

Rural Life in New England

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Abstract: This article summarizes the major dimensions of “rurality” and significant recent changes in the political, economic, and social composition of rural life. It then examines the origins of these changes, their impact on future directions of rural society, and the implications of this for collecting of sources for the study of rural life, with some description of available sources and discussion of unmet collecting needs.

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VERDANT FIELDS, RED BARNS, and small sleepy villages dominate images of rural America. The slow rhythms of nature repeat themselves, and life continues. For many who have this idealized vision it is difficult to conceive of country life as anything but farming, yet employment in farming has been steadily declining for nearly a century. Cycles of devastating natural conditions, economic hard times, and technical and scientific advances in agriculture have greatly reduced the number of farmers and farms, as well as agriculture's share of the U.S. economy. Eighty years ago more than 50 percent of Americans lived on farms; today it is fewer than 3 percent, and only 10 percent of persons in rural areas call themselves farmers. Pastoral images of rural life must therefore give way to a new view of rurality.

In the 1970s, for the first time in this century, population and economic growth in rural areas exceeded metropolitan growth.¹ Although this infusion has not affected all aspects of rural America, it has been pervasive enough to be called a rural renaissance.² Today rural America has a dynamic, diverse, and complex economic, social, and cultural fabric that includes not only the traditional farm family and the ski fanatic, but also telecommuters who "travel" to work through their telephones and their computers.

These changes have brought previously unimaginable opportunities and problems to rural America. Employment possibilities and life-styles, as well as material and cultural products, historically found only in cities are now available in the countryside. Also new are problems such as housing shortages and environmental degradation. These conditions represent a coalescing of rural and urban cultures, a complex process that grows out of both changes in modern society and the legacy of farm life.

Definition of Rural

The federal government accepts more than forty different definitions of "rural," ranging from a county without a place of over fifty thousand persons to "not urban."³ In this article a broad concept of "nonmetropolitan"—areas that either are open country, have populations of fewer than fifty thousand persons, or are not too densely settled—is used to examine four aspects of rural life: the natural resource base, including terrain, topography, and climate; politics and political structure, with particular emphasis on "community"; economics; and society and culture. An examination of each of these dimensions does not settle the ambiguities of defining rural life, but they are useful in contrasting the present with the past and clarifying the dynamic diversity of rural life in New England.

¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Detailed Population Characteristics, United States Summary, Section A: United States, Census of Population, 1980* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1983), Tables 276, 278, 283, 284.

General works on rural life include Thomas Steahr and A. E. Luloff, eds., *The Structure and Impact of Population Redistribution in New England* (University Park, Pa.: Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, Pennsylvania State University, 1986); Patricia L. Ballard and Glenn V. Fuguitt, "The Changing Small Town Settlement Structure in the United States, 1900-1980," *Rural Sociology* 50 (Spring 1985): 99-113; Kenneth P. Wilkinson, "In Search of the Community in the Changing Countryside," *Rural Sociology* 51 (Spring 1986): 1-17; J. Abdnor, "Rural America: The Forgotten Economy," *Proceedings of the Agricultural Outlook Conference* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1985), 498-507; and Kenneth L. Deavers and David L. Brown, "A New Agenda for Rural Policy in the 1980s," *Rural Development Perspectives* 1 (October 1984): 38-41.

²Calvin L. Beale has used this term in "The Changing Nature of Rural Employment," in *New Directions in Urban-Rural Migration: The Population Turnaround in Rural America*, ed. David L. Brown and John M. Wardwell (San Diego: Academic Press, 1980), and earlier works.

³U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population and Housing, 1980, User's Guide* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1982), 214.

Natural Resource Base

Judson Hale, editor of *Yankee Magazine*, has often referred to New England as a "snug place," noting that one can drive to almost any point in the region and return in the course of a day. Despite this "snugginess," there is little homogeneity of climate or terrain. The rocky Maine coast differs greatly from the heavily forested "outback" of northern Maine, which in turn contrasts significantly with the fertile Connecticut River valley. Even the Appalachian mountain system, which dominates northern New England, differs from state to state. Climates vary: Boston's temperature and rainfall resemble those of Washington, D.C., more than those of Burlington, Vermont.⁴

The rural resource base also varies widely in New England. Differences exist primarily between north and south. Only 2.2 percent of Maine's land is urban and built up; for Rhode Island it is 37 percent; and Connecticut, 32 percent. In Vermont nearly 91 percent of nonfarm land is available for agriculture; for Rhode Island the figure is 54 percent. Although all six states show a decline in available agricultural lands, the three southern states are losing theirs at a much greater rate. Rhode Island, for example, experienced a 30 percent decline in 1982, Maine less than 1 percent, and New Hampshire and Vermont only 4 percent.⁵ More than three-fourths of the agricultural lands in all six states are in forests. This last measure indicates what New England farmers have always known: agriculture in these rocky hills is hard scrabble and best suited for small farms. Nearly 65 percent of all farms in Massachusetts have had fifty acres

or less. In 1982 more than 52 percent of New England farms had fewer than fifty acres while nationally only 36 percent were that size.⁶

A relatively new aspect of the natural resource base is the acceleration of artificial changes in the environment. Recent rural environmental problems not only affect current conditions but portend ill for the future security and well-being of rural residents. These include the dumping of hazardous wastes, the concentration of pesticide and fertilizer residues, fallout from acid-bearing rains, serious topsoil depletion, and the concentration of radioactive tailings. This increasing misuse of the rural environment is a problem that, despite growing public concern, shows little sign of abating; it could greatly damage the social, economic, and cultural life of rural New England.

