town Hall, Eldora, IA.

Photo by Cara Lott

Side 2 (front side endcap to right of Main Street subtext)—Build a Community interactive

Main text

Every town is made up of essential building blocks—organizations, businesses, and institutions that help it to thrive. What does your town need to survive? What would make your town a more interesting place? How have uses of these establishments changed over the last 150 years? Are local needs still the same? Identify the elements that your town needs most and build your ideal Main Street.

Callout text:

What does your town need?

What would you choose?

What makes a community dynamic?

Building Block texts:

Barbershop

The primary reason barber and beauty shops became local institutions is that they were places where people gathered, learned the latest local news, and most importantly, fostered enduring relationships with one another.

Bank

Rural banking has a complex history. Over the years, many small local banks closed or were purchased by larger regional and national banks, which changed the local relationships that used to characterize small-town banking.

Hardware store

Local hardware stores became local institutions largely because of their level of customer service. Small town residents came to rely on hardware stores that provided goods that kept homes and businesses operating smoothly and provided critical knowledge and technical assistance with a friendly attitude.

Hospital

Many rural towns had a small community hospital. Since the 1990s, cutbacks and consolidation of services in regional medical centers have left many rural Americans traveling long distances to obtain health care. Today, 77% of rural counties have shortages in health care professionals.

General store

General stores provided one-stop shopping in rural America long before today's big-box stores. They stocked most things rural families needed, served as the local post office in many places, and became hubs of community interaction.

Post office

Post offices have been part of the fabric of American communities since the 1700s. For many crossroads communities, the opening of a post office confirmed status as a place. Even though the number of post offices has decreased since 1901, rural letter carriers still provide a vital service, delivering mail to almost 37 million rural homes and businesses in 2006.

Town hall

Town halls served as more than just administrative centers for local government. Like county courthouses, they came to symbolize a place where residents could take an active role in local government. These facilities served as places for people to meet, debate issues, and feel connected to community.

Library

Public libraries contribute to the educational and cultural fabric of American small towns. Industrialist Andrew Carnegie helped establish more than 1,600 public libraries in the U.S. between 1883 and 1929. Many Carnegie libraries remain in operation today in small towns.

Museum

Did you know that 52% of American cultural organizations were located in small towns and rural communities in 2017? Rural museums are treasures that provide access to a wealth of objects and information on local and regional history and culture.

School

Schools not only became one of the core components of community life, but also a central element of a town's identity. Local schools conveyed a sense of belonging to residents. Losing a school to consolidation created a tear in the local social fabric that proved difficult for many towns to mend.

Fire station

Fire departments help keep people and property safe. Prior to the 1850s, all fire departments were volunteer-operated. People still benefit from that tradition today in many places. In most towns with fewer than 10,000 residents, all firefighters are volunteers.

Pharmacy

Locally-operated pharmacies sprang up in small towns. Much like small general and department stores, the pharmacies suffered as national chains became more prominent. Between 2003 and 2013, 490 rural towns lost their local pharmacy.

Department store

As towns grew larger in the early 20th century, shopping options expanded. Many towns boasted a department store that offered a wider array of goods. These stores were often family-operated and were a core part of community culture. Small-town downtowns became shopping destinations.

Theater

Local theaters and opera houses—whether they offered movies, traveling shows, or locally-produced extravaganzas—added to the cultural vibrancy of Main Street and attracted people to small towns.

Feed mill

Early in their history, crossroads communities were the place where people who provided goods and services to farmers and ranchers started their businesses. These towns also processed the goods produced on the farms—from grinding and milling wheat, producing animal feeds, and processing meats—and helped forge the nation’s agricultural economy.

Hotel

Weary travelers always need a home away from home. Hotels—some utilitarian and others ornate and glamorous—popped up in small towns across the country. Hoteliers became important leaders of the small-town business community and worked hard to attract interest in small towns.

Church

Organizations representing many faiths fulfilled the spiritual and emotional needs of crossroads communities. They also became local institutions that were an integral part of a town’s cultural fabric. Through community events and service-related activities, small towns relied on local religious organizations.

Railroad depot

All aboard! Places where goods and services were needed by the railroads became new towns. Rail depots became integral links in the nation’s growing transportation network.

