CHAPTER 10. RURAL SOCIOLOGY

Rural society has always had some distinctive and unique characteristics. These have developed naturally as a result of a life-style that is dependent on natural elements. One characteristic which appears to be quite prevalent among rural people is independence. Farmers work alone much of the time, and they are singularly responsible for their land and livestock and for the decisions made regarding their management. A farm has been legally defined as "an area of land under single ownership and devoted to raising crops or domestic livestock" (Adams and Bedford 1949).

Farmers and farm families are usually not "loners," however. An independent spirit is not to be confused with antisocial feelings! Quite the opposite, in fact, as farm-centered activities, farm organizations, schools and churches provide opportunities for fun and fellowship.

What values do farmers cherish? Freedom of action; freedom from the noise and traffic of the cities; cleaner air, and the farm "way of life." Informality is valued in rural life, meetings can be held in a field, a barn, or some other shelter in which all present feel comfortable. Bales are good seats for some of these meetings. Yes, farmers continue to enjoy farming as a way of life, but some are becoming discouraged with farming as a way of making a living.

This CHAPTER includes discussions of the social organization of farmers and their farms, and the effects that centralization has had on rural sociology, business organizations and youth groups.
TOPIC 1. SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Farming is a way of life, not only because of what must be done on the farm—the regular attention needed by livestock for example—but also a chronology of events that is dependent on the natural cycles of weather, growth, and harvest. Family farms offer many advantages and opportunities for parents and children to work and play together. Dad does not "go to work," but rather works in different areas of the farm, doing different things at different times of the day and year. This includes time spent in the house at the desk planning, record-keeping, and now, computer-accounting and analyzing farm operations. Farmer's wives usually take responsibility for some part of the total operation: record-keeping, purchasing, dairy herdswoman, tractor operation, just to name a few. And children have ample opportunity to see both parents working together, and to take part in the work at an early age.

Family farms also provide recreational opportunities that city and suburban residents pay high prices for. Pleasure horses are common on farms, and many farm kids spend happy hours caring for and riding their horses. Saddle clubs are common in farm country, and riders, both young and old, get together for fun and competition, enjoying such things as barrel-racing, keyhole racing, participating in drill teams etc. Rodeo events are also part of farm life in some areas, with high schools having rodeo teams, and state high school championship rodeos in some states.

Hunting and fishing are also enjoyed by many farm families, often right on the farm. Trap shooting is also fun, and it is usually not necessary to drive to some distant trap-shooting range for a place to shoot.

UNIT 1.1. FAMILY FARMS

The family-farm has been the dominant farm-production organization in the United States (Cochrane 1965). It is a business in which the operator and family manage the operations, assume the financial risk, and provide most of the labor. The average farm family can provide about 1.5 man-years of labor, which typically includes the full-time contribution of the husband and a half-time contribution of the rest of the family.

What is a full-time work load on such a farm? Twenty-five ten-hour days per month is a reasonable appraisal of a full-time work load on a family farm. That amounts to 3000 hours of work per year, which is 1.5 times the 40-hour, 50-weeks per year of an industrial worker who takes a 2-week vacation each year.
Why would a person want to work such long hours on a farm compared to the shorter work-week of an industrial laborer? One advantage the family farmer has is that commuting is unnecessary. If a commuter spends one hour per day travelling to and from a job and one hour at lunch, the yearly total adds up to 2400. The cost of commuting may easily require two to four weeks of wages, and the frustrations of traffic, road conditions, and the necessity of punching a time clock at appointed times may well make the fewer hours worked less enjoyable to a number of people. Contrast these characteristics with the convenience of having your work at home, of being your own supervisor, of being home for lunch, of having your family near . . . to those of us who have experienced life on a family farm, these advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

Family farms have increased in size over the years, not only because more acres are needed to provide an adequate income, but also because mechanization makes it possible for one person to handle more land and livestock. The main criterion for the success of a typical family farm is that it is large enough to support a full line of appropriate-sized machinery for the livestock and crop enterprises suited for the land.

