by Frank Bryan

Rural Renaissance

This land is your land
This land is my land
From California
To the New York Island
Woody Guthrie ©

There has always been in the United States a final option: moving on, snapping the bonds of inequality and the pain of promises unfulfilled through flight; going west, heading north, coming back, seeking out those faraway places that seem at least in fancy to offer the promise of new choices, new opportunities—a new life. Throughout two centuries, as a well-meaning people worked, however falteringly, to cut away the blockages to socioeconomic mobility associated with location, there has been a recurrent bottom line—"getting out."

Roger Williams fled to Providence. Ethan Allen adventured north to the banks of Vermont's Winooski River, Daniel Boone went to Kentucky, John Bozeman to Montana, John Sutter to California. The government sent Lewis and Clark to set the compass and George Custer to kill the Indians. It conquered Mexico and passed the Homestead Act; it helped build canals and drive the spikes for the railroads. Mostly, however, it simply established conditions and then watched as we oozed westward in giant kaleidoscopic arcs; up and over, down and across in what Daniel Elazar calls "geological strata" of population settlement, one overlapping the other until finally we had been everywhere at least once.

"Moving on" is a theme of the American experience that appears on every cultural horizon. We write it and paint it. We sing and recite it. We see it in the wild geese over our fall pastures; we hear it in the early morning rumblings of the eighteen wheelers. We smell it along our coasts, in the mud of the great Mississippi, over the wild prairie grasses of the Missouri breaks. We feel it in our bones and sense it in our roots. It is as generic to the concept of America as freedom itself. But, like freedom, "moving on" is multidimensional. Many of its properties are dark on the edges, as Mark Twain told us in *Huckleberry Finn*, the ultimate American tale of freedom through movement. It is clear, however, that the pattern that holds this incredibly complex quilt together is opportunity. Movement has been a great leveler in American political experience—often a more important influence than the political mechanisms that have been created on behalf of those seeking socioeconomic mobility and freedom of opportunity.

Whether or not geographical mobility consistently leads to opportunity is open to question. Those who moved on believed it did. Hamlin Garland remembers his father's rough-hewn lyrics in *Son of the Middle Border:*

Away to Colorado a journey I'll go
For to double my fortune as other men do
Oh wife, let us go, oh don't let us wait:
I long to be there and I long to be great
While you some fair lady and who knows but I
May be some rich governor long 'fore I die

The theme of this issue of *Public Opinion* is "America, the *land* of opportunity." There has always been plenty of land and there still is. But in what sense does it offer another chance or, in many cases, a first chance? In plain fact, it has the potential to play a more important role now in the quest for opportunity than it has for over a hundred years. This is because after a century of leaving the land, Americans are now returning to it. As we swing closed the door on the twentieth century, this simple fact is of vast importance in understanding American social dynamics.

There are few clear hinge decades in the history of American internal migration streams. The main currents have flowed in tandem, criss-crossed and overlapped, camouflaging shifts and playing havoc with attempts to generalize. In the nineteenth century, the westward movement and urbanization dominated. Ur-

s America On the Move Again?

banism crested at century's turn, but the phenomenon continued until 1960. Westwardness (originally a rural-to-rural pattern) peaked earlier (1840-1860) but likewise has continued throughout our history. Even as late as the decade of the 1940s, over 80 percent of the Pacific Coast states' population increases came from migration from the East. "Go west young man" and "how you goin' to keep 'em down on the farm" have been enduring themes. Both are yoked to the notion of opportunity.

Urbanism started somewhat later, fed in the East by foreign immigration and in the West by rural dreams gone sour. The driving force behind it was economic opportunity, especially in the early days. In 1850 less than 15 percent of Americans lived in cities; by 1920 more than half did. Between 1880 and 1890, the population of Minneapolis jumped from 47,000 to 164,000; Omaha from 30,000 to 140,000; Spokane from 350 to 20,000; Denver from 35,000 to 95,000.