Vegetable stand

Crossroads communities provided a market for farmers to sell their products. Vegetable and fruit stands, and farmers markets became staples of small town commerce. That tradition continues today, even in major cities, as many Americans seek out fresh foods and other products grown by local or regional growers.

Panel Images:

Top band image:

Montpelier, VT street scene

Doug Kerr

Bottom band image:

Painted brick wall

Shevelev Vladimir/Shutterstock.com



Side 3—Sustaining Community

Main text

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 benefitted 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.

Callout text

Americans worked together to address rural challenges.

Building for the Future

Rural people often worked together to create better roads, community infrastructure, and local schools—tasks citizens continue to take on because of their devotion to a rural way of life.

Building for the Future images:

Millions of Americans promoted road construction through the Good Roads Movement, date unknown. Birmingham, AL Public Library Archives

School construction project in Knapp, WI, 1909

In 1896, the U.S. Postal Service began offering Rural Free Delivery in three West Virginia communities. The program became national in 1902, making home delivery routine, even in remote places. Mail car, 1910.

Smithsonian's National Postal Museum

[*background image*] Laying sewer pipes in Kearney, NE, 1889.
Nebraska State Historical Society, nbhips 13068

Reforming Community subtext

Some Americans worried about the future of rural America in the early 20th century. They promoted the Country Life Movement to modernize rural communities and make them more appealing places to live.

Education and training programs became powerful tools for modernizing rural communities. Federal legislation paved the way for the land-grant university network. Colleges specializing in agricultural and

mechanical education started across the country and added community outreach to their services. Extension agents took the latest in science and techniques directly to farmers.

4-H, which promoted agricultural education to young people, also connected to the cooperative extension system. Each of these programs carried education and training to rural Americans of all ages

Reforming Community images:

An agricultural agent visits local farms in Carroll County, GA, ca. 1910s.

Barnes Photo of Temple, GA. Courtesy of Georgia Archives, Vanishing Georgia Collection, car124

4-H students display their sheep, 1949.

Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M

The Ham and Egg Show debuted in Fort Valley, GA, in 1916 as an extension event for African American farm families. 33rd Ham and Egg Show, 1949.

Fort Valley State University

Tennessee State University experimental field, 1953.

Tennessee State University Archive

(background) Painted wood
xzgorik/Shutterstock.com

Help for Farm Families object case

Cooperative extension programs from universities across the country produced booklets and leaflets to connect people in rural communities with the latest technical information to improve their crops and practices. Whether you needed advice on building an outhouse or were curious about raising bees for honey, extension leaflets opened the door.

The New Deal subtext

As the Great Depression of the 1930s worsened, Americans elected Franklin D. Roosevelt who promised a “New Deal”—a series of programs designed to help Americans survive the crisis. Many of the programs targeted agricultural producers and processors, along with rural businesses and communities.

The impact of the New Deal was enormous and historic, representing one of the largest national investments in rural America. From major public works projects to rural electrification, New Deal programs helped many rural areas chart a new course.

New Deal background image:

Old wood surface

Randy R/Shutterstock.com

“New Deal Stories: How Did the New Deal Affect Your Community?” flipbook

Cover image:



Worker receives paycheck for work on a public project, 1939.
National Archives

Flipbook pages 2-3

Agricultural Assistance

One of the first New Deal actions was the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), addressing economic difficulties facing farmers. AAA subsidy programs became an early model for assistance programs that continue today.

The AAA had a positive impact on many farmers, but faced criticism. Some questioned producing fewer crops at a time when people were hungry. A small number of farmers refused government assistance. Some sharecroppers and tenant farmers were forced to move to find new work as landowners receiving government subsidies took land out of production. Image:

Image:

An Illinois farmer uses a sign to protest subsidy programs, 1940.
Library of Congress

Flipbook pages 4-5

Preserving Culture and History

The U.S. government employed more than 40,000 people in cultural projects in art, music, theatre, writing, and historical records.

One effort, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), created detailed state guidebooks and collections of oral histories that documented the experiences of formerly enslaved African Americans and recollections from American Indians. The Slave Narratives project included more than 2,000 interviews. The Indian-Pioneer Papers project encompassed 116 volumes of interviews. Most interviewers were white, and scholars today recognize that this may have had an impact on how some interviews were conducted and also on how interview subjects may have shared their stories.

