

Rural Matters: A Meditation

By
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*Woe to those who add house to house
and join field to field
until everywhere belongs to them
and they are the sole inhabitants of the land.*

Isaiah 5:8

Tell me the landscape where you live, and I will tell you who you are.

--Jose Ortega y Gasset

“Of course rural matters!” I said to myself. It seemed so obvious as I worked the truck along the steeps of the Sand Hill ridges that climbed out of the Niobrara River valley and rolled endlessly, tirelessly, treelessly to the South. The truck wheels slid in the soft sand of “blow outs” and bounced over ridges as I watched what Nebraska author Mari Sandoz referred to as the constantly changing tans and mauves of the strange rhythmical hills that crowded away into the hazy horizon. The “track” I was following could have been mistaken for a cattle trail if it weren’t for the fact that the two riddles of sand meandered through the grass in perfect parallel; the result of years of pick-ups checking fences or looking for strays. Plum thickets were in full bloom with their white blossoms providing an ornamental look to the prairie. The morning sunlight highlighted red hues in the waves of tan grass. A gentle breeze made the grass rise and fall like the swells in the ocean. I couldn’t see a house, a car, a road, a barn, a person; the only sign of human habitation was the track I was on and the occasional barbed wired fence. No golden arches, ATMs, or Walmart; not a horse or a cow, just me and the land. I thought of the words of Peter Miller, This is a land of immense aloneness and not loneliness.

Below me the river worked it’s way among cottonwoods, oaks, and cedars. In my mind I could follow the flow of the river eastward to where it joined the Missouri on its way to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. The water moved in a steady, determined sort of way as if it was on a singular mission; flowing through the land like it didn’t have a care in the world. Not too far from where I was Lewis & Clark saw grizzly bear, elk, and other critters that no longer populate the plains. I remembered last spring seeing turkeys, with their stilted walk, moving amid the cedars and deer grazing the fields near the river. I saw movement below and thought perhaps a coyote was making his way down the ridges as squirrels scampered in the trees above and raccoons held their breath. Maybe even a mountain lion or two made their home in the valley below. I wondered how they would answer the query, “Does rural matter?”

I had been thinking about this assertion (Rural Matters) for several days, ever since my colleague Sam Cordes invited me to serve on a conference (“Rural Matters: Making Place and Culture Count!”) advisory committee. At first it had seemed so simple, so obvious. Of course rural mattered! How could it not? It had been such an important part of my life that it just seemed essential, beyond question. But, as I drove through the Sand Hills I remembered all those less than positive references to rural folk: hayseed, hick, hillbilly, country bumpkin, etc. I remembered all the people for whom it did not matter. People who were indifferent to rural or down right hostile to certain parts of rural. People who made fun of rural places and people. I thought of people for whom rural mattered only as a dumping ground for waste, hazardous or otherwise, or as a source of “fuel” (water, timber, oil, and food) for urban life. And those for whom rural mattered abstractly, ideologically but who didn’t much care for rural people or actually being in rural places. My grip on the steering wheel tighten, I was beginning to think that the question was a little tricky.

I passed a Yucca plant where a little black bird sat perched on what was left of its center stem of white blossoms. As I maneuvered the truck around a big “blow out,” I decided that the place to start with this rural mattering dilemma was place or places, rural places. But, just as quickly, I decided that was problematic. In fact, Wayne Franklin in his Forward to Drake Hokanson’s Reflecting A Prairie Town: A Year in Peterson, argues that for most of us place doesn’t matter: “Many Americans no longer believe in place. We live so much in a placeless web of electronic impulses that the ground beneath our feet seems to have lost its substance. If we venture out into the three-dimensional world, it is as commuters carried along a kind of electronic circuit ourselves, from node to node, terminal to terminal. Place appears to have very little power over us. It is compliant, recessive, always there but rarely visible. We do not need it. But then he goes on to say: Why, then, do we hunger in the midst of the city for some artful western “view,” with its splendid sense of depth and contingency, forest above

valley, mountain peak above forest, the deep blue sky above it all? Or seek out, if only in imagination, a stretch of farmland where the stone or wire or wood fences mark off but cannot contain the fruitful life of the fields? The answer is both simple and profound. We feel deeply the loss of such landscapes; we mourn the loss of meaning they had for us, the loss of the selves we might have been had we inhabited them.”

I kept thinking about this notion of place. After all the conference was promoting a “place-based policy” for rural America. I still thought place was important. It seem to matter to people because we still asked each other where we were from and drew conclusions based upon the answers we got. I found some support for my thoughts in words of Barbara Kingsolver from her essay “Knowing Our Place” in her book *Small Wonder*. Specifically, she says: Whether we are leaving it or coming into it, it’s here that matters, it is place. And, she adds: Our greatest and smallest explanations for ourselves grow from place, as surely as carrots grow in the dirt.

I stopped the truck; shut off the engine, rolled down the window and just looked; taking it all in like a big drink. I breathed it in, the huge sweep of the land, letting it fill me with life. It lifted me with a sense of pride, almost as if I had made it, created what lay before me. And there was tranquility, a peace that mellowed me out---where my entire body seemed to relax, settle. My breath slowed, got quiet. I was possessed by a stillness that mimicked the land and I lost track of the distinction between me and what was outside of me. My sense of time, the flow of hours and minutes, beginnings and ends, months and years, past and present disappeared and I was just there, fully and completely in the present. I became part of the land and the landscape. And, for a moment, my sense of self, the ego me, disappeared and I merged with something bigger. It was a great feeling. As Willa Cather says in *My Antonia*, At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.

There are still some of us for who place matters and matters deeply. Lynn Schooler describes his attachment to rural Alaska almost as enchantment: It is for this that I love this place. I love it fiercely for its power of recovery after being scalped down to bedrock by ice or violent tsunamis, for the intricate play of forces as the convalescent earth unfolds its wealth of indomitable life. I love it for the power it shows us in the weight of its rain (which in many places along the coast approaches two hundred inches a year). I love it wildly for the songs it sings in the voice of a whale’s breath or the rusty tracheal trumpeting of a flock of cranes. I love it for its turbulence and eagerness, and I love it when it storms or is calm. Sometimes in the spring, when the new green leaves and first delicate blossoms are aching into bloom, I love it the way a dog loves to ride in the back of a pickup truck, and I want to run side to side barking and flapping my tongue.

I don’t live in a rural place, unless you want to rank states in terms of ruralness and then I’d say I do. I am, for the most part, a sympathetic tourist. Rural is a place I visit, frequent. It is not a place where I earn a living, raise a family, or participate in a community. It is a refuge, a place I go to escape and renew. There is something freeing about rural. To be in the city is to experience confinement, limits, to be boxed in. The city not only represents confinement but an assault on one’s senses. Judy Blunt captures this experience when she describes her feelings after moving into town from a ranch: Town seemed bursting with noise for the sake of noise. There was no stillness, no quiet place to sit and hear the wind sifting through the dry grass, and it was this more than the odd taste of bleach in the tap water, more than the stuffy smell of too many cars in the air, that left me raw and shaky at the end of the day.

Leaving the city for the countryside is a liberating experience as one by one the building blocks of closeness fall away: six lanes go to four then to two; concrete lined with sidewalks goes to blacktop then to gravel and finally to dirt; from skyscrapers to high rises to houses; houses get further apart; yards grow into acreages, then into farms; the horizon spreads out, becomes distant; the clutter of signs, buildings, TV towers and stores disappear and the sky grows large; pedestrians give way to cars, then pickup trucks and farm machinery that become fewer and fewer. The land opens up before me, the traffic thins out, concrete disappears, stop signs replace stoplights, and then give way to intersections where I’m on my own. There is just me and the open road. My grip on the steering wheel lightens, my breathing becomes easier, slower, more relaxed; my experience is more akin to flight and considerably better than chain gang like traffic of the city. I leave the bounds of the city both literally and symbolically and the country has sets me free---a weight lifts off my shoulders and my troubles fade with the skyline.

So, rural matters as an escape, a tonic for our troubles, which is aptly described by Lynn Schooler: “At the edge of a muddy vale, the tracks of an adolescent wolf skirted a pool of rainwater, doubled back to sniff at a stone, then paddled off into a stand of trees, and as we hiked deeper into the valley, I could feel the weight of everything I had left behind in the city sliding from my shoulders—the pall of the sickroom lifting at the rise of a flock of robins, the bruising pain of the love affair fading with the pant of a raven’s wing. Traversing the field was like freeing a snarl in a fishing line, the key to its undoing visible in the graffiti of the tracks, the yellow sprawl of

buttercups, and the delicate, trembling poise of an eagle feather tangled in the lowest branch of a tree.

Sitting there, amidst the quiet, with the river meandering through this great sweep of land, I thought: “Of course, this matters, this experience, the potential, this possibility, at least to me! This matters not only at the moment it happens but also because I can recall it. I can remember it, relive it, and in reliving it I can re-experience the wonder, the peace, the fullness, the inspiration of it. It ‘restoreth my soul.’ It matters as I experience it and it matters as a lived experience to which I can return in memory and reflection. It matters also as a possibility, a place where I can return or a new place I can go.”

Rural places haunt us; lurk in the recesses of our minds waiting to draw us back in time to places of our childhood or just times past. Maybe it is the context in which we remember grandparents or the setting of the adventures of our youth. It is there for us, always locked time. It matters to us. As Richard Quinney reflects in *Borderland*, I inhabit a land that is as much mental and spiritual as it is geographical. Even when I have left to live in other places, I have always returned out of need to the place that I call home. And, Lee Martin in *From Our House* notes: The farm comes to me in dreams at night. No matter how distant I am from it—no matter that the house has caved in and gone to ruin, and another man owns the land—it is the one place in the world I can never leave.

I got out of the truck and moved among the tall grass, feeling the sand give with each step, like walking on a beach above the tideline. The breeze accompanied me and stirred within me a wistful kind of peaceful freedom. I thought of Richard Manning words: "The solitude of the prairie is like no other, the feeling of being hidden and alone in a grassland as open as the sea. Walking toward the horizon through the hills, tawny and loose like the folds in a cougar's skin, one has a sense that over the next ridge there will rise a brown cloud of bison and over the next, the Pleistocene, unspoiled. Unless one has walked pure prairie, it is difficult to imagine how much freedom can flow from a landscape that is the giver of harsh rules."

As I walked I thought about this whole notion of solitude. That rural mattered as a source of this elusive thing that we value. I recalled what John Graves said about it: We don't know much about solitude these days, nor do we want to. A crowded world thinks that aloneness is always loneliness, and that to seek it is perversion. I kept thinking about this as a reason for rural mattering. This need to escape, to find peace alone without loneliness. I said to myself, "Is this something we crave? How many people really want it? Have we become afraid of what it takes to get it? Has our fear of being alone robbed us of it? Does this matter anymore?"

I worked my way back to the truck in an aimless kind of pattern like maneuvering a sailboat against the wind. I got in, took a deep breath, started the truck and put it in gear. The wheels dug at the sand and moved along the ridgeline and I began the climb to the South thinking that I'd answered my question. Rural mattered to me as escape, refuge, and sanctuary. I needed my regular rural retreat. Rural has always mattered as a spiritual retreat. Whether one is Christian or other, like Jesus going into the desert, there is the notion of rural as a place of spiritual contemplation and renewal. You rarely find religious retreats in urban settings. Rural is a place for people to find God and themselves; a place free of the day-to-day distractions of urban life. Rancher Margaret Hawkins says, "Sometimes, when we are moving cattle in the morning fog, the light breaks through onto the hills and the fog opens and we can see the clouds. It is on these beautiful mornings that the soul is restored. I have a love of the land, a love for a handful of dirt." (quoted in Peter Miller *People of the Great Plains*).