Will family farms survive in the future? Yes, in all likelihood. But since farming is becoming more capital intensive and less labor intensive, creative new ways of farm financing are needed. Cochrane (1965) suggests that insurance companies (see Allen 1983), feed companies, and other retail businesses will provide the large amounts of capital needed to finance farm operations. This will result in more control by the financier, but the operator will need more management skills.

UNIT 1.2. CORPORATE FARMS

Corporation farming is an alternative type of ownership that may or may not include family ownership. Corporations are legal entities which may hold title to land, with the money coming from persons called stockholders, investing in the corporation. The corporate farm may be a family farm type of ownership too, making it possible to keep family farms intact from one generation to the next. If there are several heirs, for example, the farm can be kept in the family by setting up a corporation with the several heirs being stockholders and one of them operates the farm. Such corporations are family-type corporations, organized for business purposes and operated very much like family farms. If the corporation were not formed, the operator may not be able to come up with the capital to buy the farm, thus forcing a sale.
Another type of corporate farm ownership and management is that of a large corporate farm. Large corporate farms offer more factory-like working conditions such as regular hours and 40-hour weeks, with particular jobs performed by those with specialized skills. Such a farm is more of a production factory than a way of life. The disadvantages to such large farms are that the workers usually do not live on the farm, but in a nearby city or town and they "drive to work," precluding the daily contact with many aspects of the farm as an ecosystem. Fieldmen may see little of the inside of the barn; dairy herdsmen may see little outside of the barn. Wildlife is of less personal interest because of the lack of contact. There may be certain efficiencies associated with such large operations, but there are some losses in contact with the natural world that only those of us who have lived on family farms can fully appreciate.

Another type of corporate farming involves ownership by large corporations that invest in farms corporations that can afford to take a loss for a number of years, using losses in farming to counteract gains in other corporate operations. It is difficult for young farmers to compete with such large capital operations. There has been an increase in the number of corporate farms; ten insurance companies have bought more than 800,000 acres of prime farmland across the country. There is opposition to institutional investors and corporate farms, and 14 states have banned or restricted business entities from owning farms or engaging in farming (Allen 1983).

UNIT 1.3. NON-RESIDENT LANDOWNERS

Today, many farmers, especially grain farmers, live in town and many urban workers live in the country. Non-resident landowners do not experience the daily contact with the land that the resident farmer does. To the non-resident landowners, the farm land is more of a business enterprise, an investment that is expected to be profitable on an annual basis and/or as a long-term investment. Ownership may afford pleasant excursions to the country for visiting, for business discussions, and for recreation.

TOPIC 2. FARM ORGANIZATIONS

There are two main kinds of farm organizations prevalent in rural America: business organizations and youth organizations. The former promotes farming as a business enterprise, and are designed to provide unified strength through the combined efforts of many individual farm families. The latter are educational and recreational organizations designed to provide opportunities for young people to "learn by doing" on the farm.
UNIT 2.1. BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

Business organizations representing different farm groups and interests have been formed in the last 50 years as farms have changed from diversified family operations to specialized enterprises. Until the 1940's, a recognizable farm bloc worked reasonably well together in the interests of commercial farmers in general (Cochrane 1965), promoting legislation that would result in a stable agriculture. As the U.S. farm population changed from a majority to a very small minority (currently approaching 30:1 non-farm to farm people) and farming became more specialized, special interest groups have spring up to represent the many forests of agriculture and agribusiness.

Business organizations representing farm groups include American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers' Union, Grange, National Farmers Organization, various farm commodity groups (wheat growers, for example) and even breed associations which may take stands on particular farm policies. These various interest groups, differing in size, do not necessarily agree on farm policies. Further, there are regional differences in attitudes, depending on the costs of production, proximity to markets, etc.