Political Structure

The concept of community is an important one in rural society. It represents not only the major social and cultural unit, but also the primary political one. In rural New England, community has always been synonymous with town. Except for the relatively few cities, the map of New England is covered entirely by towns. Towns are contiguous and exclusive; the term does not, as elsewhere, denote only the more densely settled areas. Functions elsewhere managed by counties—schools, police, roads, planning, zoning—are generally run by towns in New England, where county government is relatively weak.⁷

A major feature that distinguishes New England's rural communities from their urban counterparts, and from small towns in

⁴U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1984* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1984), 217-24.

⁵George Rucker, ed., *Land and People: A Rural America Factbook* (Washington, D.C.: Rural America, 1982), 13-14.

⁶U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Agriculture, 1982: United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1982), Table 4.

⁷See Frank M. Bryan, *Politics in the Rural States: People, Parties and Processes* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1981).

other regions, is the town meeting; it takes place once a year and all citizens attend and vote. This exercise in local autonomy makes for local cohesiveness. It is now practiced mainly in the northern tier: Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. In the more populous southern states (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island) the town meeting is still in use but has in most towns given way to representative forms of government. Both forms give considerable weight to the locality and to local issues; they breed a real or imagined sense of local power and responsibility that is generally missing in cities. This feeling is integral to the concept of "Yankee individualism" and the protection of individual freedoms.

Despite rural New Englanders' propensity for not having outsiders tell them what to do, town governments have steadily seen their power eroded by state and federal authorities. Increasingly, such local functions as police, planning, economic development, sewage, water, and health have become the responsibility of regional commissions, state boards, and federal administrative districts. These forms of government have altered the conduct of public business in rural New England, bringing benefits and problems. The consolidation of schools is typical: in poorer rural communities students now have access to educational and extracurricular activities that no individual town can afford. The price of these opportunities, however, is a loss of community identity and spirit. While individual communities still make decisions about many issues, it is clear that rural government has changed and is changing. Ironically, local "autonomy" is not possible without federal support in the form of revenue sharing and public assistance. If this support continues to dwindle, rural towns will have to redefine their administrative and political understanding of community

even further. Regional government, with its pooling of resources, may become the dominant concept of rural community in the future.

Rural Economy

The most obvious difference between the rural and urban economy is the traditional dominance of agriculture in the former. In New England as elsewhere, other economic activities have also been traditionally rural: logging, paper and pulp, leather, furniture, mining, and food processing. These segments continue to function with varying degrees of success; leather goods employment in New England, for instance, has declined by 50 percent since World War II.⁸ The number of persons employed in agriculture has of course fallen sharply. Other traditional activities, such as forestry and food processing, have seen increases in production and employment.

New England's farm population has declined continuously, but not as precipitously as in the nation as a whole. In part this is because for several decades New England has been less dependent on agriculture than any other region; in 1970, for example, only 1.3 percent of the labor force was engaged in agriculture. Between 1970 and 1980 the number of persons living on farms in rural areas in New England declined by nearly 75 percent. Although much of this change can be attributed to a reclassification of rural communities to urban or metropolitan categories because of population growth, it does demonstrate the changing nature of rural life. More indicative of agricultural trends is the decline of persons employed in agriculture, which across New England dropped by 9 percent, even with a 3 percent increase in the overall labor force. In 1980, only 1.2 percent of New England's labor force was engaged in agriculture.⁹

⁸Beale, "The Changing Nature of Rural Employment," 40-44.

⁹U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Detailed Population Characteristics, United States Summary, Section A: United States, Census of Population, 1980* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983), Tables 278, 284.

The decline in farm population and agricultural employment does not mean that New England agriculture is following all the national trends. In fact, instead of the concentration of agriculture in fewer, larger farms, New England is experiencing a renaissance in agriculture, with a greater diversity in size and product now than at any time in this century. Much of the diversification has been stimulated by the flow of new people into rural New England, but some is a response by traditional farmers determined to stay in farming; the rise of organic farming is the clearest example.

These conditions are the basis of one significant long-term and now endangered use of agricultural lands and of one new and promising trend. For years New England and in particular Vermont farmers have used the rocky hills to produce some of the finest dairy products in the country. Today, with probable cuts in federal support, the national whole-herd buyout program, and advances in agricultural technology such as the bovine growth hormone, the small family dairy farm is an endangered proposition. Fortunately, the same terrain is well suited to small-scale intensive farming. The success of this transition may be measured in part by the fact that New England saw an increase of 15 percent in total farm land between 1978 and 1984. The positive impact of diversification is not enough, however, to stem the tide of overall decline. In 1986 more than 300 dairy farms (10 percent) in Vermont alone ceased to exist. Some pessimistic analysts predict the demise of the family farm everywhere and of the entire New England dairy industry.¹⁰

The significant developments in the rural New England economy have not, however, been in traditional areas but in the emer-

gence of new segments and the expansion of areas that previously were relatively unimportant. The major components of the change are the rise of high technology industries, the development of the recreation and tourism industry, the expansion of service industries, the decentralization of the economic system, and the increased participation of women in the labor force. These factors do not exhaust the range or depth of change but, as the core of the transformation, act as catalysts for additional changes.