I worked my way into another pasture and pulled up next to a windmill stock tank. The ground around it was barren and peppered with ancient cow pies. The blades of the windmill creaked in the breeze like they wanted to get moving but couldn't quite muster the energy. Clouds framed the blades against the bright blue sky and all this was reflected in the water of the tank. I pulled the camera out, got out and went to work trying to frame a photograph. As I tried different angles and compositions it began to dawn on me that this was another reason rural mattered to me. By in large, rural was the setting of most of my photography. Rural places were my inspiration. Rural was the subject of my art. Many of our most beloved writers, poets, painters, and photographers have found inspiration for their work in rural places. Much of the poetry of Robert Frost reflects rural Vermont. It was the landscape of the Yosemite Valley that inspired Ansel Adams and majesty of the untamed west that caught the eye of painter Albert Bierstadt. Just as rural places inspire us as individuals they also inspire artists who, in turn, bring these rural places to a vast audience of folks who may have little to no direct rural experience. As author Linda Hasselstrom notes: Sense of place is at the center of most good art, created by those who become, either by birth or by migration, part of the land they write about. The West has frequently been overrun with "visiting experts." Writers who have rooted, been battered and tested by the terrain, the weather, and the people, are gaining recognition, the best of them folks who know the country and write from love of it.

The wind shifted slightly and the windmill creaked. I continued to circle around the stock tank to see if there was a better photographic angle and my internal dialogue wrapped things up as if I was lecturing to those silent hills of sand: "So rural can matter because it is the basis of so much of what is great in the arts and humanities. There are spectacular rural vistas reflected in the arts and wonderful, compelling stories about rural people and places that form the basis of great books and films. One could argue that our strongest oral traditions of storytelling have their roots in rural cultures and places. There is always great drama between man and nature and the setting where this gets played out is almost always rural. Rural matters because so many of the great human stories that we share through verse, prose, and film, and so many of our most prized images, whether on canvas or paper, hanging in the great museums, originate in rural places. As Nebraska poet Twyla Hansen said: I haven't lived on the farm for almost thirty years and now my father has passed away, too. But so often in my writing I return, kicking up and reinventing and embellishing all those wonderful earthly ties to the land. These pictures, films, and stories build bridges, make connections, make rural matter to people who have not, and may never, directly experience rural as they affirm rural to those who live it."

Back in the truck I got going again, climbing further out of the valley. The wind picked up and I noticed clouds building to the west. The land began to level out and I could see some cornfields in the distance; green patches in an otherwise tan landscape. I could no longer see the trees of the river valley. I knew that the little clumps of trees I could see in the distance were man made windbreaks planted around farmsteads. As the truck rolled along I kept thinking about this rural matters question. In a smug sort of way I thought to myself: "So for those of us that find connection, inspiration and renewal in rural places, rural matters a great deal. It is a sanctuary." I kind of liked that; felt a bit of boastful pride at the phrasing of my answer. But a bit of discomfort crept in and I thought: "But, that's the easy answer. Why rural matters is a much more complex question and one with many, many answers. And, the fact is, rural doesn't matter to everybody. Perhaps it should matter to everyone. Certainly the environmentalists try to make this case; try to logically and scientifically show that the planet and its ecosystems are all interdependent and we should all care about what's happening everywhere, from the Arctic ice shelf to the Australian outback. But people don't. Oh some do, but a lot don't. That is really the question, isn't it? Why does something matter, a place for instance, to us and not to others?"

It had been nearly 20 years since I first set foot the Sand Hills. I thought about how much I come to love their wide openness and sparse beauty, the great distances between towns, and the warmth of the people who lived there. I thought also, how during that time how much of the land had been bought up by "outsiders" like TV mogul Ted Turner. I recalled the words of John Graves, You wonder sometimes about the impulse that leads city people into the absentee possession of land. You wonder perhaps especially hard if something in you believes that land is really owned more with the head and heart, with eye and brain, than with pocketbook and title deed. It's easy enough to understand city people who live on the land they buy, or how even go there often. We will nearly be finished, I think, when we stop understanding the old pull toward green things and living things, toward dirt and rain and heat and what they spawn. Most of us still have it in us, whether as would-be squire or peasant or drifting, poaching gypsy.

The truck scared up a flock of sharp-tailed grouse whose awkward wing work and elegant glide broke my reflective musings. By the time they crested the ridges to the east, I had reached the conclusion that what matters to us are things we care about; things we relate to, have some sort of personal connection with. And, so I reasoned that we could assume it is with "rural." "Rural matters to us in direct relationship to particular rural places and/or rural people we care about."

The track passed between two scrub cedars and snaked its way over a ridge. Once again I was feeling a little smug: I'd reduced things to simple elegance and was finished with the problem. But then, "Crap, there are things that matter to me that I don't care about! Well, not care about in a positive sense. There are things that matter to us simply because it has some direct impact on us, positive or negative. The Stock Market crash of 1929 mattered to a whole bunch of people but very few of them were positive about it. During the 1960s Vietnam mattered to a whole bunch of young men because they feared they'd have to go there to fight." So I revised my thesis to: "Something matters to us because it affects us, directly or indirectly, in some important way and for rural to matter people need to perceive it affecting them in some significant way."

By the time I'd once again so eruditely, in my mind, solved the troubling question of "why rural matters," I was back at the fence. I stopped, got out, opened the gate and drove through. Then I hopped back out, picked up the gatepost and fitted it into the wire loop at the base of the fence. As I pulled the strands of barbed wire tight, I paused for a moment, thinking: "Now, of course, there is another flaw to the above argument. Things can matter to people in the abstract! There are people for whom the rainforests of South America matter, in some cases

passionately, but who have no direct experience with the rain forest themselves.” It was obvious! “Things can matter as an idea, a concept, an ideology, a political stance, a concept, and, of course, rural matters to some people in just this way. Rural as a place or something about rural or something that is characteristic of rural represents a political or ideology stance for some people. So rural can matter symbolically.”

As I put my shoulder to the post and struggled to get the top wire loop around the post, I thought: “Dam! This is getting complicated.” I pushed harder, putting my shoulder into it. The loop wasn’t cooperating and as I relaxed for a moment, my internal dialogue rolled right on: “So there are folks out there who have had no rural experience but to whom rural matters. Perhaps some of those metropolitan based animal rights folks and environmentalists.” As Catherine McNicol Stock says, ...most Americans have only the remotest connections with the day-to-day realities of rural America and most frequently idealize its value while passing through on summer vacation or flying over in a transcontinental jet.”

Finally, the gate was shut and leaned against the back of the truck to rest. I wasn’t too comfortable with where my argument was going. There was something kind of troubling about rural mattering in this way; a way that is for the most part divorced from direct human experience. I thought: “What are the dangers of that? Is it the same as rural mattering to one who experiences it?” I had this notion that we are better off, and rural would be better off, if the basis of rural mattering came from our direct, lived rural experiences and not from abstract notions derived from moral entrepreneurship. The notion of rural matters being added to the long list of political correctness, made my stomach queasy. I could see some real dangers in that---for one, such a stance is often a rather naïve and overly simplistic view of rural. It is tackling rural from a single-issue stance or ideology much like the Pro-life folks who would make all politics and government an abortion issue. So there are the environmental advocates for whom rural places, but not necessarily rural people, culture or heritage, matter. They see rural people as part of, if not the, problem and their solutions often involve removal of rural people and the destruction of rural life.

Creosote from the post was not only on my hands but also on my shirt. I was getting as messy as my “rural matters” reflections. I thought: “There is another problem here! Rural is not an absolute; it is always in reference to its counterpart. Rural is relative. It lies somewhere (or rather many places) along a continuum from rural to urban, wilderness to metropolis. So, in fact, when we (in the collective sense) talk about rural we are likely all not talking about the same thing, or, at the very least, we all have very different pictures in our minds of what that thing is.”

By the time I’d thought myself to that point, I was getting kind of fed up with the whole thing: “Why do we want rural to matter? Couldn’t that be a two-edged sword, a potentially dangerous thing?” I’d had enough. I got back in the truck, put it in gear and pulled onto the road. The tires were quiet on the dirt road and plumes of dust rose behind me. I rolled the windows down and let my rural matters debate fade away in the distance. I began to get into that country where everything is sectioned off in square miles and the land is a grid of country roads. I made it to the highway and headed south toward Bassett as thunderheads begin to pile up in the west. A windbreak of cottonwood trees reminded me of Bess Streeter Aldrich’s words, I grew up under the cottonwoods and I love them. They’re the happiest, merriest trees in the world. When everything else is still and doleful and pessimistic, they dance and laugh and twinkle.

That picked me up a bit. To the west, there were a couple of wranglers driving a herd of horses across the field. The horses seemed to be having fun, occasionally adding a little jump-kick to their run and shaking their heads. They moved into a grove, merging into a single entity. That bellowed me up even more. As Mark Spragg says, There is no happiness like the pounding of so many horses into one. I imagine I hear the horses laugh. I think it every time. I think that running is the way a horse may laugh out loud. When I am older I will believe that following in their wake has filled me with the inconsolable joy of animals.

Closer to town, I passed a field where a boy was maneuvering a tractor through the field next to the road. He seemed young, small; at least a couple of years away from having his driver’s license. I passed close enough to see that studied detached stance one can get lulled into with the drone of the engine and wheels tracking across the ground. I thought back to when I was a teenager and applying for one of my first jobs. It was a summer job for a government agency, one of those old initiatives to keep teens out of trouble in the long summer months. On the job application, under the section dealing with machines you can operate, I had listed tractor. The two middle-aged bureaucrats conducting the interview seemed amused by my entry. It was after all an office job. They ask me in detail about the types of tractors I had operated, where and when I’d operated them and what I did with them. There was a kind of wistfulness in their interest. I was clearly puzzled by their focus on my tractor operating competence and they could tell I thought it odd to spend so much of the interview on this one thing.

Finally, one of them said, “You get a lot of good thinkin time out there alone on a tractor. Gives you a good perspective on life.” Bobbie Ann Mason says: I think about what a farmer knows up there on his tractor or walking along behind his mules--the slow, enduring pace of regular toil and habit of mind that goes with it, the habit of knowing what is lasting and of noting every nuance of soil and water and season.

That was my first inkling that rural life mattered as a source of wisdom. Victor David Hanson makes this case in *The Land Was Everything*: This polarity between city and countryside, profit and sustenance, leisure and drudgery, the stuff of all Western civilization, has been but a smaller skirmish in the wider question, "What is wisdom?" Is knowledge—not the accumulation of facts—to be the accrued body of erudition from the ages, abstract and printed, the academic sweep from technology to aesthetics? Or is it found alone in the school of hard knocks, the experience drawn from mechanics and fabrication with the hands, the wisdom gained from thousands of personal misfortunes in the social and natural jungle, uncontaminated by pampered abstraction? Does man understand the universe because he can read Descartes, or does such insight arise only after he has lost his ripe crop a day before harvest?