Image:

Poster celebrating the FWP's series of American Guides, 1941.
Library of Congress

Flipbook pages 6-7

A New Beginning

In August 1933, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt traveled to impoverished areas in northern West Virginia. Moved by the experience, she began working closely with the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the U.S. Department of the Interior (later part of the Resettlement Administration) to develop a new town that offered a chance for selected families to start anew, with jobs in community farms and industries, housing, and schools. Arthurdale became the first town developed under the New Deal. A strong sense of community formed and local residents continue to preserve its homes and buildings.

Image:

Community store in Arthurdale, WV, 1935.
Library of Congress

Flipbook pages 8-9

Reinvigorating a Region

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) provided economic relief to states in the Tennessee River valley through a series of public works projects. Millions of Americans today still rely on TVA for electricity and flood control.

Norris Dam on the Clinch River was TVA's first major project. Designed to provide flood control and deliver low-cost electricity, plans also incorporated recreation areas. The project provided employment for about 2,000 workers. Like other big dams, Norris Dam had a social impact. The reservoir created by the dam forced the relocation of nearly 3,000 families.

Image:

Construction workers at Norris Dam, 1933.

Photo by Lewis Hine, National Archives

Flipbook pages 10-11

Building a Monument to Nature and Engineering

Nicknamed "America's Favorite Drive," the Blue Ridge Parkway extends 469 miles linking Shenandoah National Park in Virginia to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina. In 1935, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers began building a roadway designed to blend into its natural surroundings. Crews continued working on the road for 60 years. The project created jobs and stimulated tourism, but also displaced residents and changed transportation patterns. The parkway crossed the lands of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, which fought against granting a right of way to the government until securing better terms in 1940.

Image:

Parkway construction, date unknown.

National Archives

Panel Images

Top band images:

4-H students with boxes of chickens in Marshall, TX, ca. 1950s.

Courtesy of Debra Reid

County extension service curb market in Woodbine, NC, ca. 1920s.

National Archives

South Texas Panorama shows many of the agricultural, professional, and industrial workers who keep communities running. During the Great Depression, federally commissioned artists celebrated American work in murals, paintings, and sculpture.

South Texas Panorama (Alice, Texas post office), by Warren Hunter, 1939, oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum

Center band side images:

Postcards of major public projects

Bottom band images:

Gary, MN, panorama, 1902.

Library of Congress

Works Progress Administration worker during construction of Grand Coulee Dam in Washington state, one of the largest New Deal public works projects, 1936.

National Archives

Civilian Conservation Corps workers build a fire line near Idaho City, ID, date unknown.

Courtesy Gerald W. Williams Collection, Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Oregon State University Libraries

Side 4 – REA: Electrifying Farms (endcap to right of New Deal subtext)

Main text

By the 1930s, much of urban America and many towns were electrified. Rural areas were not.

The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) changed that by bringing more affordable electric power to the countryside. Rural residents funded the projects by investing in cooperatives.

Congress passed the Rural Electrification Act in 1935, providing federal loans to fund the construction of power lines. Local residents formed member-owned cooperatives to purchase power at wholesale prices and distribute it in rural areas.

Rural electrification created rural jobs, improved the living standards of many rural people, expanded the ability of women to support farm expansion, and began to position farms for a coming revolution in mechanization.

How did electricity change your rural community?

Panel Images:

Top band image:

Utility workers build telephone lines in Tennessee, 1942.

Library of Congress

Center and bottom band images:

[*center and bottom band*] REA promotional posters, ca. 1940s.

National Archives, FDR Presidential Library and Museum; and Special Collections, National Agricultural Library, U.S. Department of Agriculture

[*center background*] Power line installation near Arcadia, WI, date unknown.

National Archives, FDR Presidential Library and Museum

Tune In audio component



Electricity's arrival also helped open up the world to rural Americans. Power brought new forms of entertainment into rural homes and opened up new ways of communicating and working with others. Listen to stories about rural electrification and extension programs and songs from rural social justice movements.

Recordings:

Ruth Jamison and Edna Helvey Garber describe their experiences with the Cooperative Extension Service and 4-H in Augusta County, Virginia

Stan Jensen and Orion Samuelson remember how electricity instantly changed life in their families' homes

Elroy Hoffman and the Abernathy family describe how electrification had an impact on agricultural work

"We Shall Overcome" from Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Freedom Songs 1960-1966, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

"Pastures of Plenty" by Woody Guthrie from This Land is Your Land: The Asch Recordings, Vol. 1, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Side 5—Accelerating Change

Main text

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.