In the twentieth century, the magnetism of the city continued but was soon overlapped and overshadowed by the suburban impulse. Simply stated, urban dwellers began to demand land—not much land, but at least enough to care for, to mow and trim and tinker with. Technology (trollies, telephones, and automobiles) made it possible, and the government, especially in the later stages, helped with housing and highway policies. The process was accelerated after World War II by the baby boom. By mid-century we had reached what William Kowinski called in a recent *New York Times Magazine* feature, the "golden age" of suburbia. To label suburbanization a migratory pattern, however, is to create a mistaken image. It was a readjustment of the urban industrial revolution. Also, the move to the suburbs was more a manifestation of status achieved than opportunity sought.

This century did provide an important new regional twist—the South-to-North movement—which, except for a slowdown during the depression, was fairly steady through 1960. This trend, too, was heavily biased by the socioeconomic draw of the city. The first great wave of modern country music bewailed the loss of rural lifestyles amid the impersonality of the northern cities. Now widely popular, country music's historical roots remain geographically southern and thematically rural versus urban.

The twentieth century has exhibited little that is generically different from the two major migration patterns that have dominated our history almost from the beginning, the tendency to drift west and metro-magnetism. Until now.

Charting the Return to the Outback

Indeed, the 1970s seem to have composed one of those rare hinge decades when a fundamental shift came clear. Peter Morrison of the Rand Corporation calls it "one of the most significant turnabouts in migration in the nation's history." It, coupled with a concomitant reversal of South-to-North streams, may be the *first and only* significant turnabout since the urban explosion after the Civil War.

What are the statistical dimensions of this turnaround which has been called "remarkable," "pervasive," "astounding," and "unanticipated" by demographers and sociologists? They were outlined cautiously by Calvin Beale in 1975 in a paper entitled, "Where Are All the People Going?" delivered at the first National Conference on Rural America. Since that time Beale has become the most often footnoted scholar in the field. He made two points: (1) rural areas were growing faster than metropolitan areas for the first time since the early 1800s; (2) nonmetropolitan counties which were not adjacent to metropolitan counties were also making gains for the first time in over a century. A torrent of analysis followed, most of it with a wary eye cocked to the 1980 census.

The census data are now in and they confirm Beale's insights. Between 1960 and 1970, population in nonmetropolitan counties not adjacent to a metropolitan county *and* without a city of 10,000 population (in short, the "outback") registered a population change of —2.7 percent. In the ensuing decade they *gained* 13.6 percent! Metropolitan counties, on the other hand, gained only 9.8 percent in the 1970-1980 period (see table 1).

Table 1
PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN AMERICAN COUNTY TYPES

	1960-1970	1970-1980
Metropolitan counties	17.0%	9.8%
Nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to a metropolitan county	7.3	17.4
Nonmetropolitan, nonadjacent counties with a city of 10,000 or more population	7.0	14.5
Nonmetropolitan, nonadjacent counties without a city of 10,000 or more population	—2.7	13.6

Source: Economic Development Division, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

John Wardwell and Jack Gilchrist show in a recent article in *Demography* that "the phenomenon of large metropolitan deconcentration and nonmetropolitan growth is also characteristic of the locations of employment activities." During the 1970s, more than 40 percent of all new housing was constructed on rural land. Another factor emphasizing the tie between rural growth and new potential opportunity structure based on movement toward the land, is the heavy dependence of rural areas on immigration rather than natural growth. Natural decrease of population in any section of America is unusual. But, in some rural areas there were disproportionate numbers of older people (past child-rearing age) which, combined with social taboos against large families among young adults, caused a natural population decrease in more than 10 percent of all nonmetropolitan counties between 1965 and 1970. Yet these very counties (most of which had been long-term losers of population previously) actually gained population through immigration. Sociologists Kenneth Johnson and Ross Purdy called this "a pattern of population growth without precedent in recent U.S. demographic history."

