Journal of Research in Rural Education, Fall, 1994, Vol. 10, No. 2, 122-125

A Literary Collage of Rural Life

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I am the Heartland.
Hear me speak
In voices raised by those who seek
To live their lives upon the land,
To know and love and understand
The secrets of a living earth—
Its strengths, its weaknesses, its worth;
Who, Heartland born and Heartland bred,
Possess the will to move ahead.

I am the Heartland.
I survive
To keep America, my home, alive.

Rural issues are diverse and complex. It would be difficult to touch on every aspect of rural life in a short period of time. So this literary collage will look at only two: country schools and farm life. In looking at these two features, though, it is possible to gain insight into rural life, to understand some of the things that shape the people who live in rural areas.

Education, of course, is a primary means of shaping attitudes and behavior. As Andrew Gulliford, author of *America's Country Schools,* notes:

> Country schools have always been important in the rural areas of this nation, as a symbol both of cultural continuity and of the opportunities to be gained from education. Out of necessity country schools have been practicing for more than a century what the most sophisticated education systems now encourage—smaller classrooms, programs that allow students to progress at their own rate, and students who help each other learn. We seem to have come full circle in our appreciation of the community values inherent in the one-room school, where the teacher taught students of various ages and abilities in a familylike atmosphere.

A look at the legacy of the country school and an insight into the rural character comes from a former school teacher interviewed by Gulliford:

> Country school students develop independence, resourcefulness, and a sense of who they are as individuals and as members of the school community. These kids are blessed with remoteness. There aren't many others around for them to copy or try to impress. They have to draw upon themselves. They have time to think, to use their own imaginations.

Edna Ferber describes the life of a country school teacher in the beginning of her novel, *So Big. S*he tells of the challenges a school teacher faced, from starting a fire in the school house stove, to trying to inspire her pupils, to winning a beau at a community picnic. Early on, Selina, the young school teacher, learned the realities of educational opportunities. In talking with Klaas Pool, a school director at whose house she was to live, she discovered that not all of Klaas' children would attend school:

> "Do tell me which ones will and which won't."
>
> "Geertje goes to school. Jozina goes to school. Roelf works by the farm."
>
> "How old is Roelf?" She was being school teacherly again.

This literary collage initially was an oral presentation at the first meeting of the Regional Rural Advisory Council. The council was created to assist staff from the Rural Education Program of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory in examining the challenges that face communities and educators as they prepare rural children for the future. Our purpose for including the collage in the program was to show how literature can reflect some of the issues we deal with in rural education.

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"Roelf is twelve."

"Twelve! And no longer at school! But why not!"

"Roelf he works by the farm."

"Doesn't Roelf like school?"

"But sure."

"Don't you think he ought to go to school?"

"But sure."

Having begun, she could not go back. "Doesn't your wife want Roelf to go to school any more?"

"Maartje? But sure." She gathered herself together; hurled herself behind the next question.

"Then why *doesn't* he go to school, for pity's sake!"

Klaas Pool's pale blue eyes were fixed on the spot between the horse's ears. His face was serene, placid, patient.

"Roelf he works by the farm."

Roelf did get an education, at least as much as Selina could offer him late at night after her teaching and his farm work were done, and he went on to become a noted artist. Years later, Selina reflected on Roelf's journey:

> Selina understood High Prairie folk better now, though not altogether, even after almost twenty years of living amongst them. A cold people, yet kindly. Suspicious, yet generous. Distrustful of all change, yet progressing by sheer force of thrift and unceasing labour. Unimaginative for generations, only to produce—a Roelf Pool.

Understanding rural folk . . . other authors have tried to capture this. Andrew Malcolm writes eloquently of the rural perspective in a chapter from *Final Harvest.*

> Hard work will cure anything. My daddy worked hard. And he taught me to work hard. And I worked hard. And now look what you've got. . . . Look at all that machinery out there. And the food on this table. Hard work. That's the secret. You don't put it into the field, you don't get it out.
>
> Hard, honest work . . . around the clock, around the years, through the generations.