The rise of high technology industries has been the most visible component in the restructuring of the rural economy. (In addition to office accounting and computing machines, high technology includes engineering and scientific instruments, chemical research, defense-related electronic equipment, and research biology, from which come drugs, foods, and other products.) High technology is not entirely new to the New England economy, but rapid growth did not come until the 1970s. The 1970 Census showed 32,000 New Englanders employed in the manufacture of office, accounting, and computing machines; the 1980 Census, 88,000.¹¹ New England's preeminence is attributable to three interrelated factors. The region's early industrialization created a pool of skilled labor and entrepreneurial talent; the universities have been a source of new technologies, professional and technical personnel, and entrepreneurs; and, with only 6 percent of the U.S. population, New England has 40 percent of the leading venture capital firms.¹²

The high technology sector in New England is not a large employer, accounting for only 6 to 10 percent of wage and salary employment. Its expansion has had a mul-

¹⁰See, for instance, Frederick Buttel, "Beyond the Family Farm," in *Technology and Rural Social Change*, ed. Gene F. Summers (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1983), 87-106.

¹¹Lynn E. Browne, "The New England Economy and the Development of High Technology Industries," in *Economic Indicators: New England*, August 1984 (Boston: Federal Reserve Bank), A4.

¹²Browne, "The New England Economy," A5.



Alden Electronics on Route 495 in Westborough, Massachusetts, a dairy farm now occupied by an electronics company. Photograph by Nancy Carlson Schrock.

tiplier effect on local trade and service industries,¹³ however, and has contributed to the development of a thriving computer service industry. This is the sector that has most significantly affected rural New England. Along with such major high tech establishments as the IBM plant in Essex, Vermont, the diverse components of the computer service industry have enabled various rural areas to take advantage of high tech opportunities. Typical is the takeover of the American Guernsey Cattle Club facilities in Peterborough, New Hampshire, by *Byte* and *Popular Computing* magazines. New England is acquiring a new image: once seen as dominated by textiles and leather goods and as the prototype of a "mature" industrial region, it is now regarded as a dynamic, prosperous center for new industries.

In terms of total employment and dollars generated, the recreation and tourism industry has had a greater impact on the rural economy than has high technology. Traditionally recreation and tourism have meant the summer home, occasional visits to historical or natural sites, and limited use of natural areas for fishing, hunting, and hiking. Skiing, the most visible and most popular form of recreation, is a phenomenon of the last fifty years. Although income was generated in rural areas by recreation and tourism early in this century, most came from New Englanders; beginning soon after World War II, New England began to attract more tourists from outside than inside the region. As one of the top three tourist states in the nation, Vermont is affected more than any other New England state. In 1977 it was estimated that the recreation

¹³Lynn E. Browne, "High Technology and Regional Economical Development," in *Economic Indicators: New England*, April 1984 (Boston: Federal Reserve Bank), A3-A4.

industry provided as much as 10 percent of Vermont's gross product.¹⁴ By 1982 this figure had reached approximately 25 percent. Tourism is expected to continue to grow about 4 percent annually. Other states have experienced a similar impact; Mount Desert Island in Maine, for instance, has changed from a place deserving its name to one of New England's busiest summer resorts. The secondary effects of this growth include an increase of more than 100 percent in revenues from general entertainment in rural New England between 1977 and 1982;¹⁵ such businesses as service stations and general stores have also benefited.

Closely related to the growth of tourism and high technology is the expansion of the service sector, defined as private amenity services (such as hotels and restaurants), private social services (such as health care), and government services (including education and welfare). In 1982 18 percent of all U.S. employment was in service industries; for New England the figure was 20 percent, and for rural New England it was 23 percent.¹⁶ This service sector is the fastest-growing component of the region's economy. In rural New England much of this growth is due to the development of recreation, but the bulk of nongovernment service employment consists of professional services. In Vermont, for example, physicians had receipts of \$79 million in 1982, up 136 percent from 1977; legal services cost \$48 million, an increase of 86 percent.¹⁷

With the expansion of the service industry, new jobs have been created in rural areas, causing an expansion of the rural so-

cial infrastructure,¹⁸ which has acted as a magnet, attracting new people. Nearly one-quarter of all newcomers to rural areas are engaged in the service industry;¹⁹ the addition of new services has made rural areas more attractive to others, who may want the services or need them for their own occupations and who, lacking the services, might not move to rural areas. Once again there is evidence of the coalescing of the conditions of rural and urban society.

Two other trends have had pervasive effects on the rural economy: decentralization and the increased participation of women in the labor force. The growth of the service industry in rural areas is inseparable from decentralization. Services formerly available only in the city are now available in small towns. Although many providers have evidently exchanged larger profits for the amenities of rural life, others (usually companies with few employees, such as software developers) have high profit ratios. Entrepreneurs needing high profitability are therefore not precluded from locating in rural areas. Furthermore, because high technology manufacturing requires fewer raw materials and uses less energy than older industries, a plant can be located with less regard for material and energy sources. And, because the product itself is relatively small, the cost of transportation to markets is lower.

The high tech products themselves promote decentralization. Through increasingly sophisticated communications, services may be obtained far from the providing source. Telecommuters, persons who dial up a computer instead of going to work each day, are increasingly common in rural

¹⁴Vermont Agency of Development and Community Affairs, *Study of Economic Benefits of Vermont's Travel Industry* (Montpelier: the Agency, 1979), iv-7.