There are some exceptions to the turnaround phenomenon. The South still demonstrated more urban than nonurban growth in the 1970s. The Northeast was the only area to show an actual decline in metropolitanism, a —1.8 percentage change. There has been a second reversal. The old South-to-North streams have begun flowing North-to-South. The South is now on the positive end of the migration pipeline and northern immigrants to Dixie are, like their southern counterparts of the 1940s, urban bound. The West and the South together accounted for 90 percent of national population growth in the 1980s.

Woodchucks, Flatlanders, and the Gangplank Syndrome

Like most social phenomena, the new rural migration is misunderstood. Professionals rarely agree on the wherefores and the whys of the modern urban exodus. One of the principal sources of contention is the question, "Why are people going to the country?" Some say they are going for traditional economic reasons, following footloose industries into the hinterland. There is much precedent for this economic "push-pull" theory. In Vermont, for example, the coming of a single large IBM plant in the 1960s triggered an economic expansion that profoundly affected the state's population growth. History also shows that the rural-to-urban movement slowed during economic hard times, when jobs were scarce.

Others claim that the new urban migrants to the country are different from their rural-to-urban counterparts of old in that they are moving primarily for "lifestyle" opportunities, not employment opportunities. They are said to want scenery, a slower pace of life, and neighbors—they want to "get back to the land." Who is to say that the contemporary fascination for tranquility and evening whip-poor-wills is more or less a matter of "lifestyle" than the call of the bright lights and honky-tonks that lured many a farm boy into the arms of the city in an earlier era? And who is to say that those who are presently heading for the outback will be less disillusioned, alienated and culture-shocked when they find the myth of rural virtue is as booby-trapped as the myth of city life was fifty years ago? Surely the urban sophisticate is no more familiar with the realities of "getting away from it all" in the country than the ruralites were with the realities of "excitement, challenge, and opportunity" in the city.

What kind of reception will the new urban migrants receive when they get there? What do the natives ("woodchucks" as they are sometimes called in Vermont) think of the newcomers ("flatlanders" according to the woodchucks). Some feel the woodchucks will react hostilely to the flatlanders. Oregonians, fearing that their rural lifestyle would be ruined by urban migrants, openly campaigned against settlement (for example, telling California via bumper stickers "Don't Californicate Oregon"). Vermont, which long touted the state as "The Beckoning Country" seemed to want to slam the door when newly elected governor Tom Salmon cried "Vermont is not for sale" to a standing ovation from the legislature during his inaugural address in 1972. Others opt for the "gangplank" hypothesis which postulates that the last on board will be the most selfish residents of rural places, scampering to shut off settlement soon after their own arrival.

In gauging an answer to the question, several points should be kept in mind. First, rural people traditionally have been less protective of their environment than

urban people. Second, rural people have by and large supported economic development in direct proportion to the lack of it where they live. Third, there is evidence that the gangplank theory doesn't hold. In a study of residents of seventy-five high net immigration, nonmetropolitan counties in twelve states from North Dakota to Ohio, published recently in *Rural Sociology*, the following question was asked:

"Should elected officials try to attract new residents to their area?"

	Metropolitan-origin migrants n = 415	*Nonmetropolitan migrants n = 174*	*Rural residents n = 359*
Yes	*73%*	*77%*	*75%*
No	*27*	*23*	*25*

Source: Frederick C. Fliegal et al., "Population Growth in Rural Areas and Sentiments toward Future Growth," *Rural Sociology*, 46 (Fall, 1981) pp. 411-429.

Another study has shown that full-time farmers are more likely to be protectionist than are part-time farmers (who were more apt to be newcomers). City cousins with a hankerin' to get back to the soil, however, can take solace in remembering that there are precious few full-time farmers left. As far as the attitudes of rural residents are concerned, folks, there is good reason to believe the gangplank is still down—at least for some.