Malcolm continues to add revealing details that build rural character:

> Nature isn't the only thing that hides its feelings in the Midwest. . . . Public displays of emotion run against the ethnic grain of independence and self-support that stiffened the backbone of so many midwestern immigrant groups.

He seems to know the same people Selina met in Ferber's story.

In *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change,* Cornelia Flora and her colleagues connect personal characteristics with the characteristics of the land itself:

> Those drawn to [the Midwest] came to stay. They were farmers and ranchers, many from Europe, for whom owning land was important. Profits, when they existed, were used to purchase land. Farmers helped their sons get a start in farming, often by giving them pieces of land that the family had acquired. Because the early settlers all shared the same problems, there was an unusual homogeneity of experience and understanding of life.

As she sets the scene for her novel, *A Thousand Acres,* Jane Smiley explains rural folk in much the same way:

> We might as well have had a catechism:
> What is a farmer?
> A farmer is a man who feeds the world.
> What is a farmer's first duty?
> To grow more food.
> What is a farmer's second duty?
> To buy more land.
> What are the signs of a good farm?
> Clean fields, neatly painted buildings, breakfast at six, no debts, no standing water.
> How will you know a good farmer when you meet him?
> He will not ask you for any favors.

So this is what shapes attitudes and behaviors.

John Steinbeck understands the pull to own land, to work it, to produce. George, in *Of Mice and Men,* also recites a litany whenever Lenny asks him to describe "their place."

> Well, it's ten acres," said George. "Got a little win'mill. Got a little shack on it, an' a chicken run. Got a kitchen, orchard, got a few berries. An' we could have a few pigs. I could build a smoke house like the one gran'pa had, an' when we kill a pig we can smoke the bacon and the hams, and make sau-

> sage an' all like that. When the fruit come in we could can it—an' tomatoes—they're easy to can. Ever' Sunday we'd kill a chicken or a rabbit. Maybe we'd have a cow or a goat, and the cream is so thick you got to cut it with a knife and take it out with a spoon.
>
> "We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there. An' when we put in a crop, why, we'd be there to take the crop up. We'd know what come of our planting."
>
> He looked raptly at the wall over Lennie's head. "An it'd be our own."

Unfortunately for people in the Midwest, the recent financial hardships made such dreams and such values take on a melancholy cast. Andrew Malcolm says in *Final Harvest*,

> [I] was struck by some major social, economic, and structural changes under way all across the nation's heartland, in what was fast becoming a bygone time.

This sense of imminent demise even affected the way he described the landscape:

> In the closing days of September, the fields along County Road 7 are lined with dead or dying things. Green grasses turning yellow. Waves of leaves scuttling back and forth. Tumbleweeds piled against fences. Some of the corn has been picked by then. Much has not, and in the winds, the crisp, crumpled cornstalks rub against one another across the empty field in a strange kind of dry death rattle.

Bruce Hopkins, an educator and poet, relates poignantly the effects of the economic disaster for one farm family in his poem, "Lament of the Family Farm." While it implies the impact on one family, it clearly suggests what is happening across the Midwest and reiterates a loss of a way of life:

> Paralyzed by guilt and fear
> The mortgage paid in full by a prior generation
> Now in spite of the investment of a family
> The farm would be sold
>
> Children had been born into it
> Its very existence
> Seemed to give definition to life
> And dignity to those who comprised the family
>
> To be confronted
> Not with the loss of a job
> But the demise of a way of life
> Involving each family member with the other

Hopkins recounts the events in the family's life at the farm and the events in nature that marked the passage of time, events that "consecrat[ed] strength and pride" of the farmer. And despite the farm crisis, the harshness of nature at times, and children leaving, Hopkins' poem attests to the resilience of rural folk. The poem concludes with a question and an answer:

> How does one bring into perspective
> Conditions in world politics
> The collapse of the farm economy
> The cycle broken
>
> Farm foreclosures
> Wanton acts of suicide
> A regional sense of despair
> Create an aura of things gone awry
>
> A heightened sense of community
> Dogged perseverance
> And an omnipotent faith
> In what tomorrow may bring
>
> The children are not so distant
> Farm families in open dialogue
> Personal integrity
> Emergence

It is clear that farm life shapes the farmer's life. There is an inexorable link between nature and people. Andrew Malcolm notes,

> There is a rhythm and a balance to the storms, to their death-dealing destruction, to their life-giving moisture, and to the humility they spawn. . . . If the storms fail to come, according to an even broader rhythm of year, then life becomes unbalanced.

Farmers understand this balance and the necessity for practicality. James Hearst, midwestern poet, shows how the land, how working the land, affects rural thinking. In "Logician," he shows how attention to the land can dominate logic:

> Pete Eversen was called four-eyed Pete
> because he wore glasses
> but he saw duty plain nevertheless.
> When he found the hired man with his wife
> he shot her instead
> because help was hard to get
> and anyway whose fault was it?

In his poem "Truth," Hearst again reveals the farmer's sense of practical, reality-based reasoning. When asked if

there are rocks in the neighbor's field, a farmer is likely to respond,

> How the devil do I know . . .
> plow it and find out.
> If the plow strikes something
> harder than earth,
> probably you hit a rock . . .
> But the connection with a thing
> is the only truth that I know of,
> so plow it.

Hearst's poem, "The New Calf," demonstrates how the rural perspective creates a basis for understanding more far-reaching concepts, and shows how rural life is connected to universal themes. The poem tells how a farmer found an abandoned new-born calf and now is trying to save it. He watches it tremble in the straw-lined basket, watches it feebly try to swallow. And as he watches, he extends this experience beyond the boundaries of his farm:

> Now it waits for life
> to decide whether to go or stay—and
> I think of deserted innocence everywhere,
> a child locked out of the house,
> a woman dirtied in love,
> a father betrayed by his son, all of us
> sometime abandoned, lonely, denied.

Gary Paulsen presents a vivid, sentimental picture of rural life in the opening to his book, *The Winter Room:*

> If books could be more, could show more, could own more, this book would have smells.... It would have the smells of old farms; the sweet smell of new-mown hay. It would have the dusty smell of winter hay; the pungent fermented smell of the chopped corn silage. This book would have the smell of new potatoes sliced and frying in light pepper on a woodstove, and the damp smell of leather mittens steaming on the back of the stovetop.
>
> If books could be more and own more and give more, this book would have sound. . . . It would have the high, keening sound of the six-foot bucksaws as the men pull them back and forth through the trees to cut pine for paper pulp; and the solid thunking sound of the ax coming down to split stovewood.
>
> And finally, if books could be more, give more, show more, this book would have light. . . . Oh, it would have the soft gold light—gold with bits of hay dust floating in it—that slips through the crack in the barn wall; it would have the new light of dawn at the eastern edge of the pasture behind the cows coming in to be milked on a summer morning.

If books could have more, give more, show more, we might think we could touch the past. These excerpts present a nostalgic view of rural life, a time we might like to capture. It's a view many people hold—charming and alluring.

But it's not quite true. It's a stereotypical view of a way of life that we want to believe, it's so picturesque and so inspiring. In reality, though, rural life is less sweet, less rustic. Poverty creeps in. Corporations creep in. Change creeps in. We need to move our thinking away from the stereotype and create a vision of the future. We need to look at rural life as it really is and see what part we can play to preserve the strength and pride of rural life, to capitalize on the resilience and independence of the rural character, to ensure that hard, honest work continues to pay off—but also to encourage a new perspective, to allow this legacy to represent the future rural America.

If "rural" could be more, could show more, could own more, how could we touch it?

I am the Heartland.
I survive
To keep America, my home, alive.

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