A Changing Economy subtext

During the last half of the 20th century, massive changes in American business and infrastructure transformed life in rural America.

A new interstate highway system crisscrossed the nation, but bypassed many small towns. Business districts began to empty as shoppers and travelers opted for bigger stores and destinations. Global competition drove many rural manufacturing jobs overseas. Other factories closed or tried to adapt with cost-cutting measures.

Some farmers saved labor by adopting new technologies. Efficiency enabled some to expand their acreage, while other farmers struggled to stay on their land. Agribusiness became the new model.

Economic change created uneven results. Rural manufacturing grew more automated, but closures left some towns facing the problem of empty facilities.

A Changing Economy images:

Hosiery factory in North Carolina.

Courtesy of Zkano Sock Mills

Beef processing.

Photo by Lester Shepherd. U.S. Department of Agriculture

Bottling technology in a Wisconsin dairy.

Photo by Ken Hammond, U.S. Department of Agriculture

[background] Abandoned factory, Yorklyn, DE, 2014.

Photo by Stephen J. Duncan

Addressing Inequality and Poverty subtext

During the 1950s and 1960s, grassroots movements raised awareness of the complex and interrelated problems of inequality and poverty in rural communities. Conflict over equal rights for African Americans, Latinos, women, and American Indians took place in rural America. Rural people clashed—sometimes violently.

Millions of Americans from both rural and urban areas, played active roles in supporting movements to address inequality and challenges to access rural people and places. Across a diverse set of social and economic issues, many rural citizens have helped to contribute to broader American change, in critical ways.

Addressing Inequality and Poverty images:

A woman celebrates receiving her voter registration card, Fayette County, TN, 1960.

Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, copyright Ernest C. Withers Trust

The first Farm Aid concert took place in 1985 to focus attention on the needs of American farm families.
Farm Aid/Paul Natkin

Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the National Farmworkers Association, organized farmworkers and generated awareness of labor and civil rights issues beginning in the 1950s. Huerta leads a California march, ca. 1970s.

Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

Supporters organized a March for Rural Hospitals to call attention to problems facing rural health care, Washington, DC, 2015.

Courtesy of the National Rural Health Association

[*background*] Rusted metal

Mr. Watchara Pooto/Shutterstock.com

Showing Solidarity object case

Thousands of rural Americans joined movements against inequality and injustice. Through buttons, patches, and even belt buckles, people made their support for these efforts clear.

Objects: Button and belt buckle from American Agricultural Movement, 1970s; Civil Rights organization button, 1960s; and Tractorcade button, 1970s

Keywords

Industry, change

Panel Images

Top band images:

Closed oil mill, Pendleton, SC, 2011.

Photo by Peter Wrenn

Shuttered rail depot, Charles Town, WV, ca. 1980.

Courtesy of Jay Miller, Flickr: lionel682

Participants rally to support African American farmers, 1992.

Federation of Southern Cooperatives

Center band side image:

Rusted metal

Mr. Watchara Pooto/Shutterstock.com

Bottom band images:

Migrant farmers harvest celery in California.

Photo by Dan Long

After 118 years in business, the Lukaszewicz family closed its Farwell, NE, furniture, appliance, and flooring store in 2016.

Copyright 2018 *Omaha World-Herald*

Civil rights movement workers gathered at a county convention of the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi, 1964.



Side 6—Changes in Rural Community Organizations (endcap to right of Addressing Inequality and Poverty)

Main text

Community organizations—like schools, religious organizations, civic groups, service clubs, and chambers of commerce—had long been anchors of rural culture when postwar changes began to alter the vitality of rural communities.

School consolidation offers improved facilities and opportunities, but also can be a symbol of decline. Losing schools often leads to the loss of community cohesion.

The aging rural population struggles to sustain social and cultural organizations. But many local groups remain strong and work hard to address critical community needs and bolster local social services.

Changes in Rural Community Organizations images:

Over the course of the last century, 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) have played significant roles in the social, educational and cultural development of rural students, while also supporting agricultural and rural development. Today, both incorporate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) into their educational programs. 4-H students study robotics in Illinois, 2017.