¹⁵U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Service Industries, 1982: Vermont* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1982), Table 2a.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Table 1a.

¹⁸The social infrastructure is made up of the basic supporting human services and facilities—such as education and health care—that make social life possible.

¹⁹*Census of Service Industries, 1982: Vermont*, Table 2a.

communities. Equally feasible is the location of the entire service in a rural area. For example, recently in East Dover, Vermont, a new DEC System 20 mainframe computer was carefully transported over a frozen dirt road to the Merriam farmhouse. William Merriam, president of FEL Computing, employs nine people to develop software and sell time on his computer.²⁰

Despite the large increase in women's employment during World War II, in 1950 women were a small proportion of the labor force. For rural women the percentage was especially low; nationally only 20 percent were employed. By 1980 nearly 39 percent of rural women over sixteen were in the work force, compared to just over 47 percent of urban women. The proportion of working mothers in both urban and rural areas increased dramatically between 1970 and 1980, from 32 to 48 percent.²¹ In part, these increases can be attributed to the constantly rising costs of maintaining a household and raising a family. In addition, factors that formerly kept rural women from paid employment have disappeared or lost some of their force. These include lower material expectations, inaccessibility of employment centers, a smaller percentage of unmarried women requiring self support, and general rural social conservatism. The sectors that have experienced the largest increases in employment of rural women are professional services and manufacturing. Growth in the former largely reflects the rapid expansion of health services, a trend not unique to rural areas. Increases in factory employment are part of the general trend toward decentralization in manufacturing; as a result there is more variety in products made in rural areas.

In some areas the expanding number of women in the rural labor force has alleviated labor shortages; in others, it has led to competition for jobs with men, some of them unskilled, some minorities. Whether a job provides additional income and a higher standard of living or, as for single mothers, a subsistence income, it represents one more way in which the aspirations and life styles of rural people have become closer to those of their urban counterparts.

Society and Culture

The much discussed "Snowbelt to Sunbelt" population migration does not apply to New England, where recent population growth has been positive, steady, and decentralized. Between 1970 and 1980 New England's population increased by 4.2 percent. In nonmetropolitan areas, which account for almost one-quarter of the region's population, the increase was 16.4 percent, well above the national average of 11.4 percent. Almost all the nonmetropolitan growth was in communities of fewer than five thousand persons, where the population increased by 21.2 percent. The vast majority of this growth occurred in the northern tier: Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.²²

This population change, which reverses 150 years of population movement, has been called the "rural renaissance." Among the explanations for this migration are the expansion and development of new components of the rural economy and the extension of urban amenities and culture, but many people have come simply because they, like many Americans, prefer small-town living. Recent Gallup findings show that more than

²⁰Reg Hardy, "Packing a Roomful of Computer into Rural Farmhouse Bedroom," *Vermont Business*, February 1985, 19. Although Merriam says that "as a professional, I wanted to be tied to a non-Vermont economy," he believes that "generally. . . the problems of running a business here are no different than anywhere else. They are cash flow, paperwork, and government regulations. These problems far overshadow any others relating to location."

²¹Beale, "Changing Nature of Rural Employment," 39-40.

²²Rucker, *Land and People*, 13. The rates for these states were 13.2, 15, and 24.8 percent respectively, with most of the growth in nonmetropolitan areas.

70 percent of Americans do or would prefer rural and small-town life.²³ Among those acting on this preference are the elderly, who have increasingly opted for early retirement and who are freer than their predecessors to move to places in which they want to live. Many parents with young families, choosing quality of life over high income, have migrated to rural areas; in some cases, however, inadequate schools and other social services have caused rural emigrants to return to the city or the suburbs.

The importance of the rural renaissance extends beyond the actual in-migration of some urban families. During the last decade the trend has taken on the air of a movement, evident in the host of magazines and journals aimed at the new rural resident, such as Blair and Ketchum's *Country Journal*, *Country Gentleman*, *Country Living*, and *Farm Wife*.²⁴ New organizations have emerged. Some are advocacy groups: for instance, rural america, inc.; the Rural Housing Coalition; Housing Assistance Corporation; the Food, Research and Action Center (FRAC); the Rural Coalition; and the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC). Others serve the special needs of newcomers to rural areas: for example, Natural Organic Farmers Association (NOFA) and Gardens for All. There is also a revival of interest in traditional service organizations, such as the Grange and the National Farmers' Union. Despite the specifically rural focus of these organizations, their structure and purposes reflect the continuing coalescing of rural and urban cultures. Rural organizations have historically been multifaceted in function. The Grange, for instance, served as a social, sometimes political, and always news-providing entity. The new organizations and

journals, however, are specialized, each dealing only with a given topic or function.

The integration of rural and urban life in rural New England in the 1980s is largely to be expected: former urban residents bring their culture and preferences with them. But both urban and rural cultures are caught in larger changes that are dictating the coalescing of cultures, changes that are predicated primarily on advances in electronic communications media and transportation, and that have profound effects on all aspects of rural life.