I rolled on into Bassett past the sale barn, car dealership and lumberyard. There was Sanger’s grocery, the Hoch funeral home, and the Rock County Leader. Downtown was in some ways typical of any small town with its old hotel and café, bank, bars, and bowling alley. There were, however, a few things that stood out as different. To the east was an old Phillips 66 gas station that had been restored and to the west was the Kaleidoscope Art Gallery next to a large, sprawling variety store. An art gallery in a town this size (population 739) seemed a little unusual but Thedford, population 243, had one. The restored gas station was not so unusual given the strong sense of heritage and history in rural America as evidenced by the proliferation of museums, restored one-room school houses, etc. But what was different was that the art gallery was connected to the variety store and you could enter it from either the street or the store. In this way, the Bassett Arts Council could have their gallery open to the public during variety store hours without having to staff it. Here was perfect example of small town community spirit and collaboration that we associate with rural America. There was a simple elegance to that arrangement. It was just the kind of thing that just makes you feel good, the kind of thing that matters.

I guess Bassett’s always had a strong sense of community spirit even if it got folks crossways with the law. One of the first things the town did when it was created was to form a vigilante committee. On the night of February 6, 1884 a group of these masked men kidnapped notorious outlaw Kid Wade from the sheriff and hung him from a whistle-post a mile east of town. Later on in an effort to become the county seat of the newly formed Rock County some town’s folk apparently messed with the votes and rival contender Newport filed charges of fraud. The case made its way all the way to district court where the judge ruled that fraud was about equal on both sides and that Rock County had the right to have an end to the matter and named Bassett as the county seat.

At the intersection of Highways 20 and 183, I stop at the Texaco station to fill up and grab a pop. Inside people chatted with one another, asking after friends and relatives. I thought of what Norris Alfred, editor of the *Polk Progress*, said about small towns like this one: The village is still a way of life for a large number of Nebraska citizens. Villagers like the concern and caring that accompanies knowing each other. Without it life becomes bleak; the old forgotten; strangers never friends; and no one to take note of daily existence.

I walked back out to the truck with my root beer, thinking about this sense of community. Stephen G. Bloom described it in *Postville*: As untouched by the vitality and vulgarity of America’s urban sprawl, Postville had everything modern cities do not: innocence, tranquillity, cohesion, a sense of order. Almost everyone belonged to St. Paul Lutheran Church, and if they didn’t, they went to St. Bridget’s, the Catholic church on West Williams Street or Community Presbyterian on South Reynolds Street. Apart from taverns, few places in small towns allow for outsiders, and when a stranger stepped into either Postville’s Club 51 or the Horseshoe Lounge around the corner, word spread faster than a May hailstorm. Every resident was accommodated and accounted for in this closed society, and strangers were regarded with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

Heading west out of town, past the “Turkey Crossing” sign, I thought more about what Bloom had to say: Yet rural Iowans’ second nature was to seek an ecclesiastic merging of soul, body, and spirit to survive. The hard Iowa farm life required a connectedness, a mutual support system among neighbors. Through the brutal Iowa winters, scorching summers, pesticide thick springs, around-the-clock autumn harvests, a communal bond was crucial if the community was to survive. Maintaining this support system was the under girding of rural life. Each year, if things went right, if the corn crops were good, if the hogs didn’t get sick and die, if the market was decent for a change, if rain or drought didn’t devastate your land, a sense of triumph over adversity emerged. A collective soul arose. Hope endured. Such an abiding sense of community embraced opposing agendas, factions, likes and dislikes, and had provided sustenance for these northeast Iowa farmers for more than a century.

I knew that sense of community was important not only to the people who lived there but also to people who were from rural places. My friend Lisa, who grew up on a Sand Hills ranch near Thedford, talks about how that community was, and continues to be, an anchor for her. As she said to me recently, “To part of a community where you matter to everybody from the moment you’re born is a wonderful, secure feeling. To have everyone know who you are and the family you belong to and who you are related to; to feel that the whole community cares about you and looks out for you; is a precious gift that stays with you even when you move away and discover that you don’t matter to everyone. It will always be my anchor in the world.”

Off the highway to the north, stood a barn painted to resemble a giant red, white, and blue American flag. That got me to thinking how we as Americans used to idealize “rural,” especially “agricultural” rural. Thomas Jefferson said, Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God. John Adams said, As much as I converse with sages and heroes, they have very little of my love and admiration. I long for rural and domestic scenes, for the warbling of birds and the prattling of my children. Franklin D. Roosevelt argued, The American farmer living on his own land remains the ideal of self-reliance and spiritual balance! And, Nebraska’s own William Jennings Bryan said, ...the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave your farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.

My mind drifted back to Bassett, the art gallery and the variety store and I got one of those kind of warm-fuzzy feelings. I couldn’t help but think that “community,” the sense that we’re all in this together, was the cornerstone of rural matters. This idea that rural folks somehow get along, work things out, makes a big difference. Rural was not where one found examples of David Riesman’s “lonely crowd.” It seemed ironic that in an area where population density is low and people often live a great distance from one another, you are not alone. Kent Meyer, in talking about his neighbors response to his family when his father died just before harvest, captured this: In the moment of disaster for one of their members, these prairie communities draw into themselves, out of their rich substrate of tradition, out of the deepest sources of their culture, all the quiet charities and powerful stories that have told them how to live—stories that have never, in ordinary times, prevented them from bickering and gossiping, and coveting their neighbor’s machinery. But when the worst that can happen happens, when the resources of the individual or family are exhausted, talk, like the tendrils of roots, draws from the old stories their essential meaning and power, and land and stories and people and belief for a time become one, and though no one expects help, everyone knows it will come.

As I rounded the curve, passing an abandoned dark blue mental building that once was a Christian School, I thought about this charity, neighborliness, as the touchstone of why rural matters. Robert Heilman argues this point: City dwellers tend to forget that the word “neighbor” (from the German Nachbar by way of the Anglo-Saxon Neahgebur, meaning “near farmer”) is a rural word for a rural concept. “Civilization,” on the other hand, comes from the Latin civitas, meaning “city.” The two ideals are not really related. A place can be, and often is, neighborly without being terribly civilized, and the reverse also holds true. In fact, civility and neighborliness just might be notions as incompatible as urbanity and boorishness.

But I was speculating again as an outsider. Rural didn’t matter to me because I was an integral part of some small community, bound up in the cocoon of neighborliness. I was on the outside looking in; guessing about things that mattered, reflecting an ideal that’s as old as this country when Jefferson proposed the small family farm as the cornerstone of American democracy. Not that I was wrong about the value of it as an ideal and certainly it mattered for that. Still I was afraid I’d gotten carried away with too much “Little House on the Prairie,” assuming value based upon a few impressions. This brought up that troubling question of whether rural could really matter in the abstract, without direct human connection. Did rural really matter to ME because of this sense of community I was sensing in Bassett? It did, I suppose, because I wanted to believe in that possibility, even if I didn’t live in it.

I have to admit that I was more that a little worried a little about rural mattering in the abstract—like the love some people have for celebrities. You wonder whether they’d really like, much less live in, rural if they experienced it directly. Rural is a lot messier and more complicated than the single issue ideological view and, I suspect, that viable solutions to rural problems and politics are going to have to be more messy and complicated than saving prairie dogs. But, the fact is that if rural is going to matter as a public policy priority, it is going to matter in a pluralistic sense. As my lobbyist friends often remind me, if there are 120 votes in favor of a particular piece of legislation, there are 120 different reasons for those votes. Rural matters to each of us in different ways and for different reasons, just as rural represents tremendous diversity of land, people, culture and heritage. No single rural policy is possible and we cannot expect to share a single rationale for rural mattering.

Those philosophical conundrums were becoming a plague on the peacefulness of my wandering around the countryside! I decided it was time to get off the highway and grabbed the first road to the south. The truck tires slid in the gravel and then settled in to a groove. A small herd of cattle grazed in the pasture next to an old abandon farmstead and a pair of Mallards drifted together in a pond as if they were the couple of the year. I tried to disengage myself from my internal debate but the questions kept coming. "Did people have to have some direct personal experience or connection with rural for it to really matter or did they just have to identify with the people that do (i.e., the city dweller seeing something of themselves in the lives of rural folk)?" The later being the argument some rural advocates promoted in the injunction that you've got to get "suburban soccer moms" to care about rural. These questions were just too many angels dancing on the head of a pin for me. I took a deep breath and focused on the road ahead and on the land that just rolled off in every direction, open, spacious, and vacant. I thought of Peter Miller's reflection, There is a feeling of people, the lack of people, the want for people, the desire for no people. I want to draw horizons into my soul and have them bounce around so much that they expand my horizons and I become unfettered. This is a metaphysical land.

I approached another abandoned farmstead with its weather worn gray wood, vacant windows, and sagging porch. I slowed to a stop and surveyed the yard. The barn, whose haymow door hung by one hinge, tilted slightly to the south. An old windmill creaked in the breeze and rusting tools and pieces of things that once harvested crops were strewn here and there. The doorless house and windows void of glass couldn't have looked anymore empty. I imagined that if I looked inside I'd find the inevitable deteriorating plaster walls, a worn shoe left behind, faded and ragged curtains on a window, and perhaps an old cast iron stove. Sometimes these places seem more plentiful than the working ranches and farms. For me, they have a mystical quality about them, much like the ancient pyramids. They have character, or at least, they reflect character. I know some people don't like them, think of them as symbols of failure, signs of economic collapse. They wish they weren't there and that people wouldn't take pictures of them. To me they're kind of magical and I wish I knew their stories. Wright Morris had it right in *The Home Place*: I say these things are beautiful, but I do so with the understanding that mighty few people anywhere will follow what I mean. That's too bad. For this character is beautiful. I'm not going to labor the point, but there's something about these man-tired things, something added, that is more than character. The same word, but a new specific gravity. Perhaps all I'm saying is that character can be a form of passion, and that some things, these things, have that kind of character. That kind of Passion has made them holy things. That kind of holiness, I'd say, is abstinence, frugality, and independence---the home-grown, made-on-the-farm trinity. Not the land of plenty, the old age pension, or the full dinner pail. Independence, not abundance, is the heart of their America.

The clouds that had been hovering in the distance were now towering thunderheads to the west, marching toward me like an invading army. I saw flashes of lighting and heard the distant crack of thunder. I pulled over at the top of a little rise, stopped and leaned out the truck window to watch the storm as it gathered force. I smelled the damp stillness in the air as the land waited for this essence of life on the prairie. There was darkness in the distance as the storm moved closer and bolts of lighting joined earth and sky in an electric connection. This was a pure rural experience. No matter what the weather, the experience of it outside the city is more immediate, more complete, and more real. To be in the countryside in weather is to be apart of it, to share in it the way grass and trees and animals experience it. The city weather experience is disconnected, distant. In rural, weather is both immediate in experience and consequence. As Bess Streeter Aldrich says, "For the average city dweller, weather is fairly inconsequential, a thing to be enjoyed, endured, or ignored. To country people it is the big thing...the god of the farm...the arbiter of destiny. Fortune responds to its smile. Disaster follows its frown."

The direct immersion in the rural weather experience is both exhilarating and frightening. I felt the wind coming, the grass began to move and heard the rush of it across the prairie. Then "splat", a raindrop hit the windshield and then another and another until I had to put the window up. The storm washed over me like a wave crashing on the shore. Wind shook the truck, splashing the rain against the sides as though I was in a ship on a stormy sea. The land got dark and the color of the grasses deepened. The lighting and thunder danced around me and the landscape was blurred by water streaming down the windshield. I just put my seat back and drifted to the rocking of the truck and the patter of rain.