Computers in the Country: the Face of Modern Ruralism

One looks for meandering country roads and one finds straight, glossy ones built to federal specifications. One looks for pastured Jerseys and one finds Holsteins huddled in environmentally controlled "free" stalls. One looks for barefoot farm boys with fishing poles and finds none. One looks for boundaried villages, country stores, and neighbors. But the villages have been extended, the country stores have been gentrified, and the neighbors are gone. One thinks of a politics "close to the people" and finds instead highly centralized state governments dominated by their bureaucracies. One thinks "country" and finds . . . there is as yet no proper word for it. We will need one soon. This is not how rural America is now, totally. But this is the way it is fast becoming.

The early American agrarian republic was small farm, small town rural. The industrialized nation was metro-urban. It now appears that those rural areas of America which were ignored by the urban-industrial revolution are the most benign environments for the post-modern technostate. America's hinterland has long been shunned by the national consciousness. Now, unfettered by the paraphernalia of the most recent condition (urban industrialism), it is in a position to assume developmental precedence as our third century of natural life begins to unfold.

Neal Peirce, in a recent book on the South (*The Deep South States of America*, W. W. Norton, 1974), entitles a portion of his chapter on Mississippi, which is the most rural state in the region, "From Cotton to Computers." Well said. The huge majority of American scholars and opinion elites, who will be called upon to forecast the coming arrangement of people and land, are urbanists in disposition and culture. If there is one notion of which they must disabuse themselves, it is that rural areas are technologically retarded. The interstate highway system is to rural America what the trollies were to the suburbs of the past. The computer is the telephone. Life and business can now be conducted on the periphery—the extreme periphery.

Leading in the technocratization of rural areas has been the farmer. The statistics are mind boggling. Such a tiny fraction of our population is involved in actual farming, yet it feeds so many. The typical urbanite would be as amazed at the workings of the normal, computerized dairy herd as a North Dakota wheat farmer would be at the operation of Washington's new Metro system. The failure to come to grips with the pervasive impact technosystems have had on rural life girdles most attempts to understand modern ruralism. This failure may result from the amazing quickness of the rural transformation, which occurred in only two decades (1955-1975). Rural places are expected to be following, bringing up the rear, needing a helping hand from those who adjust the urban-industrial conditions to the new technocracy, but one finds precisely the opposite. They know what they are doing and, in many respects, because there are fewer monkey wrenches to be thrown into the workings from the urban-industrial period, they are forging ahead. I have dealt with the causative elements of this model in other writings. Let me summarize the political conditions that seem to exist in those American states where technology and low density living have been suddenly wedded.

- The old attitudinal dichotomy between rural and urban is disappearing. It still exists as an ideological construct in America, but size of place of residence no longer clearly locates it.
- Political systems are growing more centralized and bureaucratic. Local governments have less autonomy in rural states than in urban states.
- Citizen fatigue is prevalent. Even though the scope of governance is just as broad as in urban areas, there are fewer people to do the negotiating and this leaves the major interest groups and bureaucracies more fully in control.
- More and more rural people live in technological cocoons, protected from the natural harshness of rural life—television under Montana's lonely big sky, air conditioning for Mississippi's piney woods, four-wheel drive vehicles for Vermont's deep snowed winters. This estrangement from the land produces an artificiality in modern rural culture that affects political life.
- The concept of "neighbor" and neighborhood

suffers when a people's spatial distance (which defines "rural") reinforces the atomizing effect of technology itself. One's friends need not even be in the same town, to say nothing of next door. The same goes for one's co-workers. One may shop here, and politic there, join the jogging club here and send one's kids to school there. Rural people are more apt to be *both* spatially and technologically estranged from one another and are even less apt to be attached to a sense of "community" than urban people.

- The sense of political community is further threatened by functional fragmentation. The one-man, one-vote dictum laid down in *Baker* v. *Carr* (1962) means that rural legislative districts are twisted and reshaped every decade and seldom match the boundaries of local governments. In Montana a rancher may share a political relationship with one neighbor in a SID (special improvement district) for mosquitoes, with another neighbor in a SID for coyotes, and another with a third neighbor for water. The county plows the roads but the state representative is elected from a slice of the county combined with a census enumerator district or two from somewhere else.