National 4-H Council

Native Alaskan families attend a community meeting in Alaska.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. All rights reserved

[background] Crossroad quilt, made by Linda Dufresne, Council Bluffs, IA

Panel Images

Top band image:

Bodie, CA church.

Doug James/Shutterstock.com

Bottom band image:

Consolidations led to many rural youth traveling long distances to school. By 2001, just 2.7% of rural students aged 6 to 12 lived within a mile of school. School bus near Forrest City, AR.

Photo by Bob Nichols, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Section 5- Persistence

Front Side—main text

Rural Americans believe in their communities. Many seek solutions to problems rather than abandoning the places where they live.

But 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.

Economic Survival subtext

Communities with a diverse economic base, good schools, public services, and affordable health care have a better chance of drawing new business investments and maintaining their populations. Likewise, towns that exhibit diversity, inclusion, and active rural arts and cultural life attract visitors to their communities.

National and global economic forces affect local employers. Rural communities are often successful when they partner with county, state, or other development organizations to retain local industry and recruit new opportunities.

Locally owned businesses must offer a unique value proposition that cannot be replaced by national franchises or internet sales.

What's happening in your local economy?

Rethinking Farming subtext

Farming is a passion, a way of life, and an occupation that sustains us all.

Agriculture stimulates local economies. The retirement of a well-respected farmer or the loss of farmland to suburban development can threaten rural infrastructure.

Local, state, and national governments respond to farmers' interests because agricultural production is crucial to national security, social welfare, and economic vitality.

The farm crisis of the 1980s increased the sense of urgency to sustain family farms. Many families lost their farms. Others took off-farm jobs to make ends meet or rethought their businesses. Some invested in the agribusiness model while others embraced alternative, community-supported agriculture. Many became hobby farmers.

Agricultural products keep millions of Americans employed as they process what farmers grow and what we all consume.

Main Street Revitalization subtext

Small town Main Streets are historical and cultural treasures.

Economic strategies that attract new businesses can preserve a town's historic fabric. Many communities employ preservation programs that revitalize locally loved landmarks while emphasizing community distinctions and maintaining historic integrity.

The Main Street America program, launched by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1980, encourages local partnerships to create vibrant downtowns. Non-profit organizations, state and national economic development agencies, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development also provide resources that can help.

Residents partnering with business owners, local governments, and civic and cultural organizations sustain the effort.

Keywords

Preservation, partnership, sustainability

Panel Images:

Top band images:

Combine harvester
GRIMME Group

Minnesota farm.
America/Alamy Stock Photo

Amish farmer, near Emma, IN.
Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress

Center band images:

Change over time in Millerton, NY.
Photo by James Thompson, www.ZenPointMedia.com

Farmers regularly use technology to make their work more efficient.
iStock.com/cstar55

Farmer raising organic produce, Charles City, VA.
U.S. Department of Agriculture

[background] Bustling downtown Telluride, Colorado, attracts tourists and visitors through its businesses and festivals.

Telluride Blues and Brews Festival

[background] A busy waterfront in Bernard, ME.
Mira/Alamy Stock Photo

[background] Shoppers visit a pedestrian mall in Virginia.

Frank Vetere/Alamy Stock Photo

[sides] Wood siding
meow wii/Shutterstock.com

Bottom band images:

Organic cheese making at Thistle Hill Farm, North Pomfret, VT.
Photo by John Putnam

Marching band in Douglas, Wyoming's Fair Parade.
Gates Frontiers Fund Wyoming Collection within the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress,
Prints and Photographs Division

Aerial view of farmland.
Popsuievych/Shutterstock.com

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

“Creative Persistence: How Have Residents Helped Revitalize Your Town’s Main Street?” flipbook

Cover image:
Eudora, KS street scene
Museum on Main Street

Flipbook pages 2-3

The Heart of a Community Renaissance

Wyoming’s Goshen County may have a poverty rate that is above the state’s average, but creative development ensures that its towns keep moving forward.

Many places have failing storefronts. In Goshen’s largest town, Torrington, it was a building facing a busy corner on Main Street. The county created a shared retail-community space called 21st and Main that boasts a coffee shop, store, visitors’ center, and an events area. According to economic development director Ashley Harpstreith, “If you want to feel the heart of the community, it’s there.” Other Wyoming towns are developing similar multipurpose facilities.