Rain, especially in the spring, seems to bring more color, more definition to the Sand Hills. The red and yellow grasses deepen and you can see the new base of green emerging here and there. The usual dryness of the area seems to fade everything and the bright light of the sun tends to bleach the colors until they merge together and only hint of their differences. But the gray skies of rain, with its defuse light, highlights the colors of the different grasses and adds a damp richness that escapes one on bright sunny days. When the rain comes and the sky gets close to the earth, you notice the land in ways that escape you when there is bright blue above, dancing white

clouds and endless horizon. With the rain, the gray of plum thickets turns to a glistening black and the pale white of their blossoms turns to a deep ivory. The gray-green of yucca deepens, becoming more olive. What, during the sun filled day, passes for a quilt of patch work colors ranging from a reddish brown to a pale, flat tan transforms itself to a complex tweed of rusts, yellows, browns, tans, grays, and greens under the damp of rain.

The brunt of the storm moved eastward and only a gentle rain lingered. Maybe it was the darkness or the coming quiet of the storm passing, but I began to think about the ideals of rural from a different perspective. I remembered the words of O.G. Davidson in *Broken Heartland*: "Conditions in America's rural communities are far worse than is generally recognized. Contrary to national assumptions of rural tranquility, many small towns...today warrant the label 'ghetto.' And Joel Dyer's assertion in *Harvest of Rage*: Norman Rockwell's version of rural America is dead, if it ever really existed. What's left in the 90 percent of the landmass that is designated 'rural' is massive poverty and despair. For decades, men, women, and children in our small towns and farms have cried out for help. But their pleas for assistance have gone unanswered, as if they couldn't be heard over the noise of the city. Rural residents are drowning in an tumultuous sea of circumstances beyond their control. The millions of rural Americans still trying to tread water are being pulled under by the callous decisions emanating from corporate boardrooms and the nation's capital. Unable to be heard or to rescue themselves, they've grown angry.

Yes, rural was changing and had changed. Rural was, in fact, a moving target. The rural of my father's summers on his uncle's farm in Illinois was not the same as the rural of my summers on my uncle's farm in Missouri and the rural of Thomas Jefferson was a far cry from the rural of George Bush. Whatever mattered about rural and the rural that mattered was, in some ways, slipping away. Perhaps it always had been. Larry McMurtry talks about this in *Walter Benjamin At The Dairy Queen*: What the Western experience has demonstrated perhaps more clearly than any other is the astonishing speed with which things can change. There were so many buffalo—fifty million, by some estimates—that no one could really envision their disappearance, yet it took barely twenty years to eliminate them. Similarly, the cowboys who went north up the plains to the Yellowstone couldn't quite at first imagine that the unfenced purity of the Great Plains would be fenced and cut into ranches in less than half their lifetime. A cowboy of 1866 saw the virgin land as one great expanse, stretching all the way from Mexico to Canada; such a cowboy would have had to be very prescient to imagine that most of that land would be cut up and fenced before he was even middle aged. But many cowboys lived to see that happen, and it left them with a confused, unhappy, bittersweet feeling, unable to forget the paradise they helped destroy."

I remembered a phone conversation I had with a rural country Judge about, as he put it, "...this rural matters thing." He focused on the practical, the "put your money where your mouth is" sentiment. He said, "It's pretty damn pessimistic and depressing out here. There are no jobs, no real future for young people. If we believe in rural mattering are we willing to ask young people to make that investment? Are we willing to tell our children to hang in there, to stay home? I don't know a whole lot of rural families that are doing that. That's the real test though, isn't it?" Once again I thought of Larry McMurtry's (*In A Narrow Grave*) words: Before I was out of high school I realized I was witnessing the dying of a way of life—the rural, pastoral way of life. In the Southwest the best energies were no longer to be found in the homeplace, or in the small towns; the cities required these energies and the cities bought them. The kids who stayed in the country tended to be dull, lazy, cautious, or all three; those with brains, zip, and daring were soon off to Dallas or Houston.

I recognized, too, that the no longer open but still spacious range on which my ranching family had made its livelihood for two generations would not produce a livelihood for me or for my siblings and their kind. The cattle range had become the oil patch; the dozer cap replaced the Stetson almost overnight. The myth of the cowboy grew purer every year because there were so few actual cowboys left to contradict it.

Just when I was getting truly depressed about rural and rural changing, disappearing, and mattering, the sun broke through the clouds and a rainbow arched across the prairie. Shafts of light highlighted the landscape and picked out wildflowers that were almost hidden among the grasses. Now I am not a stickler for wildflower identification or one who knows their official names. I know it's a trade off, that I'm missing something. But I leave that to others, comfortable in my ignorance. The fact is I'm not sure I want to know names of wildflowers such as Smooth Fleabane, Penstemon, Gaillardia, and Bracted Spiderwort; which, quite frankly, sound like things for which you'd want to seek medical care. Still, I thought of Lisa Dale Norton's words: Lean. Not quite desert, yet no oasis either. Earthen shades of brown, the green of grass, the yellow of prickly-pear flower, the bright purple of penstemon. Daisies."

The clouds moved eastward. The western sky opened up. The sky, the far distant horizon and the endless grass pulled me out of my rural funk. The world opened up, grew big and I was carried along with it, joining with the greatness of the sky. Thomas Hart Benton, the great American landscape artist described the plains as having

this “releasing effect”, In the West proper, there are no limits. The world goes on indefinitely. The horizon is not seen as the end of a scene. It carries you on beyond itself into farther and farther spaces. And, Robert Lewis Stevenson said about the plains of Nebraska: “...there was a certain exhilaration in this spacious vacancy, this greatness of air, this discovery of the whole arch of heaven.

Then I heard it, faint at first, the almost squawking sound of cranes, Sand Hill Cranes. I strained my neck to see if I could see them, pick their grayness out the sky. But, I couldn't see them. I just heard the familiar sound. The sound Paul Gruchow describes as like the roaring of the sea in a conch shell; when you have finally heard it, you recognize that you have always known it. It is like the cry of a loon or the howling of wolves or the warning rattle of a snake, an article in the universal language. Eyes closed, I visualized the flocks I had seen in years past, wave after wave of flying V's moving across the sky, circling down in great spirals to feed, or standing as muted clumps of storm clouds on stilts. But more than anything I recalled their strange mating rituals so aptly describe by Kittredge: Those birds were exotic and lovely as they danced their mating dances in our meadows, each circling the other with gawky, tall-bird elegance, balanced by their fluttering wings as they seized the impulse and loped across the meadows with their long necks extended to the sky and their beaks open to whatever ecstasy birds can know.

The rainbow faded away. It was time to move on. The after-the-rain wetness, a greening up, sparkled in the sun with little glistening droplets hanging from the blades of grass. I put in my Country Gospel CD and turned up the volume. Turn your radio on, turn your radio on, if you want to hear the sound of Zion... I edged the truck back on the road and continued south still feeling the dampness in the air. ...get in touch with God, turn your radio on...I took the next road west, gravel straight and true as the sections homestead it divided. There was a comfortable bump to the road that put me in motion to the music. Storm clouds moved on eastward and the sky grew large to the west. In perfect synchronization Willie Nelson chimed in: They tell me of a home far beyond the sea, they tell me of a home far away, they tell me of a home where no storm clouds roam, oh they tell me of an uncloudy day, oh the land of an uncloudy day, oh the land of an uncloudy sky, oh they tell me of a home where no storm clouds rise, oh they tell me of an uncloudy day. I found myself signing along with Willie, the truck tracking in the groves of gravel, and feeling like there was just no place on earth better to listen to country gospel music than rolling down a country road. Oh they tell me of a land where my friends have gone, oh they tell me of a home where no storm clouds rise, oh they tell me of an uncloudy day. I could feel the gloom of the storm lifting and my foot pressed on the accelerator. The truck seemed almost to float along. I looked over Jordan and what did I see, coming for to carry me home, swing low sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home, swing low sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. I'm sometimes up, sometimes down, comin' for to carry me home...The evidence of rain was fast disappearing, being gobbled up by the sandy soil. The sun danced in sparkles on the grass and created a rusty hue on a stack of hay bales. The road climbed, rising to where the land spread out and the horizon opened up. I'll fly way, fly away...some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away...I'll fly away...to a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away... I'll fly away oh glory, I'll fly away...when I die, hallelujah by and by... I'll fly away...

I glanced in my rearview mirror and could see the towering thunderheads still clinging to the eastern horizon almost like a mountain range. That got me thinking about another rural, the Tetons, those magnificent peaks of the Wyoming Rockies. I remembered the contrasting feeling of the solidness of the rock and the tentativeness of my steps as I left the upper saddle at around 12,000 feet and started up the Grand Teton. Like it was yesterday I could visualize moving step by step along the Excum Ridge while watching the early morning sunlight play off the snow fields and light up the Jackson Hole valley below. I remembered the all consuming nature of the experience where the movement of hand and foot from crevasse to hold, the rhythm of me and the mountain, was all there was---that was my life; no past, no future, just immediate, essential presence of rock and hand and foot. I thought about when I reached the top and how I was simply filled with the view, the sweep of the mountains, jagged peaks running north and south and the mountains cascading from snow to rocks to forest, falling into the Snake River. I remembered my satisfaction, my pride in accomplishment standing on top of that mountain. But I also remembered the thunderstorm and the lighting and our mad scramble down the Owens-Spaulding Route with its 150-foot free repel, dangling in midair, dropping in increments of yards at a time. Reliving that moment, dangling in air on the side of a mountain, it occurred to me: “Adventure! Adventure, unless you're talking crime, seems more synonymous with rural places. I can't conceive of an urban setting where I would have had the same kind of experience I did when I climbed the Grand Teton. Whether it's mountaineering, hiking, crossing country skiing, camping, rafting, hunting, or fishing, “rural” is the primary and preferred setting for adventure. It is where we test ourselves and, sometimes, find ourselves. It is where we come into our own. When we set off on an adventure, it is almost always to some uninhabited place, the sea, space or rural. Rural matters because it provides us these opportunities.”

I turned west, feeling good, bouncing along a “Minimum Maintenance Road” watching the bright blue settle into the clearing sky. Barbed-wire fences lined the road and puddles of water collected in the ditches. I looked at the straight fence posts and taut wire marching off into the distance and thought of Robert Frost’s often-misinterpreted line good fences, good neighbor’s make. Frost got me thinking about Vermont and how different the Green Mountains with their forests and cascading waterfalls were from these treeless, rolling hills of red grass. I remembered the forests of Virginia where I had played under giant Tulip Poplars and Sycamores, diving into fragrant Honey Suckled covered bushes and gorging myself with mulberries and wild cherries. I thought about the Hill Country of central Texas where limestone outcroppings fight for space among the scrub cedar, mesquite and prickly pear cactus and where, in the spring, Blue Bonnets and Indian Paint Brush carpet the land. These are the places, along with the Tetons and the Nebraska Sand Hills, that I value most, where my mind escapes the day to day doldrums. These are my special “rural” places; places where I feel a spiritual connection, a sense of belonging. As Willa Cather said in *Song of the Lark*: She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her; a naive, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, childlike power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers.