Television is the major factor in the coalescing of rural and urban culture. The spread of cable television and satellite technology allows even the most isolated rural communities to receive a plethora of channels. In New England, one in four homes has cable; one-half of those with access to cable service subscribe. As in urban areas, movie theatres are closing as VCR ownership increases. Entertainment is increasingly spectator rather than participatory; such New England customs as sugar and snow parties are likely to give way to group viewing of the latest Star Trek video. Television has also altered the perception, desires, and tastes of rural New Englanders. For many, to acquire the urban things they see on television is as good as being there.

Meantime, being there has been made easier by improved transportation, notably the interstate highway system and the improvement of state highways. Rural airports have also seen extensive growth. The Burlington International Airport, for instance, once a lonely outpost for the Air National Guard, has become the third busiest airport in New England. Besides further increasing the exposure of rural citizens to urban life, better transportation has meant greater accessibility of rural areas to urban

²³*Washington Post Weekly*, 14 March 1985, 13.

²⁴Such older titles as *Yankee*, *Down East*, and *Vermont Life* have less to offer rural residents, appealing more to tourists and to urbanites who may be descendants of New England farmers or who dream of some day moving to the country.



4-H girls preparing food on camera for Tony Adams's program, "Across the Fence," Burlington, Vt. Photo courtesy of Extension Service, University of Vermont.

populations, which has drastically altered the face of rural society. The most significant result has been the growth of recreation and tourism. In 1980 more than two million people, or four times its population, visited Vermont for at least one day. With them came not only millions of dollars but also urban cultural influences. As a result, restaurateurs try to serve the "right" food, and hotel owners to decorate in a more cosmopolitan fashion. Retail stores near tourist or recreation sites must consider urban tastes before stocking their shelves. Potters, weavers, and other artisans and artists have studios in former farmhouses. Summer theatres, music festivals, and art galleries have multiplied.

The most influential piece of equipment is of course the computer. Not only does it make telecommuting possible, but it makes all users increasingly interdependent. The farmer needing grain-rationing software and the small rural retailer buying a spreadsheet package are dependent on outside assistance. For all the benefits the computer brings to rural life it also brings increased dependence: on suppliers, maintenance personnel, and applications specialists. In time this may lessen, but for now and the foreseeable future changes will be dictated from outside.

To argue that rural and urban life have, and will become, more interdependent is not to argue that rural society has lost its uniqueness. The differences in rural and urban natural resource bases will prevent complete assimilation; agriculture and open spaces will continue to exert their appeal. But the gulf has been reduced; the changing nature of rural politics, economics, and society have brought rural life much closer to urban life.

Collecting on Rural Life

Nearly every archives and manuscript repository will have some holdings that pertain to one or more aspects of rural life. It is obvious that the papers of Senator George D. Aiken at the University of Vermont document issues affecting the economy of his state, or that records of the November 1927 flood include information about government and individual actions in rural areas at that time. The significance for documenting rural life of the papers of prominent Boston or New York families may be less obvious, but many such families have owned places in rural areas, and their papers help document rural employment, changes in the environment, and rural lifestyles and values. All New England archivists, manuscript curators, town clerks, and

curators of local historical societies, therefore, should be aware of the importance of rural life as they appraise potential acquisitions and describe present and future holdings. Archivists in New England should make a conscious attempt to coordinate collecting of documentation of rural life and dissemination of information about such documentation, not only in internal finding aids but also in multi-repository directories, guides, and data bases. Archivists elsewhere might emphasize this topic in appraisal, collecting, and description in accordance with its importance in their regions.

Documentation strategists in this as in other areas face both feast and famine. There is often an embarrassment of information in some areas, with the same data appearing in books, periodicals, government reports, and institutional archives, and scarcity in others, such as materials from the Grange or the Farm Bureau. Archivists with a grasp of the significant aspects of the topic will be able—collectively more likely than individually—to strive for a balanced record, weeding out duplication and searching for scarce and informative records when necessary.

Archival collections should provide documentation for each of the major aspects of rural life, complementing and supplementing data published by federal, state, and local governments. At the University of Vermont, for example, population data can be found in three different sections of the university library, at the Center for Rural Studies, and at the Social Science Research Center. At each of these locations the data appear in several forms: government documents, state reports, and university studies. The problem is not availability, but duplication and access. State tax records are not in the library but at the Center for Rural Studies; the challenge is to make

sure that researchers know this. Town reports are in numerous repositories, including the university library, the state library, and local archives. Grand lists²⁵ or employment data are available only through the issuing agency and at the Center for Rural Studies. There is a need for more systematic information about and referral to such scattered but essential sources.

To give archivists some guidance on the maintenance of past, present, and future records of rural life, the following sections consider what sources are available and what should be preserved, how, and by whom for the subtopics considered above: the natural resource base, political structure, rural economy, and society and culture.

Documenting the Natural Resource Base

The natural resource base is the most distinct aspect of rural life; general information about rural natural resources appears separately from urban data, in two primary formats. First and most numerous are government publications. In determining what archival collections are to be sought and preserved, consideration should be given to the extent to which U.S. government (and to a lesser extent state) publications illuminate the situation in rural areas.

The second format is computer-based geographic information systems, which are used in most major universities and state governments. These systems vary in structure and content, but all aim to provide an accessible source of information that can be readily updated and cross referenced. These data systems are already organized and documented. If archivists concerned with rural life in a particular state or region will find them and understand their contents and structure, they will be able to seek out and appraise other sources.