April is the Cruelest Month: Opportunity for the Few

It could be a springtime for America—an opportunity to reexplore the outback, reset our roots and reestablish our presence on the land. But springtime, as T. S. Eliot has told us (*The Waste Land*, 1922) can be cruel, "stirring dull roots with spring rain." As a people, our roots were stirred in the 1970s by the longing for a largely mythical past, a green past of pastoral simplicity that promised, as Charles Reich suggested, a green future, a rural future.

It appears that we will have a rural future but it may not be the future of the dream; of farmsteads, slow living, human scale communities, understandable politics (close up and personal)—the simple life, the "good" life. If there is a certain cruelty in that, it was self-inflicted, for the dream itself was an indulgence, as Richard Hofstadter and so many others have warned.

The more important question is how many of us will be involved in the unfolding of this latest geographic revolution? In what sense is it an affirmation that America still is a *land* of opportunity? The fact is that this latest migration, like the suburban one before it, seems to be another example of a movement of those with one kind of status seeking another kind. There is a great turnstile at the border of rural America these days, and it is keyed by financial and professional status. The gangplank is still down, if you have the means to walk up it.

How is this so?

Protection and Projection

To partake of the new rural renaissance, one needs either the financial wherewithal (one must be able to purchase a tract of land) and/or (usually "and") a mind that understands and can manipulate the technosystem —that vast complexity of rules and regulations operating to protect the land from the existence of human life on it. There are two forces building the fences and, although they like to call each other names, they share a profoundly important common denominator—the status prerequisite. One is protectionist. The other is projectionist. One seeks to set the land completely aside, to be watched but not touched. The other seeks to use the land in a planned orderly fashion. *Neither* makes room for the status-deprived.

It is clear how the protectionist mentality works, for it does not discriminate against anyone. Its denial to the poor of a piece of rural America is an unfortunate spin-off from the greater priority—protecting the land from humans in general. The projectionists discriminate, not in a nasty way, mind you, but the result is the same. Planners, although they are loath to admit it, need to plan *for* something. That something is defined in terms of prevailing class values. The prevailing class in rural America is a technocratic (elsewhere I have called it "systems") elite.

The systems elite values order, neatness, cleanliness, uncluttered landscapes and rational lifestyles—a planned rural romanticism. They fix up a covered bridge. They save a ghost town. They bring a small "clean" industry into the county and landscape it to fit the terrain. Most of all, they zone. Their power flows from a proposition that is as estranged from the prevailing view of ruralism as frost is from Biloxi: ruralites *like* zoning. Farmers *are* zoners. Those who deal with and understand nature, soon learn that one must plan in order to survive. Nature is the most efficient of systems. In rural America it is also the most visible. The new migrants bring a zoner's mentality with them and find it reinforced by the natural inclination of the population.

In concept, of course, zoning means selection and selection invites discrimination. Land-use plans which, on their face, simply promote orderly development are apt to turn the development process in particular directions. Vermont's "Act 250," for example, has a bias in favor of ten-acre lots, which, of course, are unaffordable for most. A ten-acre lot, a Morgan horse, and a four-wheel drive vehicle are the "unobstructive measures" with which one documents the prevailing lifestyle in the Green Mountain State. Rural ghettoization is a fact of life as the understatused huddle in their trailer parks, drive big, used, gas guzzlers and watch the fences appear around the land of their childhood.

There will be no "Homestead Act" for the second rural migration. Inasmuch as it is driven by an economic push-pull theory of employment opportunity, it is biased in favor of those with the professional skills of the tertiary class—knowledge managers and consultants. To the extent that it is driven by the push-pull of quality of life factors, one must remember that scenery does not put tuna fish in the lunch box.