I turned back north and tried to refocus on the landscape but questions kept coming and there I was back talking to myself as if I were some professor pontificating at a lectern: “Does everything and everybody in rural matter and does everything that has rural origins and heritage matter? And, if everything matters, what value is anything in particular? So, there you have it. Of course you have to say that it matters. It all matters. Here we encounter the problem of relativity. Does some rural matter more than other rural and, then of course, how does rural matter relative to urban. So rural matters but in what sense does it matter and to what degree and in relationship to what. You see the problem? The problem with the assertion rural matters is: Matters to whom and matters how? Matters could mean simply that it must/should be taken into account because it has some sort of power (i.e., it could affect things for better or worse). Taxes matter, not because I like them, but they affect me. Matters can also mean that it has value, worth, potential benefit for us as individuals or us collectively. There is the argument that you should care about rural, rural should matter to you, because it could either help or hurt you. That is, essentially, an argument the environmentalists use to try to get city folk to care about the countryside, or the South American rain forest for that matter. But, it is a pretty abstract way in which to connect people to rural matters. The use of threat to make rural matter is a little like the use of punishment to deter crime. As the criminologists point out, for punishment to be effective deterrent it has to be swift, certain, and severe. In other words, you have to believe that you’re going to get caught, that the consequences will be delivered swiftly, and that they will be nasty. I, quite frankly, don’t think anybody in New York or L.A. thinks rural has that kind of power.” But, I was again digressing, wandering off into the philosophical, if not ecological, ozone--not to mention nearly putting myself to sleep.

I thought about a phone conversation I’d had the previous week with Cyd, a former ranch wife who was now working for a small college in the western part of the state. I’d called to find out how things were going since they’d moved to town and her rancher husband had gone to work construction. I’d put the Why Rural Matters question to her. She said: “Well I guess rural matters most in terms of values, work ethics, and community – civic involvement.” She paused, kind of sighed, as went on: “I am very afraid for the future of rural.” She talked about how we were passing the torch of agriculture to big businesses, which had no commitment to or caring for the land. Then she really got philosophical: “But, rural needs to matter; we need to have a dispersed population, a population that is connected to the land and to the long-term cycles of agriculture—the cycle of generations working the land, of planting, nurturing, and harvesting. We need a people that know the meaning of community; a people that can show the rest of the country what it means to work together, to support each other. As a Nation we are losing our willingness to connect to each other in meaningful ways. That is a lesson that rural has to teach. We need that stabilizing voice that comes from rural”

By the time I was back at Highway 20 I could barely keep my eyes open. The whole “rural matters” thing was beginning to take its toll. I wondered whether “mattering” was a matter of attention, neither good nor bad, right or wrong? I thought, “maybe it doesn’t matter why rural matters or why rural mattering should matter if it didn’t matter” or “How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?”

I turned left on to pavement and headed west toward Long Pine thinking again about this contrast between rural and urban. Wondering about the essence of difference between place and people. I recalled Sharon Butala’s reflections on her first visit to a ranch on the plains of rural Canada: It wasn’t just the scenery or the novelty of everything that captivated me. I was struck also by how comfortable those men had seemed, how at ease they were in their work, and how unassuming and casual in their skill with animals and with the tools they used to manage them. I was surprised to see they were actually enjoying themselves. They laughed, cracked jokes, kidded each other while they worked in the corral or on horseback, roped or cut out cattle and chased them in. I

was used to a world perpetually fraught with tension, with competitiveness so extreme at times as to seem really crazy, where the only constant was steady but, nonetheless, gut-wrenching change and the resulting mad scrabbling for position. As I sat on the rail watching and listening that day a new world was washing slowly over me, seeping in without my noticing, a slower world, and a timeless one that resonated with a sense that it must always have been there in just this way and always would be.

That got me to thinking about pace-of-life and change, two other areas of rural-urban difference. As Ted Kooser says, “In the country, though, change is customarily as gradual and predictable as the leafing of trees.” I thought: “Out here change is manageable; in part, because there is enough stability to ground you, enough sameness to give you comfort. In the city things change minute by minute.” I tried to remember the names and faces of people who had move through my life in the past ten years. There were people whom I’d worked with less than three years ago whose names I couldn’t recall; neighbors who had moved away that seemed as distant as people I knew as a child. There were parts of the city that had transformed themselves into places I no longer knew and fields that I’d once hunted which were now suburban housing developments. I concluded: “In the city the context of life seems temporary, fragile. You are always playing catch-up. But in the country, the ground does not move beneath your feet. You have a base from which to take on the world. There is a sense of security, stability to rural life.”

I detoured into Long Pine to see if Doc White was at Jeanne’s Café. Surely he would have a simple answer as to why rural matters. Doc’s a retired vet who has a ranch that borders town. He writes books on rural humor with little quips like: “Never climb fences leaning toward you and never kiss a girl leaning away from you.” and “They never started calling him tall in the saddle until he got hemorrhoids.” He’s married to Sherry, a United Methodist pastor who lives next to her church over a hundred miles away in Ansley. Theirs is a “commuter marriage” that you’d more expect to see in cities.

Long Pine, like many rural towns, ain’t what it used to be. While the grocery store’s still open and there are still the two requisite bars, the old hotel sits abandoned and Main Street has a sort of vacant look. There is a little pawn shop/antique place, a lumber yard, a feed and grain, and a few businesses but its not the old railroad town that sprung up on the plains in the 1870s. There’s no visible sign of the stockyards and roundhouse that sat west of town and once marked Long Pine as a center for cattle shipping. The American State Bank is now the Veteran’s Club. It’s not the same community that had its own Chautauqua grounds and there’s a kind of “graying” of the residents. Like so many small rural communities the young people are leaving or have left. Just like Ben Sherwood said, This place was just a wide spot in the road. Like so many towns on the plains, all the young people would gradually move away, leaving only the old folks behind. It was death by slow strangulation, life sucked out breath by breath.

I drove through the vacantness that was downtown thinking: “If rural matters so much why is it that so many young people are so anxious to get the hell out of it? Is it just that there are not the jobs?” I remembered Julian Blair’s reflection on growing up in rural Kansas, We kids always took for granted that to leave Kansas was a good thing. And Ann Daum’s, I was a ranch kid, but the truth is less romantic than its sounds. There was dust and too many grasshoppers and towering kochia weeds behind the barn. My ranch horses were always hand-me-downs—half-lame geldings who had worked a lifetime for someone else, who would never buck or bolt or dance sideways when the other riders galloped past us after crank-tailed calves.

None of Doc’s pick-ups were at the café, so I opted not to stop. I drove through a brief neighborhood with city blocks and little frame houses that looked like the 1940s. At the west edge of town the road dropped down to cross Pine Creek as it made its way north to join with the Niobrara River. I stopped on the bridge for a minute to see if I could catch a glimpse of the trout that were reputed to be living here, but I saw no life in the water and moved on, the road rising back to level ground. I turned off the blacktop and followed the high ground along an irrigation ditch. I could see Doc’s ranch with cattle and manure spread out across the pasture out to the west below me. And, there was Doc wandering among the cattle on horseback, checking things out after the storm. He cut a tall, impressive figure as he moved easily amid the cows and their calves like something out of a western. There was a flow to his movement; he seemed at one with the horse and his surroundings. I thought, “There is a connection here, a rhythm of life that mirrors the rhythms of nature. To live and work out here is to be more at one with the world, to be more connected to the grander scheme of things, to be closer to whatever you call God.” I recalled how Linda Hasselstrom put it in *Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher*: I think of our lives as circular: our work is dedicated not just to profit-making but literally to feeding ourselves. We are sometimes able to choose work that sustains us mentally, or at least gives us variety, and to plan our own days rather than working to a schedule set up by someone else. But the steady rhythm of night turning to day, spring to summer birth to death, the progress of the moon and sun, the sweep of wind and rain— those natural

cycles determine how we arrange our lives. What does not fit into the smooth circle of our days, into the repeating cycle of the seasons, does not belong here.” Almost without thinking I said out loud: “Believe me, to the folks who live this life, it matters!”

As I worked my way around to the south entrance to the pasture, I realized the most obvious reason rural mattered: people. It was people like Doc and his minister wife Sherry who exemplified rural mattering. They were as rural folks say, “good people.” Whether its fair or not, we tend to assume that you’re more likely to find “good folk” in rural America or, at least, less likely to find “bad folk.” We have this notion of rural being inherently “good” and its counterpart of being a place of evil, or at least prone toward evil, and temptation. But, then there are plenty of good folks who live in urban and suburban places. Still for me, one of the reasons rural mattered was because of the people I knew who lived in, or were from, rural places and because of the people whom I shared rural places with.

I pulled into the gate and stopped, figuring I’d best wait for Doc. I didn’t want to create some faux pas like the ones that so typified the “dude” in western folklore. A pair of ducks drifted in, landing on a small puddle of water next to the windmill. It slowly began to occur to me that maybe it wasn’t the people per se that made rural seem like the home of “good folks” but rather the culture of rural and the kinds of relationships that rural made possible. Without thinking I’d fallen into the sociological reverie and conjured up Ferdinand Toennies with his notions of *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft*. On I went, like I was lecturing to the pair of mallards: “Small communities allow for primary relationships where we relate to people in multiple roles (e.g., I know Joe not only because I am a parent and he is a school teacher but I know Joe as a neighbor, a fellow member of the country club, someone I hunt with, a member of the annual Fourth of July Party Planning Committee, etc.) and where we have a shared history (e.g., I’ve known Joe since he was born). In other words, at least theoretically, life in smaller communities is more holistic, less fragmented, and has more continuity (both over time and throughout our social world). And, therefore, it has the potential for a quality of relationships that makes for a more supportive, secure, and friendly social world. Right? Wasn’t this just a matter of what some would call livability? Rural communities allow for a scale of living that seems humanly possible, where the problems seem manageable, where it’s possible to know your neighbors, where collective solutions seem realistic, achievable, where you believe you could actually work out your differences without resorting to law or violence.”

My head was befuddled again. The social and behavioral sciences seemed a poor route to getting at something that mattered. I just couldn’t see that route giving me very satisfying answers to the question of “Why rural matters?”. I was going to have to rely on the arts and humanities. I thought of Wallace Stegner’s reflection on his rural roots: I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people and humor I respond to, the prejudices I wear like dishonorable scars, the affections that sometimes waken me from middle-aged sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and heroes I follow, the colors and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by that little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead. However, anachronistic I may be, I am a product of the American earth, and in nothing quite so much as in the contrast between what I knew through the pores and what I was officially taught.

