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# Introduction: What and Where is Rural American, and Why Should We Care?

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*The Routledge History of*  
**Rural America**

Edited by PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG

## What, and Where, is Rural America – and Why Should We Care?

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

I begin my course, the History of Rural America, with a seemingly simple question: What is rural America? What seems like a simple question, however, always turns into anything but. The students spend more than an hour discussing the subject, and the answers end up filling the entire blackboard, and more. We branch off into other directions, asking: what have the people of the United States traditionally believed about the importance of agriculture and rural life to American society? What position has it had in American mythology and beliefs about the American dream? How does popular culture reflect Americans' beliefs about agriculture, rural areas, and farm people? What drives these myths and beliefs? Where do we get our information? The question the class circles back to, and will continue circling back to, is what is a rural place, and how have rural places shaped the history of the nation?

There are, of course, officially sanctioned answers to the question of what a rural place is. The Census Bureau has traditionally defined rural as any place with less than 2,500 people, and it continues to use elements of that definition even today. The current definition includes this wording: “The Census Bureau identifies two types of urban areas: Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people; Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people.

‘Rural’ encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.”<sup>1</sup>

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the federal agency most involved with rural places and their concerns, builds its definition in a two-step process, based on a model provided by the Office of Management and Budget. First, it defines what is urban: “Central

counties with one or more urbanized areas; urbanized areas . . . are densely-settled urban entities with 50,000 or more people.” Additionally, the definition includes the information that “Outlying counties that are economically tied to the core counties as measured by labor-force commuting. Outlying counties are included if 25 percent of workers living in the county commute to the central counties, or if 25 percent of the employment in the county consists of workers coming out from the central counties—the so-called ‘reverse’ commuting pattern.”<sup>2</sup> Once the urban side of the equation is established, which is defined by a greater population, or commuting access to a greater population, what is “non-metropolitan” or rural can be defined. Non-metropolitan areas are broken down by two other criteria. Says the USDA on the question of what makes an area rural:

1. Micropolitan (micro) areas, which are nonmetro labor-market areas centered on urban clusters of 10,000-49,999 persons and defined with the same criteria used to define metro areas.
2. All remaining counties, often labeled “noncore” counties because they are not part of “core-based” metro or micro areas;<sup>3</sup>

Once all of the verbiage has been distilled, rural areas, officially, are home to 2,500 people or less; they are not part of urban clusters; and they are not simply bedroom communities for larger, metropolitan communities. Rural is defined by open country and “stand alone” small communities. From the point of view of the federal government and its agencies, rural is signaled by the looseness of the pattern of settlement on the land rather than any more subjective features.

For my students, however, the problem of definition is greater than this. For students who hail from very small towns or farms, places of 2,500 may seem quite large. There may be more people in their Western Civilization class, or in their dormitory, than in their hometown. For students from Des Moines or Chicago, however, Ames, Iowa, with its roughly 60,000 residents, often feels like a small town, having more in common with the surrounding open country than their own, larger hometowns. The issue of how a place feels guides people's perceptions of the difference between rural and urban as much as any other factor.

For many students, rural is also intimately linked with agricultural. Do people in this place make their living in agriculture, or by serving the needs of farmers? If so, then it must be rural, even when the residents of many places with low population density make their living in extractive industries rather than agriculture. For others, it is a question of services. Most rural communities today are not full service communities, lacking extensive employment opportunities, grocery and clothing stores, doctors, hospitals and their own K-12 schools. Rural localities require residents to travel to meet some or all of their day to day requirements. Rural also implies a lack of stop lights and movie theaters, and roads that turn to dirt at the edge of town.

Rural, too, has implications for human relationships. My students, like many Americans, tend to see the meanings attached to rurality through rose-colored glasses. Rural residence requires that people know their neighbors. It requires them to attend church and participate in charitable activities in their communities. Rural means that residents will look out for each other's children. It also implies a greater ability to allow those children to go outside and play, without

danger from passing strangers. Rural, inevitably, holds less rosy meanings as well. It could mean a lack of tolerance for difference, and everyone “knowing everyone else’s business.” The assumption is that people who do not fit will ultimately leave for larger, more anonymous places. Rural, in everyone’s books, seems to mean face-to-face interactions, with all of their pleasures and perils.