²⁵A grand list is a list of all properties in a town, usually in the following categories: agricultural, industrial, commercial, primary residential, seasonal or vacation residential, and government (town, state, federal). Each town sets its own tax rate in each of the categories, and the town clerk maintains the list.

Less well documented is the impact on the rural environment of nuclear power plants, the dumping of nuclear waste and toxic chemicals, water pollution, and acid rain. Aside from newspaper coverage, there are government records (e.g., of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Environmental Protection Agency, and state environmental departments), records of court cases, and of environmental organizations. Personal papers or oral histories of victims of environmental hazards would add a human dimension. The archivist should be aware of environmental hazards and disasters as a new and growing aspect of rural life.

At the same time, the archivist should not ignore the creation of day-to-day information on natural resources by individuals: for instance, the daily measurement of rainfall and sunshine in a given place by a particular farmer, which provides data for the growing interest in microclimates. Emphasis should be placed on the continuity of data gathering, which makes time-series analysis possible. Such materials as rock or plant collections, though not appropriate acquisitions for an archival repository, might be made known by an archivist as sources for the study of a particular locale. In fact, documenting the natural resource base of rural life is an area in which archivists might cooperate with curators of natural history museums.

Documenting Political Structure

Political structure can be readily divided into four levels: local (town or county), regional, state, and federal. The wide range and large volume of the documentation, however, especially when combined with the shifting and overlapping responsibilities of the layers of government, make it difficult to determine who should keep what records.

The four primary areas to be documented are town meetings, elections, finances, and events. Each rural New England town issues an annual report, which provides the agenda, including the proposed budget, for the town meeting. It also includes a summary of the previous year's meeting and the previous year's actual budget. Town reports are kept by town clerks, the state library, the state or other major university library, and the extension service.²⁶ Town reports do not chronicle the proceedings at town meetings. Notes taken by the town clerk are available only at the town office; they are used to write the next year's report, but may not be kept indefinitely. Local newspapers cover at least some town meetings, and students in sociology and political science courses are sometimes sent out to observe and report on them. The University of Vermont has a collection of such observations from roughly the last two decades.

Elections are the easiest to document, as the data are the best organized. Typically, these data are maintained by both the town (or county) and state governments; often they are also kept at state universities. The main function of the archivist is to be aware of what information is available, who maintains it, and for how long. State or local law does not mandate the collection of campaign literature. Many researchers will want to know not only who ran (both winners and losers) and the final outcome, but also what the issues were and how the campaign was waged. The challenge is to select from the increasing mass of materials those that are most representative, not forgetting memorabilia, which have their place in exhibitions and publications.

Records of local government finance typically take the form of town or city budgets and annual reports. Recently, as responsibility for certain services has shifted

²⁶The Vermont Extension Service gives an annual award for the best town report; this stimulates town pride and, more important, serves to standardize and improve reporting.

from the federal to state or local governments, there has been a growing interest in financial sources on the part of persons and agencies responsible for the services; they need not only town budgets and annual reports but also grand lists and records of state and federal grants to local and state governments. Increasingly, these data are in machine-readable form. In most cases the government entity has already preserved the information, and the archivist needs only to be aware of the location and format of the records, and to determine how long they are kept.

The Community Development Block Grant Program is an example of overlapping responsibilities among various levels of government. It is a joint federal and state program designed to assist communities with economic development and housing. In Vermont, for example, it is administered by the Department of Development and Community Affairs. There are three levels of document retention. The federal agency, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), keeps a minimal amount of aggregate data, but does not retain applications or other materials for particular towns or counties. The state is mandated by HUD to keep for three years grant applications and awards and various benchmarks of contract completion. These records do not document which local individuals benefited from a program and how they benefited, and after three years the state is free to discard them. The local or town government has the most extensive information, maintaining the same materials as the state and also those documenting individual loans (recipients, amounts, etc.). Access to these data is hampered by the location of so much documentation in the participating communities: a researcher needing comparative information from several communities is faced with a long and tedious search. Fur-

thermore, there is no assurance that local governments will retain these records indefinitely.