The basic issues in farm policy formulation seem to center on whether or not there should be controls on production, and on whether or not there should be price supports. The two extremes go from a completely open market, with no controls on either production or price, to regulated production with price supports. The former provides more chance for very profitable or very unprofitable years, the latter provides more stability from year to year. Which one is best for agriculture is not a simple question; there are no simple answers to complex questions.

UNIT 2.2. YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

There are two main youth organizations that have been set up primarily for rural youth: Future Farmers of America and 4-H. Both of these organizations have changed in recent years, and are by no means restricted to rural youth, but rather provide opportunities for both rural and urban youth to work together on common projects.

The Future Farmers of America (FFA) organization has as its motto:

"Learning to do,
doing to learn,
earning to live,
living to serve."
Its primary aim is "development of agricultural leadership, citizenship, and cooperation" (Bender et al. 1979). It originated in 1926, and the national headquarters are located in Alexandria, Virginia. There are a half-million high school students enrolled in 8,300 vocational agriculture programs in the U.S.

The purposes of the FFA provide a good indication of its scope; these are summarized from Bender et al. (1979).

1. To develop competent, aggressive, rural, and agricultural leadership.

2. To create and nurture a love of country life.

3. To strengthen the confidence of students of vocational agriculture in themselves and their work.

4. To create more interest in the intelligent choice of agricultural operations.

5. To encourage members in the development of individual farming programs and establishment in agricultural careers.

6. To encourage members to improve the farm home and its surroundings.

7. To participate in worthy undertakings for the improvement of agriculture.

8. To develop character, train for useful citizenship, and foster patriotism.

9. To participate in cooperative effort.

10. To encourage and practice thrift.

11. To encourage improvement in scholarship.

12. To provide and encourage the development of organized rural recreational activities.

The FFA organization supplements instruction in vocational agriculture in high schools. At present, vocational agriculture programs are being eliminated as a result of budget constraints. It is my belief that educational programs in agriculture, the source of food and fiber, should be expanded rather than eliminated. Since we as a nation depend on our natural resources and agriculture is a major enterprise in the use of these resources, courses in the study of the use of agricultural
resources should be required in both urban and rural schools. How else can we be a nation of understanding people in the future, especially when only a small fraction of today's young people live on farms?

The 4-H organization is a national organization devoted to the education of youth by local leadership, both paid and voluntary. It is a cooperative enterprise which includes USDA at the national level, agricultural colleges at the State level, and extension agents at the county level. Local clubs are formed by boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 21, with volunteer adult leaders. Club members enroll in different kinds of projects such as raising a garden or field crop, training animals, baking, sewing, insect collecting, conservation, etc. Project work includes planning, record-keeping, and exhibiting results of the work, following approved practices. The 4-H motto "to make the best better" is directed toward excellence, a worthy goal for each of us to pursue.

The conservation program has been an important part of 4-H activities over the years. Club members have learned about soil and water conservation, fish and wildlife management, and woodlot management with the help of their extension agents and other resources. Many 4-H projects have been the start of large-scale conservation measures on entire farms, and of careers in conservation by youth who did not remain on the farm.

In recent years, 4-H has expanded beyond the farms and rural America. Now, it is a program for suburban and city youth too. It is a program of learning by doing, with adults working with young people. The following excerpts from a cooperative extension bulletin illustrate the philosophy used.

4-H offers adults a chance to show they care about youth—to be a part of growing up.

A 4-H volunteer is a person of any age with concern—a person who enjoys life and is willing to share that joy.

4-H strives to help young people understand themselves and appreciate others. It provides opportunities to develop skills, attitudes and responsibility as a part of growing up. It encourages cooperation and a sense of concern for others.
The impressive characteristic of the 4-H and FFA programs is that they emphasize the positive, promoting worthwhile activities and involvement at an age when young people need and want the help of understanding adults. As T.A. Erickson, well-known 4-H leader and educator, wrote in *My Sixty Years with Rural Youth*, (Erickson 1956):

"One reason why I like to go to National 4-H Club Congresses is that I always see there so many young people with the same vision that I acquired as a boy from my father and mother—a vision of the farmer as a happy man."