What is less open for debate, at least from the perspective of rural and agricultural historians, is the centrality of rural communities to US history. At the time of the American Revolution, ninety percent of the nation’s residents lived and worked in rural areas. Small scale enterprises and face to face interactions defined their worlds. Over time, urbanization and industrialization would remake the face of the nation, but it was a long process carried out over hundreds of years. In 1920, the Census noted that the US had become an urban nation, with more than fifty percent of the population living in places of greater than 2,500 people. I would argue that in many states, the change came later. In some places, school consolidation did not effectively arrive until after World War II. In many open country communities, a large proportion of the population lived without electricity and hard surfaced roads into the post-World War II era. It was with the crises that came just before mid-century – the Great Depression and World War II -- that the pace of rural depopulation accelerated, and rural neighborhoods began to disappear. As rural schools, rural churches and small towns lost their constituencies, and the majority of people met their needs for education, community and economic survival in towns and cities, the United States truly became an urban nation. In 2013, roughly fifteen percent of the population of the United States lived in non-metropolitan areas. This number promises to fall further, as non-metropolitan areas across the country continue to shrink; only a few rural locations favored by extraordinary

environmental amenities or reasonable proximity to urban areas seem likely to see further growth.<sup>4</sup>

Although the difference is not as clearly visible from the perspective of the twenty-first century, rural and urban America have often been different worlds. In the period since World War II, rural and urban America have become increasingly interconnected, and increasingly similar. Given changes in communication and transportation technology, and the pervasiveness of the market and consumerism, a more common culture has come to define the nation, both rural and urban. Regardless of location, people have access to the same music, the same clothing and the same visual culture, in the form of movies, television and the internet. The similarity that we now know, however, has served to mask the historic differences between these two Americas. As David Danbom, author of *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, has written: “Through most of world history, rural people have been dramatically different from urban people, and rural life has diverged strikingly from urban life; that reality continues now in much of the developing world. Until very recently rural people in Europe and North America had unique experiences. They looked, talked, and acted differently from urban people. And they pursued an occupation that was at least as much a way of life as it was a way of making a living.”<sup>5</sup> By focusing on the history of rural America, we are focusing on a very different set of cultures, and cultures that were those of the majority until very recently. In some ways, they are lost cultures. The use of the word cultures, rather than the singular culture, is important to note. Rural has had different meanings at different times; place, too, strongly influences the shape of rural culture. The rural south was a different place in 1850 than it is today, and its history is unlikely to be mistaken for that of rural New England or the Great Plains.

In this volume, the authors are addressing the history of the United States' rural experience, and providing a beginning point for those who are hoping to answer the question of what is rural, and why is it important. The book is divided into four main sections: regions of rural America, rural lives in context, change and development, and resources for scholars and teachers. Examining the essays on the regions of rural America, readers can discover what makes New England different from the South, and why the Midwest and Mountain West are quite different places. The chapters on rural lives provide an entrée into the social and cultural history of rural peoples – women, children and men – as well as a description of some of the forces shaping rural communities, such as immigration, race and religious difference. Chapters on change and development examine the forces molding the countryside, such as rural-urban tensions, technological change and increasing globalization. The final section will help scholars and educators integrate rural history into their research, writing and classrooms. By breaking the field of rural history into so many pieces, we are complicating the history of the United States, and adding often neglected wrinkles to the story. We are adding places, people and topics to the national narrative that you may not have previously considered. How and when you choose to incorporate this material into your own work is, of course, at your own discretion. But as we strive for inclusiveness in our work and in our classrooms, we hope that some part of the rural majority, once the largest majority in this nation's history, will find a place in the stories that we all tell.

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<sup>1</sup>United States Census Bureau, “Urban and Rural Classification,”

<http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, “What is Rural?”

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx#.U-kfFGNhsTA>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, “Population and Migration, Overview,” <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/population-migration.aspx#.U-opuGNhsTA>.

<sup>5</sup> David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 2.