Image:
Shoppers outside 21st and Main, 2017.
Goshen County Economic Development

Flipbook pages 4-5

Building the Future Through Stories

Story collection campaigns offer a chance to get everyone in a town involved. Lanesboro and Red Wing, both in Minnesota, found that stories created new ways for visitors and residents to experience local culture.

A landmark phone booth in Lanesboro was modified to both play and record stories, ensuring that multiple views of local history are available. In Red Wing, cultural organizations recognized that story collection could help them reach underrepresented communities. Collecting stories from Latino residents brought new views of Red Wing into local historical interpretations and long-term planning efforts.

Image:

Story phone booth at the Lanesboro Museum in Lanesboro, MN, 2017.
Photo by Adam Wiltgen

Flipbook pages 6-7

Local Stories Fuel Tourism Growth

In 1987, two scholars, theorizing that Plains state populations would continue to decline, proposed turning about 140,000 square miles of the Great Plains into a nature preserve. Residents of McCook, Nebraska, a town of about 8,000 in the southwestern part of the state, took the idea as a challenge to create an opportunity to use local stories to define their community's future.

The result was the Buffalo Commons Storytelling and Music Festival, which debuted in 1997. The two-day festival held each June welcomes storytellers and musicians that help visitors better understand and celebrate rural life. The event includes performances, tours, and even children's theater.

Image:

Festival performance, McCook, NE, 2017.
Photo by Linda Clark, McCook, NE

Flipbook pages 8-9

Local Culture Drives Revitalization

During the first half of the 20th century, the town of Winslow, Arizona, experienced a sudden shift in economic growth spurred by increased auto-tourism from U.S. Route 66. In 1979, Interstate 40 replaced Route 66, and Winslow's downtown traffic all but disappeared. Within the last 30 years, however, members of the community became the driving force behind Winslow's revitalization. Through annual events like the Standin' on the Corner Festival, and through the restoration of several historic buildings, Winslow succeeded in creating spaces for the community to share local history, art, and culture.

Image:

Visitors to Winslow's Standin' on the Corner Park, Winslow, AZ.
Photo by Dan Lutzick

Flipbook pages 10-11

Maintaining Community Identity

Development leaders in Mount Vernon, Iowa, a town of just over 4,500, ensure that efforts stay true to the community's identity. According to development director Joe Jennison, "We don't need to destroy our old buildings to become something we're not."

Mount Vernon celebrates its downtown by keeping residents engaged. The Mount Vernon-Lisbon Community Development Group organizes 14 festivals each year and has 300 volunteers. One festival,

Chalk the Walk, attracts 500 artists that use the town's streets as their canvasses. The festivals garner regional media attention. Residents and visitors support local businesses.

Image:

Chalk the Walk festival participants work on a collaborative artwork, Mount Vernon, IA, 2017. Photo by Mehrdad Zarifkar, courtesy of Mount Vernon-Lisbon Community Development Group.

Flipbook pages 12-13

Theater-Based Revitalization

Located in southwest Georgia, the small town of Colquitt is home to a booming heritage tourism industry headlined by a locally run theatrical production, titled Swamp Gravy, that carries the distinction of being the state's official folklife play. Held annually since 1992, these plays are developed from local and regional folklore collected by a team of volunteers. They involve more than 100 community members of all ages and backgrounds, and revolve around the premise that everyone has a story to tell.

Image:

Buddy Johnson, Brad Burke, and Tony Everson perform a scene from "Swamp Gravy, Down at the Depot." Written by Debra C. Jones and directed by Rob Lauer, "Down at the Depot" was the 2004 edition of Georgia's official folklife play, "Swamp Gravy" in Colquitt, GA.

Photo by Kalee Holt

Flipbook pages 14-15

Progress Through Partnerships

Many rural Americans love showing off their communities. They bring lots of pride in their places to the table. But making investments in creating amenities that will make travelers stay and sample everything towns have to offer can be challenging.

In western Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia, communities working with The Progress Fund's Trail Towns Program learn how to make themselves more attractive to people biking and hiking on area trails. Towns near the trails learn how to develop business partnerships and preservation efforts. These communities also focus on the unique things they can offer to make a better experience for travelers.

Image:

Cyclists on the Great Allegheny Passage trail, Meyersdale, PA.