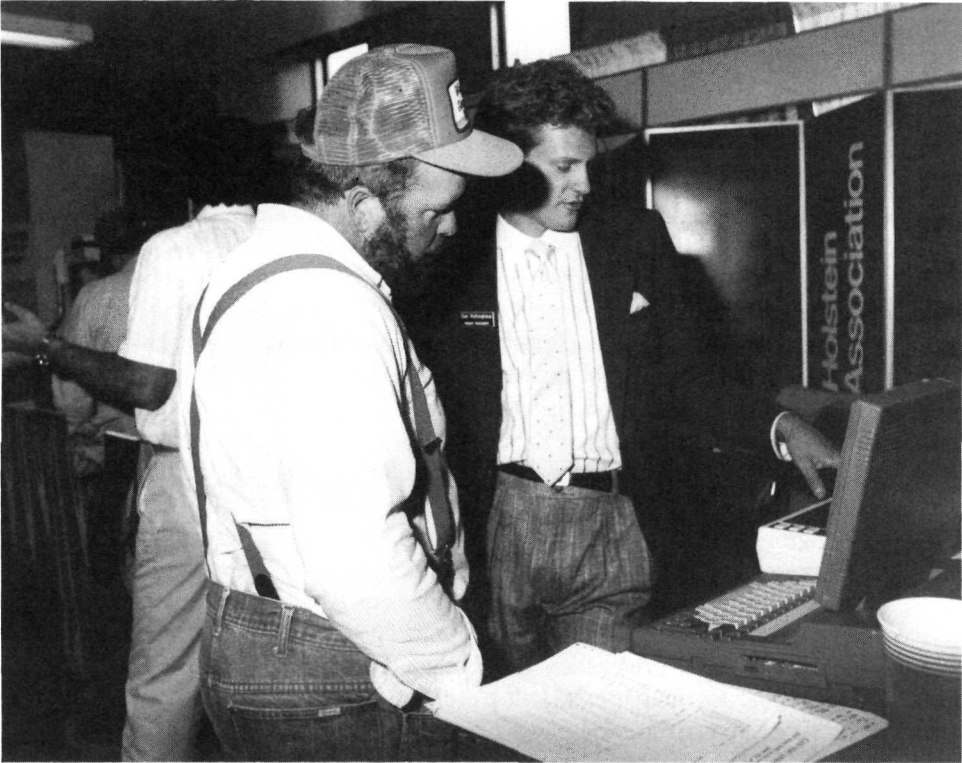
Hardest to document in this area are events of a political nature, such as teacher strikes, antinuclear demonstrations, special bond issues, or tax referenda. Unlike elections or budgets, they do not occur on a regular basis. Many such events are unofficial and so are not likely to be routinely documented in government archives. Strictly local events may be documented by the town clerk or local historical society; those that have implications beyond the local level, by the state archives or university or a repository holding the records of the organizations responsible for the event. Sources other than archives might contain relevant information, particularly records of such organizations as public interest research groups that conduct special studies. Again, there is no assurance of long-term preservation unless the records are deposited.

Regional government is a relatively new phenomenon that offers a rich, largely untapped source of information on rural government and politics.²⁷ Regional planning commissions and schools, district environmental boards, and special fire and water districts are examples of political units for which there are no natural archival repositories. Some records are maintained by state archives, but universities and other major local repositories should consider collecting records of these agencies. In Vermont, for example, records of the Regional Environmental Boards, which determine the appropriateness of many types of development, are filed in each regional office and are thus difficult to use for statewide studies. In this case the university would be a good repository.

Documenting the Rural Economy

There are five major aspects of the rural

²⁷"Region" is used here to designate not a group of states (such as New England) but a group of towns or counties that combine to solve common problems or achieve common goals.



Holstein dairyman watching a demonstration of a computer program to select sires for his on-farm breeding program. Photo courtesy of the Holstein Association.

economy to be documented: agriculture, high technology, recreation and tourism, the service sector, and the participation of women.

Despite a gradual but steady decline of agriculture in New England, there continues to be much to document. In fact the decline itself must be documented, particularly the recent spate of farm failures. The decline of agricultural employment is in part a result of changes in farm management and technology. Materials documenting these changes must be collected and maintained, notably farm diaries and ledgers. In addition, the archivist must come to terms with the new formats of the information, as, for example, the traditional diary and ledger give way to the personal computer. Corporate records of dairy and breeding companies, if the companies allow access or are willing to deposit the records, would

document individual farms and overall trends. In making appraisal decisions, archivists should consider how representative an item or collection is, how complete it is, and whether it is in some way unusual.

The high technology sector in rural New England consists mainly of small, decentralized firms, as well as branch plants of some large firms. Much of the impact of these industries is documented by periodicals and government records. Business records, including information on the social and political activities and impact of high technology companies, should be collected but present the usual problems of business records: complexity, volume, and management's lack of interest and reluctance to grant access. Archivists should ascertain the existence of records and determine collecting priorities and responsibilities. Ideally businesses themselves would be persuaded

to maintain their records, hire archivists, and make their archives known and available for research. Short of this, existing repositories should try to acquire records of representative firms. Choice of repository depends on impact. If the business has an impact beyond the community or immediate region of its location, then its records should be a state or university responsibility. If the firm is primarily local, regional or local archives should collect them. The larger archives should be aware of local collections: high technology is another area in which multi-repository data bases, guides, or clearinghouses are extremely important.

The rapidly growing recreation and tourism industry presents a familiar problem: an apparently endless quantity of material. In selecting documentation archivists should consider four aspects of the recreation industry as it pertains to rural life: (1) its structure (location, ownership, and physical facilities); (2) the economic impact (employment, investment patterns, and contributions to the economy, such as through taxation); (3) the social and environmental effects (increased housing demand, changing school enrollments, and pressures on social services, water supply, and so on); and (4) the recreation infrastructure, agencies and organizations that are already documenting the industry—such as the Recreation and Tourism Clearinghouse at the University of Vermont. Only the major sources and a representative sample of others can be maintained. Major sources would include those documenting national and state parks, ski areas, and lodging and restaurant associations. Of less concern but still important would be records of selected private camp grounds, amusement parks, and small tourist attractions. If a collection has national, state, or regional import, the state or a major university should maintain it; if not, the local government or historical society should be encouraged to do so.

Manuscript repositories have traditionally collected records documenting some parts of the service sector, including papers of doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Not only are there many such records available, but growth and change in the service sector has made documenting this aspect of rural life a complex process. The single doctor serving one town, for example, may still be there, but he (or now she) is no longer alone: there are hospitals, rural health centers, women's health centers, and advocacy groups. These may complement the doctor's services, compete with them, or some combination of the two. Simply collecting the doctor's papers no longer fully documents health care in that town. An awareness of available community-level data will help facilitate the process, but in appraising individual collections archivists should look for the impact on local employment and the tax base, and the integration of the person or business into local society.