Lest the impression be given that all farm youth are happy and rural America is free from drugs, crime, and other components of our present society, I must point out that the traditional differences between farm and non-farm societies have broken down in the last generation as a result of improved transportation and communication, and the centralization of schools, churches, and businesses. Drugs have the potential for particularly devastating effects, and recent studies show that there have been alarming increases in the availability and use of drugs in rural America. While such trends may be countered directly, a long-term solution must also be found by providing worthwhile, meaningful opportunities for rural youth, using the advantages provided by technology and the privileges associated with living on the land, surrounded by the natural resources which not only support all of us but provide such enjoyment and fulfillment as well.

**TOPIC 3. CENTRALIZATION**

In the rural communities of the jet age many of the traditional distinctions between farm and non-farm people have disappeared. Both groups are now merged together in most community activities as a result of centralization, which has been made possible by improved transportation and communication capabilities. While this may seem logical, there have been difficulties in many communities when centralization has caused shifts in responsibilities, business functions, and social centers. Some of these are discussed briefly in the UNITS which follow.
UNIT 3.1. SCHOOLS

The school is a major community establishment in rural America, the center of many community activities. Far from major cultural centers, the small towns scattered across rural America must provide their own cultural activities, and the school is the most logical place to turn to. The special programs at Christmas, spring concerts, plays, athletics, contests, graduation . . . all of these are major events in rural communities.

Rural schools have been going through a time of reorganization since the end of World War II. The process may be called centralization, or consolidation. The many small districts that were established in the 1800's and early 1900's, many of them one-room schools with eight grades and one teacher, have been consolidated with other districts to establish a large central school. Before reliable bus transportation, this was impossible, and many students remained home to work on the farm after completing 8th grade. Those who wanted more education were compelled to go to a larger town where they would have to live during the school year.

Rural school consolidation has caused considerable difficulties among farm families as they have watched their schools move farther away, with a concomitant loss of contact and control. Yet such consolidation has been inevitable as farms have grown larger, family sizes smaller, and educational requirements higher. After mentally adjusting to these changes, the larger community usually becomes the focal point, sometimes joining two or more towns together in one school, and such schools are often built in the country, between the towns.

Consolidated schools are large enough to provide a more diversified curriculum and a selection of extracurricular activities, but there are dangers that schools can become too large too. Smaller high schools provide opportunities for participation by a larger proportion of the students, with more emphasis on the participation than on the absolute quality of the activities, especially the extra-curricular ones. I am pleased with the opportunity to participate in athletics, band, chorus, school plays, edit the school newspaper, and be a class office-holder in high school; all of these experiences were preludes to my current interests, and to those I have shared with my own children as they have participated in many of these same activities while attending a small upstate New York High School.

Large curriculum offerings in the larger high schools may have some disadvantages. The number of Cornell students I have come in contact with who do not know how to type, for example, is
appalling, especially when computer keyboards are most efficiently operated by skilled typists. My guess is that a higher proportion of students take typing in the smaller high schools where there are fewer course options than in the larger high schools where there are more options.

UNIT 3.2. CHURCHES

Churches have been a part of rural America since settlement and homesteading began. In fact, schools and churches were the centers of activities in the rural communities as people began a new society with the expectation of a better life.

Churches established in rural America represented both the Protestant and Catholic faiths, depending on the origins of the settlers. Different protestant denominations were established also, again dependent on the origins of the settlers. The church as an institution provided moral stability along with the opportunity to worship God, in a setting that provided social contacts as well.

To some, the Church remains a useful institution, but only one of many in society which serve different functions. To others, the church is more than an institution. It is a body of believers, a collection of persons who not only worship God but believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, the Savior of all those who choose to follow Him. Why do we believe this to be true? Because the Bible contains truths which cannot be overlooked concerning man's relationship to God, and to each other.