The Progress Fund's Trail Towns Program

Side 2 – Traditions Preserve the Future (Endcap to the right of Main Street Revitalization)

Traditions Preserve the Future flipper interactive

Many communities recognize that their cultural and craft traditions are also marketable assets. Visitors are attracted to the products produced by local craftspeople and artisans, and learn about the community. Lift the panels below to discover the stories behind each of the objects.

Flipper 1: Seagrove pottery

Outside: Pottery example

Inside text:

Seagrove, North Carolina, a town with just over 225 residents, is well known for its handmade pottery. During the 1970s, potters in the area began attracting tourists interested in traditional techniques. Today, the town is home to the North Carolina Pottery Center and an annual festival.

Flipper 2: Sea Island basketry

Outside: Basket example

Inside text:

Many tourists visiting South Carolina’s Lowcountry are first introduced to Gullah culture through coiled sweetgrass baskets sold in markets and even along roadways. Enslaved West Africans brought basketry traditions with them to the region. Today, their descendants—talented African American artists—help sustain their communities through sales and cultural outreach.

Flipper 3: Wool Arts

Outside: Wool sample

Inside text:

Growing interest in clothing and other products made of wool from animals like sheep and alpaca spurred the development of “fibersheds”—networks of fiber farms and artisans—in rural areas from California to New England. Since 1983, a network of women artists have invited the public to learn more about traditional fiber work through the New Hampshire Wool Arts Tour in the small community of Hillsborough.

Keyword

Transform

Panel Images:

Top band image:

Shoppers on Main Street, Dahlonoga, GA.

Photo courtesy of Georgia Department of Economic Development

Center band image

Waitsfield, VT.

Joseph Sohm/Shutterstock.com

Bottom band image:

Business and pleasure boats in the harbor at Stonington, ME.

Photo by Susan Cole Kelly

Side 3 – The Attractions of a Country Life

Main text

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.

Keyword phrases:

Farm to table, Back to the land, Rural life

Callout text

Why do you think “country” appeals to so many people rural and city alike?

Callout text

What attracts you to country life?

Country Sells object case

From music and films to clothing and toys, merchandise reflects our connections to rural America. Many Americans purchase furnishings, goods, and memorabilia that reflect country tastes.

Objects: Magazine ad for Buick cars, 1950s; DVD set featuring four films set in rural areas; souvenir patch from Branson, MO; *A Chicken in Every Yard* book; Fisher Price Family Farm toy, and “Beverly Hillbillies” lunchbox.

Ideals and Identity subtext

Popular culture connects city folks to their rural counterparts, though it often simplifies what it is like to live in the country. Television shows, movies, novels, and music may romanticize, satirize, and trivialize rural people in drawing contrasts to urban stereotypes.

Travelers to rural places may visit living history farms, local harvest festivals, antique tractor shows, or take a “farm-cation” to experience “country” life. To respond, many rural communities are increasingly creating tourism opportunities that present their unique and authentic assets.

Ideals and Identity images:

Child vacationing at a farm, Alsea, OR.

Photo by Melissa Carroll, Leaping Lamb Farm Stay

Visitors to a pick-it-yourself farm in Johnston County, NC.

Johnston County Visitors Bureau



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

[text panel background] Red wood planks
Suti Stock Photo/Shutterstock.com

Panel Images

Top band images:

Appalachian Trail, near Rangeley, ME.

Photo by William Durr

Outdoor wedding at a rural event center, Candler, NC.

Photo by Jesse Kitt

Vacationers at a hay race, near Lancaster, PA.

DiscoverLancaster.com/BrianEvans

Woman picking flowers.

LNP Media Group, Inc.

Western Weekend Parade, Woodville, TX.

The Lyda Hill Texas Collection of Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Hunter.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Center band images:

[background] Farm landscape

Edward Fielding/Shutterstock.com

[sides] Pine bark

Museum on Main Street

Bottom band images:

"Farm-cation" guests at Thus Far Farm, Westminster, SC.

Photo by C. McGinn Lathan

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

Day-trippers from eastern cities often head to the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains for outdoor recreation. Tubing on the Potomac River near Harpers Ferry, WV, 2015.

Museum on Main Street

Camping at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, CO.