Doc ambled over on this horse as I got out of the truck. “Howdy” he said, “Come after some more of them turkeys?” “Nah” I said, “they’re too sneaky for me.” He gave me the typical rancher to hunter response, “Well, I practically step on one every time I get off my horse.” I smiled, “Well, I guess that’s my problem. I don’t hunt from horseback.” “Maybe ya should,” he said. I decided to change the subject, “How you like that little shower?” He kind of grinned, “The rains been good but it still too dry.” I nodded my head yes. He went on, “I’m getting out of the cattle business, gonna start raising grasshoppers.” “Good,” I replied, “more turkey food.” He smiled. Then I popped the big question, “Tell me Doc, why do you think rural matters?” He kind of looked at me with what I took to be the same steeled patience he dealt with other city folk and said, “Without rural the country wouldn’t have food.” I could tell that was meant to be THE ANSWER but I wasn’t ready to settle for it. I gave him a look that meant I wanted more and, after it was clear to him that he either had a complete idiot on his hands or someone stubborn as one of his mules, he patiently went on: “We have, in this country, a dependable source of food. If America jacked around and started getting all our food from other countries, things might not be so dependable. We could end up in big trouble.” I nodded and kept looking like a lost child that needed to be taken by the hand and lead home. There was kind of a resigned sigh on his part as he looked away toward town. “I like to think rural America produces good workers, people with good integrity,” he said. “What else?” I said. “Well” he said, “if it weren’t for rural America our trade deficit would be a lot worse. All that grain we send overseas helps keep things in balance.” “Hadn’t thought about that,” I said. He

went on, "Yeah, there's a feller round here that's got a sawmill and cuts good red cedar and sends it to Japan and China; another thing that kind of helps with the country's trade deficit. You can kind of see that, can't you?" I nodded and smiled. He said, "I don't know, maybe you ought to talk to somebody who's got a better opinion, I'm pretty biased." "No," I said, "I want to know what you think." He was quiet for a minute and then said, "Well...the quality of the people, the stability of our food supply, and balancing exports. That sort of sums it up for me." I could tell he'd said all he was about to on that subject. So, I asked him how things were going and inquired after Sherry and so on. We had a nice visit and then I allowed as how I'd best let him get back to his cows and I'd better get on down the road. He got back on his horse and headed off toward the ranch house and I got back in my truck and headed back toward town wondering why I hadn't thought about the export thing.

I left Long Pine and headed west on Hwy 20. I thought about Doc, in a very real sense, a cowboy. The cowboy is a truly American icon, a symbol of freedom and conquest, a model of self-reliance and independence, a reflection of much of why we think rural matters. So much of what is mythical about our country and our heritage comes from the country. Yes, we have "urban legends," but these are the creepy and bizarre tales of the city. You know, the "Hookman" or the "Baby-on-the-truck" stuff. They neither inspire nor instruct. But our mythic heroes, those that exemplify who we'd like to be, what we value, are rural. Both real exaggerations such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Johnny Appleseed, Ethan Allen and Buffalo Bill as well as true fabrications such as Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyon, and Febold Feboldson tend to come from rural places. As Clifford says, The roots of our own culture are in wilderness. The stories of our history and the legends of our heroes are entwined with it.

I passed the Hwy 183 turnoff to Springview, a town where two giant wind turbines mark one of the newer reasons that rural matters, at least to utility companies. On the south side of the highway I saw the remnants of another American icon, the old Pineview Drive-In Theater with its deteriorating screen, army of speaker posts, and lonely concession stand. I remembered going to the drive-in with my parents to see *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and that movie's portrayal of the clash and competition that still goes on between farm folks and "townies." I continued on westward to Ainsworth, one of the few towns in Nebraska laid out by a woman. In 1883 Nannie Osborne platted her 160 acre homestead next to the railroad right-of-way into lots with sites provided for the First Congregational Church and the United Methodist Church as well as designating one full block as "Courthouse Block."

Coming into Ainsworth from the east I passed the Evangelical Free Church, which stood next to the entrance to the Sand Hills Rod and Gun Club Shooting Range. Just a little further on the left was the home football field of the Ainsworth Bulldogs. If there is one thing that means community, that matters in rural America, it is the local school. There's no greater embodiment of that mattering than rural high school football. Not just in the "Go Big Red" country of Nebraska but all across the country. School is the embodiment of rural communities and loss of a school hurts more than anything else. I remembered back last year, asking a woman at a grocery counter in a small town about their school and being taken aback by the bitterness of her response when she said, "THEY took our school back in eighty-six." It had been over fifteen years since school consolidation had come to her town and it was still as painful if it had been a week ago.

I passed the newest motel in town, the Comfort Inn, and then one of the oldest, the Remington Arms. I turned left onto the main street and stopped in front the Ranch Land Western Store, one of the very best in the State. Getting out of the truck one whiff told me the breeze was from the northwest. The smell from the big feedlot north of town almost drove me back in the truck. As I walked over to the Western Store, I thought: "Rural life wasn't necessarily all a bed of roses. Willa Cather spoke of The fear of the tongue, the terror of little towns, in *The Song of the Lark* and Linda Scott DeRosier gives a concrete example in *Creeker*, One drawback to going to school and living in the same place your whole life is that you are never able to get out from under your mistakes. I wet my pants three times in third grade, and I was still trying to live it down when I got out of high school."

Beside the "talk" in rural communities, there is the inevitable complaint of boredom, especially among the young. Lee Maynard's description of a small town in West Virginia is typical: During the winters in Crum the days were long, boring and cold, and during the summers the days were long, boring and hot. In Crum, only the temperature changed. The sad little town lay in a narrow valley, squeezed between the river and the hills, trapped before the floods, baked by the ancient heat of the mountains, awaiting each stagnant winter with all the patience, good looks and energy of a sloth. It was a collection of small houses, an assemblage of shacks, a reflecting pond of tin roofs.

Though, as I walked into the store I thought, "Even so, people love these rural communities." H.G. Bissinger

found just such an attachment in his visit to Odessa, Texas: She loved her hometown, because of what it represented and despite what it represented. She loved the friendliness of it and the small-town feel of it, the way she knew everyone out at the country club or at the store, the way the gossip made an easy circle. She relished the physical rawness of it, the feeling of wind across her face and the gorgeous lightning storms during the summer when the sky, as she described it, just seemed to open up and dance. She knew the place was as immutable to the changes of time as an iceberg, but there was something reassuring about that. People stood up for one another. They cared about one another. They held old-fashion values.

I wandered past the fancy silver spurs and hats that cost more than a good pair of shoes. I thought about our Hollywood images of the cowboy, much like many of our images of rural, as myths—romanticized notions that go back to the early dime novels. As Gretel Enrich says: In our hellbent earnestness to romanticize the cowboy we've ironically disesteemed his true character. If he's "strong and silent" it's because there's probably no one to talk to. If he "rides away into the sunset" it's because he's been on horseback since four in the morning moving cattle and he's trying, fifteen hours later, to get home to his family. If he's "a rugged individualist" he's also part of a team: ranch work is teamwork and even the glorified open-range cowboys of the 1880s rode up and down the Chisholm Trail in the company of twenty or thirty other riders. Instead of the macho, trigger-happy man our culture has perversely wanted him to be, the cowboy is more apt to be convivial, quirky, and softhearted. To be "tough" on a ranch has nothing to do with conquests and displays of power. More often than not, circumstances—like the colt he's riding or an unexpected blizzard—are overpowering him. It's not toughness but "toughing it out" that counts. In other words, this macho, cultural artifact the cowboy has become is simply a man who possesses resilience, patience, and an instinct for survival.

In the boot section, I felt depressed. Rural had enough to deal with without the burden of mythology that so colored people's perception. If rural was on people's radar screen at all, it was likely this Hollywood image of rural places and people, it wasn't the real rural, often not even close. So much of what mattered to people about rural was this very mythology, this romantic set of notions from film, TV, and popular fiction. It was like being an actor who is loved for the people he portrays and not for himself. I tried on some "ropers" and decided I shouldn't pass them up given I didn't know when I'd be back this way and being as how the western store at the mall certainly wouldn't have this selection.

Back outside, I tossed my new boots in the truck and just stood there looking down the main street. I wondered what life was like here in Brown County. I knew things were hard. The town wasn't growing. One of the State social workers here had told me last year, "The folks in Lincoln just have no clue what's its like to try to help people out here. First of all there's such a stigma against welfare that many of the folks who need it won't apply for it. I hate to see that cause they got kids that could benefit. But they got their pride and they just get by on with what they got. And, even if someone comes in for help the chances of me being able to get it to them is remote. Suppose I determine that, by State rules, what a person needs is job training. Well, where do you suppose the closest community or tech college is? I tell ya, it ain't down the street here. It's hundreds of miles! That's the problem. Every time I figure out a solution to someone's problem, I got to then find a solution to the solution."

I got in the truck, backed out and headed to the grocery store. I grabbed a couple of root beers and some cheese sticks, and wandered over to check out the fruit. I passed up the bananas, ready for banana bread, and the grapes on their way to becoming raisins, and finally settled on a red delicious apple. That's one thing I don't like about rural. If you want it "fresh" you'd damn well better grow it because finding fresh produce in rural grocery stores is like looking for good barbecue in Manhattan.

I've always known that "rural" has a dark side to it. Our vision of the noble homesteader neglects some of the realities of "the orphan train." And anybody who reads about Margaret Bell's life on the frontier or Dorothy Allison's growing up in rural South Carolina can't help but wonder about how true our images of rural life, past and present, are. Not to mention the small town conflicts that erupt into murder as portrayed in Brown's Lone Tree and MacLean's In Broad Daylight or the down right evil of Annie Cook in Yost's Evil Obsession.

I sat in the truck for a while just watching the commerce of this small community. People coming and going, stopping in here and there. Saying howdy and hello, waving. It reminded me of Valentine, another community about the same size up the road to the West. I'd was there last fall when they hosted their annual Old West Days and Cowboy Poetry Gathering. That night Cowboy Poetry played to a sell out crowd with over 400 people packing the high school auditorium while outside in the football stadium the Valentine High School Badgers faced off against their long-time arch rivals the Ainsworth Bulldogs. Last week I talked with one of the organizers of that event and put this rural matters question to him. Bob, who'd retired back to the home place

after a career in Colorado, said: “Well, I don’t know. Lots of different reasons I guess. The old, how do you say...the values that rural people have. Seems like there was a saying about that. Yeah, a definition of rural. Rural: Backwards area of America still struggling to overcome fixations with religion, family values and work.” I smiled at that thought.

I got going and headed west on Hwy 20 again. Cornfields spread out on both sides of the highway except for the space taken up by the Ainsworth Municipal Golf Course to the north. Just outside of town I passed what was once the Ainsworth Army Air Field that trained crews to fly B-17s, P-38s, and P-47s during World War II. Looking out across the empty 2,496-acre site from the highway I had trouble visualizing 7,000 people attending the 1947 National Air Show here. Clearly rural Nebraska mattered during the war. There was a multitude of these small air bases, not to mention bomb manufacturing plants and prisoner of war camps, scattered across the Great Plains. They are all closed now, most abandoned; some like this one turned into the town’s airport. I wondered what it must have been like for those young pilots to be plunked down here in the middle of the Sand Hills, in the middle of a war. I wondered how they got on with the local folks and what did they do to blow off steam, to have fun. Were there romances with the daughters of ranchers? Did rural matter to them? As I always did when I saw one of these sites, I wished somebody would write a book about the experience or make a movie. There were stories there I wanted to know.

I wanted more stories like Chicago Tribune reporter Bob Greene’s book (Once Upon A Town) on the North Platte Canteen. The founding and operation of that canteen was a small-town-rural thing that really mattered. From Christmas Day 1941 to the end of the war, every day rain or shine, cold or hot, every troop train coming through that town was met. America’s soldiers were greeted with hot coffee, cakes, sandwiches, and smiles. Local residents of North Platte and the surrounding communities supported, through volunteer work and donations (of food and money), this tribute to America’s soldiers as they passed through Middle America on troop trains on their way to fight for their country. In reading the book I was not only reminded of the kind of community spirit that we often think of when we think of rural places but also reminded how much that kind of thing makes us feel that we matter. And the book makes it very clear how much it mattered to the soldiers. Greene quotes a ex-soldier who passed through North Platte shortly after being grounded by the Army Air Corps medical board: “There are moments in a young man’s life when it means a great deal if someone seems to appreciate him,” he said. “You have no idea what the respect I was shown by those people at the Canteen did for me. I was feeling like I was no good to anybody. And those people made me feel that I mattered.”