Decentralization and the increased participation of women in the labor force should be documented in the course of collecting records in all the aforementioned categories of economic activity. Archivists can highlight these aspects of the rural economy in finding aids and make them accessible by subject cataloging.

Documenting Society and Culture

The social dimension touches on nearly every aspect of rural life. There are three major social aspects to be documented: population, institutions (e.g., churches and civic organizations), and values.

Population change is well documented by federal and state agencies. Numerous state studies update and extend decennial federal censuses. Much of the federal information is routinely available in government document libraries, in both hard copy and microfiche. State information, however, tends to languish in obscurity in state agencies. State or university archivists might

develop regular communications with these agencies and acquire population estimates and projections, tax records, and school enrollments and expenditures. Other networks and organizations also collect and maintain population information, especially the new State Data Centers (SDC). SDCs work with the Bureau of the Census, state agencies, and universities to provide a wide range of federal and state statistics. Each New England state has an SDC, although they vary in structure and in the types of information they maintain.

In documenting rural institutions the archivist faces particular problems of appraisal and selection. A representative cross section of churches and civic groups should appear in archival collections. Many religions and denominations maintain archives, but rural churches are often overshadowed by the larger urban ones. Among other groups, not only the historically recognized denominations and organizations should be included but also those that have sprung up because of the "rural renaissance" and other recent changes in rural life—not only the Grange, for example, but also the National Organic Farmers Association (NOFA), and not only Congregational or Unitarian parishes but also the Christian Fundamentalist sects that have established small settlements in rural areas. The records collected should document finances, membership, issues, and the impact of the organizations on their members and on the larger society.

Organizations such as the Grange and NOFA represent a variety of values and life-styles, and their records will reflect this. Values and life-styles extend well beyond institutions, however. Independence and individuality are still central values for rural New England, and so the archivist must also document individual lives and values. This is of course a familiar task. Archivists need only be aware of the increasing diversity of the rural population. There is a

need to document the lives of the poor and homeless, always difficult because they leave little or no written legacy. As with the urban poor, one has to rely largely on the records of agencies and organizations that serve the needy. The new-timers, the urban immigrants, may be less colorful than the old-timers, but they and their profound effect on rural society and culture should also be documented. Changing values and life styles are evident in such sources as magazines (*Country Living* and *Farm Wife*, for example), newspapers (although in a less coherent and uniform fashion), advertisements, political literature, lecture programs, and of course the records of organizations. University special collections departments and local historical societies should collect personal papers that record the reasons for and results of moving to the country.

Rural culture has been greatly affected by the coalescing of rural and urban life, due largely to improved communication and transportation. Archivists, long aware of rural culture, must pay close attention to the growing diversity of expression: for example, new musical instruments and styles, including contributions from urban culture. The archivist should also be aware of culture as a form of social expression. Music from Farm Aid, for example, is as important as a social expression as it is musically. A record of movies shown at local theaters, length of run, and attendance at each would give some insight into what was popular, and thus shed some light on community values. Radio and television present the now familiar problems of a constant flow of new recordings on impermanent media, the use of which requires special equipment, and stations unwilling or unable to maintain archives. In terms of rural life, one needs to know what people were hearing or watching. A more complete record is needed only for programs that originated in rural areas.

Better transportation—especially new interstate highways and expanded air service—has been a major factor in making urban culture available to rural residents. It has also had an impact on virtually every aspect of rural life. Archivists should make a special effort to address two issues: first, they should be aware of the construction process of roads, bus stations, runways, and other transportation structures. Such construction has employed many rural residents and radically changed the environment. It is documented by plans, by records of public hearings and of the decisions to build the structures, and by corporate records of contracting firms. Second, archivists should seek out information on the use of these structures, documented by bus, train, and airplane schedules, and by data from state transportation agencies on the usage patterns of roads and highways. Use reflects the flow of people and goods between rural and urban areas and thus the impact of the latter on rural life.

Conclusion

Rural New England faces a dynamic future. Population growth in the region, while slower over the past five years than during the previous decade, is still far ahead of the growth rate of other rural parts of the nation and is expected to continue at this steady pace. Many of the trends discussed above will also continue, albeit at different rates. The number of persons in agriculture will

probably decline at a higher rate. The service industry will expand at an even faster rate, as will the tourist industry. Culture in rural areas will increasingly be dictated by urban choices as media saturation of rural areas continues. Local uses and adaptations of what the city sends and broadcasts will, however, continue to alter the flavor of rural entertainment. Society and government will face many of the same issues as during the last ten years, but the pressures for services, and for change in general, will intensify. At the core of these challenges will be the question of the viability of many rural communities; many will undergo significant alterations and some will cease to exist.

Whether particular communities succeed or fail, whether they change or remain the same, archivists must be aware of the processes and the patterns that are evolving. The processes make clear not only how change has occurred and what it has wrought, but also who or what we are as a society. Rural New England, both as a microcosm and as a dynamic sector of society, provides an excellent opportunity for better understanding rural life in general. Despite the reduced relative size of the rural population, more people than ever now live in rural areas; that number will only increase. Archivists can help enhance the general understanding of the growing segment of the population that chooses to live in an ever-changing rural America.