Photo by Daniel Marshall

Side 4 – Why Do I Choose to Live Here? (endcap to the right of Ideals and Identity)

Why Do I Choose to Live Here video component

Keyword

Choices

Panel image:

[background] Utah farmstead.

Johnny Adolphson/Shutterstock.com

Section 6 – Managing Change

Front side – main text

What happens in rural America matters to all of America.

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.

Core ideals of community, equality, opportunity, civility, and human rights stand side-by-side with American commitment to personal liberty, free markets, innovation, and economic progress. There is inherent tension between all of these values; change can cast those tensions into high relief.

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?

Identity

How does your community reflect its rural identity? Country and small-town residents look to their history to develop strategies for sustaining their communities, both economically and culturally.

Touch the computer screen to hear the families’ stories and learn more about rural identity.

Image:

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

Museum on Main Street

Land

Most Americans living in rural places value and treasure the land. What land use and conservation issues are you currently facing in your community? How can you ensure that the natural landscapes you have now are available for future generations? How would you make sure that the lands important to our economy remain productive?

Touch the computer screen to find out about the Harms' story and more about Americans' relationships with land.

Image:

Don and Dorothy Harms, dairy farmers and owners of Valley Springs Farm Bed & Breakfast in Reedsburg, WI, 2017.

Museum on Main Street

Community

What kind of community would you like to see in rural America? Each community's future hinges on its people and the values they share. How will your community create opportunities for all residents to feel that they have a voice? How will local culture and history be part of your plans for the future? What educational needs are required to ensure young people are prepared to sustain the community?

Touch the computer screen to hear about Hopewell and explore how Americans connect in rural communities.

Image:

Wayne Haynes researches family and community roots of Hopewell, an old African American community near Bedias and Huntsville, TX, 2017.

Museum on Main Street

Persistence

Rural communities are developing strategies to ensure their futures. What jobs would you like your town to have in the future? How will people prepare for that work? How can residents, different cultural constituencies, local businesses, and governments work together to help communities remain in control of their own development?

Touch the computer screen to see Reedsburg's story and learn how other communities handle change.

Image:

Food stand at Fermentation Fest, an annual celebration of food, art, and performance run by the Wormfarm Institute, in Reedsburg, WI, 2017.

Museum on Main Street

Panel Images

Top band images:

The allure of rural life still binds families together. A farmer and daughter share the day's work. Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture

To manage health care needs, many rural communities now utilize digital technology to ensure that patients have access to specialists.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture

Rural areas form partnerships to attract investments from high tech firms. A technician maintains computer server equipment, London, KY.

Photo by Lance Cheung, U.S. Department of Agriculture

California farmer Mai Nguyen examines harvesting equipment she uses as a member of a cooperative of small farmers, which shares equipment to lower costs.

Photo by Lance Cheung, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Center and bottom band image:

[background] Carbon County, WY.

Library of Congress

Life at the Crossroads computer kiosk component

Side 2—Let’s Talk

Main text and instructions for mailbox interactive

Rural America is at a new crossroads. Change is constant. Share your thoughts about your community’s future. What do you think is your town’s best asset and how can it help sustain your community? What does your area need most? What would most benefit young people? What do you think is the most important issue facing your town that people need to discuss?

Help start that conversation. Grab a postcard. Answer one of the questions above and place the card in the mailbox. Your community will feature these ideas in local discussions about critical issues.

We want to hear from you!

Quote

“You aren’t wealthy until you have something money can’t buy.” – Garth Brooks

Rural Wealth caption

Rural America’s wealth includes much more than just capital, buildings, agricultural and natural resources, and political access. Rural communities hold important human, intellectual, social, and cultural assets that are based on the shared experience and creativity of rural people. How do these assets make your region stronger and more viable? How do they increase the quality of life for citizens?

Rural wealth image:

[center and bottom background] Art installation near Reedsburg, WI.

Photo from Wormfarm Institute

Panel images

Top band images:

The different cultures that make up rural communities are strong assets. An American Indian artisan participates in the Indian Arts Showcase at Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site near Williston, ND.

National Park Service

Involved, interested citizens help sustain communities. Watonga, Oklahoma, residents meet with a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) representative.

Photo by Marvin Nauman, FEMA

Partnerships, collaboration, and lifelong learning help communities manage change. An extension agent consults with a local farmer, Peach County, GA.

Courtesy of Fort Valley State University Cooperative Extension Program