That sense of small town, rural community spirit is not uncommon. Pete Davis quotes Moni Hourt talking about it in western Nebraska: “I’ll give you another example. There was a rancher in Sioux County had cancer, and the insurance wouldn’t cover him going to Omaha to try to get that treated. So he was going to die. And this is back when the farms were bust, there wasn’t much money in the country out there—there’s not many people out there either—but they raised ten thousand dollars in a day. And that man’s still alive. Now they couldn’t believe in Omaha that a community could do that, and it may be difficult to understand, with all the problems this country has economically. But there is such an incredible bond to these hills, to these people, to these ideas. I walk down the street and I talk to this guy and that, and I know their history; I know about their children who failed, and their children who succeeded, and we’re all together. We’re here because we want to be, and because we love where we’re at.”

There is, however, another side to this sense of community in small towns. As Kathleen Norris remarks, I have observed that in the small town, the need to get along favors the passive aggressives, those for whom honest differences and disagreements pose such a threat that they are quickly submerged, left to fester in a complex web of resentments. This is why, when the tempests erupt in the small-town teapot, they are so violently destructive. This is why, when the comfortable fiction that we’re all the same under the skin, is exposed as a lie, those who are genuinely different so often feel ostracized and eventually leave.

On beyond the former airbase I passed another vacant piece of land with a historical marker, which commemorated the old Lakeland schoolhouse. This was the only sod high school in the country. It served the thirty-three youth of the area during the Depression years of 1934 to 1941. The school, actually 20 miles to the south of the highway, was heated with “cow chips” gathered by teachers, students, and parents.

As I drove, I kept thinking about the North Platte Canteen and how much it mattered. Then it struck me that those raised fingers on the steering wheel and windshield salutes that we get in rural places are important because it makes us feel like we matter. It’s a form of recognition that you almost never get in the city. It’s a statement of worth. It is like saying, “Even though I don’t know you, you make a difference; your presence is acknowledged.” And, it’s, for the most part, unconditional. It has nothing to do with the kind of car you drive,

how you dress, what you do for a living, whom you are related to, or what you can do for them---you are simply worth something as a person, a human being. So unlike the city where your presence is, more often than not, actively ignored and, in some cases, visibly resented. I don't know about you, but that matters to me.

Just before Johnstown, who's namesake John Berry was awarded two gold-handled pistols from Buffalo Bill Cody for winning the great Chadron to Chicago horse race of 1893, I took the Norden Road north. On gravel again I descended into a creek bed that hosted scrub cedar in a meandering line through the sand hills. I remembered how messy this road was last year after nearly an inch of rain. I ran for miles in four-wheel drive, the truck sliding back and forth on the crown of the road. The only thing keeping me from turning around was seeing the tracks of someone else who had gone before me, someone that had made it. I had figured that I could too, and I did. But, its something we take for granted in the city, except maybe in a severe snowstorm, this ability to get where we want to go when we want to get there.

As I moved along, I got lost in the rolling hills again and felt that secret kind of joy that this land has to offer. I thought of the words of Nebraska's own Willa Cather from *Song of the Lark*, The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range. Wire fences might mark the end of a man's pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can. It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang---and one's heart sang there, too.

I noticed, here and there along the roadside, the pale pink blossoms of the wild rose. I remembered the few times I'd tried to harvest them, take some back to grow in the city. Like with many things in rural, such transplantation doesn't work. There are things that matter in rural areas which people in the cities want but they want them in the city. But so much of what lives in a rural area can only truly be enjoyed where its roots are. Ted Kooser knows that wild roses stand for this: You can't dig up wild roses and take them away from their work. They sag in gardens, starved for a gravel road, the hot summer wind, and cracked clay of a ditch. They don't want to be pretty or fragrant or to get too close to one another. Wearing their stained white aprons and moth-eaten pink dresses, each has a few red rose hips to bake and get frosted by state fair time. That's all they care about. If it was good enough for their mothers, it's plenty good enough for them.

Cruising the same gravel that last year had seemed like it was going to drop out from under me, I thought about what this land must have seemed like to the first Europeans to come here. As early as 1796, a Scotsman, James McKay, is reputed to have led a horse caravan of Spaniards through here. The experience of this land must have been so much different to those folks. I was remind just how much rural is a moving target. How rural life is changing, dramatically. Things that were typically urban problems (drugs, crime, etc.) are now common place in rural settings. Much of what made small town life the ideal of what we think of as "community" is no longer there. I said to myself, "So what about what we value of rural America is still possible today. Is the pace of life slower, are kids safer, is solitude still possible, are we closer to nature & God there, are we freer and less encumbered there, do we confront the elements more directly there, or is it all relative?"

That stretch of road always seemed longer to me that it should be and the answers to those questions seemed to grow more elusive. I thought of what a task it would be to make rural matter to folks caught up in city life, much less the suburban universe. I wondered what you could do. Could you develop TV ads? I tried to think of what you would say: "So what is your rural connection? Do you remember dragonflies dancing along the creek when you were little or community Fourth of July picnics in a neighbor's field? Did you take Sunday drives in the country with your parents or spend lazy summer days on an uncles farm? Did your Dad take you fishing at a farm pond or did you backpack in the mountains in college? Well, rural needs your help! Contact the Rural Matters Hotline at 1-800-OUR-HOPE." I could imagine the words but I just couldn't picture who we'd have do it. Who would be the spokesperson for rural? What celebrity could we trot out to reach today's America? What film idol, rock star, literary giant, fashion queen, politico, Wall Street Tycoon, or other ilk could credibly be persuasive about rural mattering? I honestly drew a blank.

I came to a rise and stopped, looking at the Niobrara River Valley in the distance, seeing the way the treeless hills dropped into the strip of woodlands that lined the river. I concluded that even if we got people's attention with my TV commercial it probably wouldn't last. I knew that you could get people to care about some aspect of rural, like the film *The Farmer's Wife* did, but I doubted that it would have much staying power. It's the things that press down on people day-to-day that matter. Rural is remote in more ways than one. Still, I had to admit that I had hope and that it lay with the Arts and the Humanities. I thought: "Wasn't it photographs like those of Dorothea Lange and books like *The Grapes of Wrath* that brought national attention to the plight of rural Americans during the Depression? Isn't this our best hope? Through these works people who have never lived

in or frequented rural areas can identify with them---can see aspects of themselves in rural people or be moved by descriptions or depictions of the rural landscape and rural life.” At least, that was the conclusion I was coming to.

Truck in gear, I moved on, once again dropping down into the Niobrara River Valley, descending in slow curves past the entrance to the Nature Conservancy’s fifty thousand-acre Niobrara Valley Preserve. As I got closer to the river a road ran off to the left toward Currie’s property and the Buffalo pasture beyond. From that road two years ago I’d seen a group of Whooping Cranes, tall, stately and white, hanging out on a sandbar in the river. Something I’d never see in Omaha, New York, L.A. or Chicago. I thought about driving in and seeing if I could spot any wildlife but it was getting late and I passed on the opportunity.

The road dropped further and headed across the river on the Norden Bridge. Under the bridge the river narrows into a channel and rushes through a rock formed spillway that looks almost manmade, then spreads out again making its way eastward. The sun was sinking in the west. I stopped on the bridge to watch the river. It came steadily, lazily from the west; a meandering reflection of sky sparkling with refracted light and subtle power turning into a boiling sea as it squeezed between rock shelves before regaining its composure and moving over the eastern prairie.

As I sat in the truck on the bridge watching the water, I tried to recall the exact words of Nebraska newspaperman Norris Alfred: We gain a sense of fulfillment watching, from bank or bridge, a river in full flow, and an understanding of our heritage—an unrecorded distant past as unknown as the future. It is a pleasant surprise to realize we can watch that flow for a brief time. By watching the water flow we can sense the current’s tug and see it in the shiverings of a tree branch, half-submerged in the flow. For we are born in a world of movement and understand it. We move in it and with it. Flowing water is as eternal as the earth, and our thoughts flow with it. To live is to move freely; to wander and wonder. In the Grand Design a river is a wandering water trail; part of the meteorological immensity that pumps life onto planet earth. We must accommodate our lives to rivers, not vice versa. Tread lightly, speak softly, and regard with awe the miracle of existence—of life in immeasurable, dark, dead space. We exist for a few seconds of eternal time. Arrogance during that brief interval, does not become us.

I took a deep breath and just let myself get lost in the flow of the river and the stillness. Here I was with the spiritual again, a sense of something greater than one’s self, a connection that, at least for me, I find much easier in rural places. I could feel my breathing in sync with the flow of the river and the passage of time. Once again the question of rural matters seemed silly, like asking if water flows to the sea. Then, of course, it became obvious that one of the problems with this question was it implied an absolute, as if rural was a singular, fixed entity. I had to admit that rural is relative in time, space, and experience. Once again I was off on my internal philosophical monologue: “What was once rural has become urban, or at least suburban, and what passed for rural a hundred years ago cannot, in any realistic sense, be found today. And, if it could, our technological advances would make the experience of it dramatically different. Our technology, what with GPS and Satellite telephones, is transforming even the most remote wilderness experience. Witness the recent incident where a climber stranded near the top of Mt. Everest talked to his wife in New Zealand as he died. How will what we mean by rural be altered when we arrive at the Star Trek era where you can beam yourself in and out of remote areas at will, in an instant; and when some else can beam themselves in next to you?!” I looked over next to me to see if someone had arrived unannounced in the passenger seat.

In the distance I heard tires on gravel and my reflective spell was broken. I decided I’d better get off the bridge before I became one of the rare traffic statistics of Brown County. I put the truck in gear and moved on thinking: “Rural New England is not at all like the rural of the Deep South and rural Virginia is nothing like rural Montana. Variations in landscape, culture, population density, demography, history, and economy all combine to make rural, in many ways, more heterogeneous than urban. I thought that maybe rural mattered because of these differences; maybe rural was the last vestige of difference, the last hold out to the homogenizing of the American way of life.”

The road jogged to the west in a long slow curve and then started to climb north. I passed an old pick-up and the driver gave me the customary raised finger off the steering wheel wave. I’d gotten that more often than not on all the gravel roads I’d been on and on the streets of Bassett, Long Pine, and Ainsworth. Some times it was just the raised finger but other times it was a kind of salute. There is a kind of cozy, friendliness about this aspect of traveling rural routes.

It was getting on toward evening, as I turned west to follow the road along the river, crossed a little creek and

moved on under a canopy of towering oaks and cottonwoods. Past the old barn wood sign nailed to a tree that said “Black cows on road,” I followed the river upstream. I soon entered what could easily be called the “Canoe Camp District” where campground after campground occupied the space between the road and the river all the way to where the road turned north and climbed out of the valley to the highway and the tiny community of Sparks. The road and the campsites were empty; it was too early in the year for the canoeists. As summer rolled around, especially on the weekends, those campsites would be full and sport utility vehicles with license plates from Lincoln and Omaha would ramble up and down the road. The Niobrara is a great river for canoeing, kayaking, and tubing. It moves swiftly but not dangerously, at least until you reach Rocky Ford. It travels through pretty country with little waterfalls that cascade down banks lined with oak and cedar. As I drove along I thought of all those folks I’d seen crowd this river on summer weekends and it reminded me that rural matters for hundreds of “recreational” purposes. I wondered if, in fact, that was why rural mattered most to urban dwellers. Rural was their playground.