The emphasis in my church background concerning the need to be a good steward of our natural resources has had a profound effect on my thinking as a professional conservationist. Verse 14 in Psalm 104, quoted in page iii of this book, is a truth that cannot be questioned. How many people could be fed by a hunting society? And how much wildlife would there be if an agricultural society did not raise the food for the world population?

Ecologists sometimes take issue with some Old Testament verses, such as those dealing with man's "dominion" over "every living thing." But does dominion imply destruction? I find no evidence of that. Rather, I find that Old and New Testament writers emphasize the goodness and beauty of God's creation, and with it a responsibility for us who use these resources to also maintain them. Such has been the Biblical message proclaimed on "Soil Stewardship Sundays," "4-H Sundays," and other special
observances by churches, especially those in rural America, which recognize that our natural resources are gifts for us to use in an attitude of praise and thanksgiving.

UNIT 3.3. SHOPPING CENTERS

Shopping centers have affected rural sociology and farm life greatly. A generation ago, there were many small towns of less than a thousand people, each with a variety of stores, including grocery stores, hardware stores, clothing stores, a pharmacy, a specialty shop or two, and machinery dealers. Now, many of these businesses have become victims of centralized shopping, with the larger towns offering choices of not only stores, but collections of stores in one or more shopping malls located on the periphery of the town. The smaller towns within a 20 to 40 mile radius have become residential communities where the people live while working in the larger towns and shopping in the malls before returning home. The small-town businesses suffer.

The major change that has affected farmers directly is the closing down of many small town machinery dealers, making fewer but larger dealerships in the larger towns. This is partly due to the increased complexity of tractors and machinery; there are more parts, which means greater parts inventories are needed, and small town dealers simply could not keep adequate parts inventories on hand.

UNIT 3.4. TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION CHANGES

Centralization of schools and businesses could not have been possible without changes in transportation and communication capabilities. These changes include not only improved roads but also improved vehicles, not only improved telephones but improved direct-dialing systems.

The road system has been improved at both the national level, with an interstate highway system, and the local level, with improved graded and surfaced county roads. Such improvements are not mere conveniences, but are necessities as changes have occurred in livestock and crop management. The switch to bulk tanks for milk storage, for example, means that large milk trucks must reach farms regularly to pick up milk. This requires good year-around roads, including good driveways from the county roads to the barns. These roads, which are the farmers' responsibility, may be fairly long—a quarter mile or more—in some areas.
Farm families have many more opportunities for off-the-farm activities now than ever before, too. Transportation is much better now, with improved vehicles and roads, so farms many miles from town are less than an hour from centralized shopping centers, schools, churches, and other community facilities and events. Indeed, centralization may have gone farther than it should have during the 1960s and 1970s as technology and energy made it possible to centralize facilities because people could drive from miles around to central locations. Prior to that, technology did not allow centralization; roads were not as good, cars were not as reliable, farm operations were not too mechanized and it was not only desirable but also necessary to have activities and services scattered throughout the rural population. In the 1980s, with energy costs soaring, it may be desirable to decentralize again, not for lack of technology, but for lack of available inexpensive energy.

Communication changes have occurred along with centralization. Farmers now have direct telephone dialing in many areas, which means that they can be in touch with an extension agent in town or a livestock market in a distant city as quickly as if they lived next door. The use of computers, linked by telephone to central data-processing centers, will surely increase in the next few years. The capabilities exist now; it is just a matter of time for people to learn how to use them.

**TOPIC 4. SUMMARY**

The remarkable thing to me about all the changes discussed in CHAPTER 10 is that they have occurred within my lifetime, and I consider myself to be relatively young! From a farm without electricity to radio, television, satellite transmission, electronic information processing, and jet planes—all in one 33-year-long generation! What changes will take place in the next generation?

**LITERATURE CITED**


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