It wasn’t long until those thoughts lead me to recall the many stories I’d heard about how urban-based recreational enterprises mistreated rural folks in what seems akin to the attitudes early settlers had toward native peoples. In Frank Clifford’s book about the continental divide he interviews a woman rancher who describes dealing with a national group putting in a hiking trail near her property: “They never thought to inform us they were putting the trail through here” Louise says. “First thing they did was drive one of their signs through a water pipe and drain one of our stock tanks. Then they intentionally put one up facing the wrong way, so that we had all kinds of people trooping down our road, through our corrals, and past our house. They drank out of our the hose, without asking. They came into the house when we weren’t there and used the phone. One fellow sat out there in his car blowing his horn and yelling at Andy to move cows out of his way. These people feel superior to us. They act like we’re the trespassers, and they have all the rights.”

As I thought about the quote from Louise it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, I’d been “barking up the wrong tree.” Maybe the issue of rural mattering had nothing to do with its value or worth. I thought, “That’s it! The real issue here is power. Urban matters because there are more people in it, more people who directly experience urban on a daily basis. And, it is what these numbers represent, political clout, market share, and wealth, that makes the difference. It has little to do with value. Power, or rather the increasing lack of it, is what we’re talking about with rural matters. Rural is getting the short end of the stick, getting edged out. It’s a matter of numbers, political clout—things rural has been steadily losing.”

I passed Rocky Ford Canoe Camp, one of the biggest and oldest, the road climbing up on a little plateau above an abandoned cabin that reminded me this was once homestead territory. I stopped the truck and looked down on the cabin whose walls seemed to be about to collapse inward at any moment. Sitting there I thought, “Ya know, I think I’m on to somethin’ here.” I was reveling in my insight when it hit me: “The reality is that the problem of rural is worse than being on the losing end of things, being pushed out. At least in that case you’re a player; you’re in the game. What’s happening more and more to rural people and places is simply indifference. They are ignored, left out, not taken into account, simply not appearing on the radar screen.”

I took one of those involuntary deep sighs, a kind of resigned breath, and had that creepy little kid feeling of standing lost on a street corner while people rush past you as if you weren’t there. That sense of feeling small, unimportant, and insignificant, of not mattering. Bissinger captures this view toward rural America in his description of Odessa, Texas: Across the country there were thousands of places just like it, places that were not only isolated but insulated, places that had gone through the growing pains of America without anyone paying attention, places that existed as islands unto themselves with no link to the great cities except that they all sang the same national anthem to the same flag at sporting events. They were the kind of places that you saw from a plane on a clear night if you happened to look out the window, a concentration of little beaded dots breaking up the empty landscape with several veins leading in and out, and then bleak emptiness once again.

It is a view that every traveler had seen a million times before, and maybe if you were a passenger on a plane bisecting the night you looked down and saw those lights and wondered what it would be like to live in an Odessa, to inhabit one of those infinitesimal dots, to be in a place that seemed so painfully far away from everything, so completely out of the mainstream of life. Perhaps you wondered what values people held on to in a place like that, what they cared about. Or perhaps you went back to your book, eager to get as far away as possible from that yawning maw that seemed so unimaginable, so utterly unimportant.

I knew that even those folks in cities that knew these realities saw them in abstract, detached sort of ways. I imagined some professor at the university lecturing on that very topic: “The reality is that politics and policy is urban. Ever since the Supreme Court decision on apportionment, the “one-man, one-vote” notion, rural political power has been eroding. The eyes through which national and state problems are perceived, solutions crafted

and policy formed, wear urban glasses. The sensibilities of our country have become predominately urban; rural just doesn't come into view. As Berger and Luckman would say, rural is no longer a significant part of our social construction of reality. If rural does come into view at all it is usually in a somewhat condescending sense. As the great Nebraska poet John Neihardt said, There is a curious notion abroad that just the fact of living in a city somehow renders one superior to people living in rural surroundings. Remember, read chapters 5 and 6 in the text and be prepared for a test next week."

Sitting there in the truck, looking at what was left of somebody's dream, listening to the quiet, and feeling the pull of the river below me, I felt a little sad about it all. I thought: "It would be one thing if this indifference meant that rural would be just left alone, that rural folks could go about their lives and business without being bothered. But, that isn't the case. The rural economy and rural existence is so intertwined with national stuff, even global stuff, that an isolated existence isn't possible, even if urban America would allow it. In fact, this lovely stretch of river is less and less locally owned every year. It is all very depressing. The fact is that urban America has designs for rural places. They need rural places for food, fuel, waste disposal, recreation, power generation, and so on. The problem is that rural's ability to influence, to have a say, in any of this is rapidly declining. Urban takes what it wants and leaves rural out of the mix."

As I pondered these issues of power and inequity, a big, ugly, black crow flew down and landed on the roof of the cabin. He let out one of its screechy, squawks as if he was acknowledging my thesis. So, I continued: "Are we saying rural matters in the same way any minority group says it matters---are rural folk no different from blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, Women, People with Disabilities, People of Color? Are we simply talking about rights, protection, fair share, equality, justice, etc.? Does rural mattering ultimately come down to a legal issue? Is the best hope for rural in the courts?" He turned his head and gave a rather condescending look as he flew away uttering one more squawk.

The sun was sinking, growing the tree shadows eastward. The question of rural mattering was once again feeling like a burden, a big weight that was sitting on my shoulders. I turned the key in the ignition, put the truck in gear and moved on. I was just around the bend from my destination and ready to leave this rural mattering debate behind. Sunny Brook Canoe Camp was founded and is still operated by a ranching family whose ancestors made their way here in an ox drawn wagon coming over from Minnesota into South Dakota and then down into Nebraska. As I rounded the bend to east edge of the camp I spooked a flock of turkeys. They flew up and landed in a pasture up the hill from the road. Around the next curve I saw one of the camp vans parked in the pasture between the road and the river. Steve was out checking on some of his cattle. I waved at him. He ambled over and I got out to greet him. Steve and his dad, Roy, run Sunny Brook Camp as well as a ranching operation. Roy, who was getting on in years and had spent his first ten years in a log cabin not too far up the road from where we stood, recently moved into Valentine, where his father had been one of the first blacksmiths. I'd known Roy and Steve for going on 15 years. My friends and I had been camping on their property during fall turkey hunting season since the mid-eighties. They'd been great hosts and generally all around good folks. The kind of folks you expect to find in rural areas.

I explained to Steve that I'd been driving around all day studying on this rural matters question and wondered if he had anybody staying in the big cabin. He allowed as how he didn't. So, I asked him if he'd rent it to me for the night and he agreed. He asked me a little more and I tried to explain my dilemma. He finally said, "Well I can see how that might be troublesome. But, we all know what we're doing here." I felt a little foolish, like I'd told him that I'd been struggling with the value of air and he'd said, "well, we all need it to breathe." He must have felt a little sorry for me, maybe I looked a little dejected, because he added: "Of course, it may be a little hard to get city folks to understand that." I nodded. He went on, "...and its probably just as hard for us to understand them." I wasn't so sure he wasn't talking about me, but I smiled and nodded again; feeling a little like one of those silly nodding toy dolls people have in the rear windows or dashboards of their cars. He said, "Well, come on, let's get you situated." He got in the van and I followed him back to the camp.

Now, the big cabin actually sits on a little rise on the riverbank and has a big deck that's perfect for a quiet evening in the country. I parked the truck in front, grabbed my overnight bag and cooler, walked up the steps, tossed the bag inside, and headed for the deck followed by Steve's dog. I pulled up a lounge chair, set the cooler down next to me and positioned myself to watch the sunset. It was nice just to relax for a bit after being in the truck all day. To just let the road's bounce and grind seep out of my bones; to watch the sun sink in the west. I looked across the river to land that was now part of the Nature Conservancy's 50,000 acres. I was glad for that; it was pristine land that would be preserved. Land that wouldn't turn into resort condos or hobby ranches even though this side of the river was an ever-growing string of canoe camps. I just sat there petting the head of the dog next to me and watching the sun get bigger as it moved toward the horizon.

I looked at the dog. He looked back at me. He had that sort of plaintive look like no matter what you could do it would never quite give him the attention he deserved. He was one of those cattle dogs that did more to keep critters in line and moving in the right direction than any ten men on horseback. I scratched behind his ears and said, "So, if rural matters, does urban matter, and if so, in what way or ways?" He just turned his head so I could scratch another spot. I had to admit that urban probably mattered in many of the same ways that rural did. People found comfort in the city, excitement in its hustle and bustle, inspiration in its architecture, etc. And, there was the problem of the arts. That's always where the city folks went first in any comparison. It was always, well just think of the great theater, the galleries, the museums, the performances, and so on. We see the city as the center of culture, or at least high culture. It is the place where you can find the "best" in entertainment and the widest variety of choice. In most rural communities you didn't have theater multiplexes with a choice of dozens of different films. I asked, "well does it matter equally or does it matter more or less?" The dog just turned his head, pointing me to another spot that needed scratching. I clearly understood his indifference. After all, I'd had a day full of that stuff and wanted a break too. I scratched some more, looked at the river and thought about Gretel Ehrlich's words: We are often like rivers: careless and forceful, timid and dangerous, lucid and muddied, eddying, gleaming, still.

Identifying more with the "muddied" part than the "lucid," I opened a root beer, pulled out some cheese sticks and took a bite of my Ainsworth apple. Steve's wife, who teaches school up the road in a little country school, brought me some bedding for the night. I thought about asking her what her kids would say about rural mattering but she's kind of shy and I opted just to thank her and let her retreat to their doublewide. I had talked with rural teachers before and they often told me how angry their kids were, especially during the height of the recent farm crisis. Those rural kids were resentful, and I think a little hurt, that the rest of the country seemed so indifferent about their plight. Some of them felt betrayed that the folks for whom they grow food seemed not to care about them, their families, and what was happening to them.

As the sun sank below the western horizon it turned the clouds crimson with deep purple highlights, mirrored in the smooth flowing river. A perfect reflection of sky in water, the kind where you weren't quite sure which way was up. Time, for the moment, seemed suspended and I floated, first eastward with the river and then westward with the clouds. Back and forth like I'd been doing all day, covering the landscape of reasons why rural mattered. First with a laundry list of values like rural mattering as a place where we find solitude, solace, escape, adventure, peace, and recreation; as a source and incubator for American values and wisdom; the locus of what we mean by "community"; as a BIG part of our heritage; as a source of inspiration for the arts and humanities; as a grower of good people and good stories; as a place where people matter just because they're people; as a culture of caring and a strong work ethic; as a setting that allows for life on a human scale; as a place free from the stresses, competition, noise, clutter, and turmoil of cities; as a place where the pace of life is comfortable and change is manageable; as source of food, timber, fuel, and power; and, of course, some negative stuff like as dumping ground for waste, nuclear and other. Then, focusing on issues of power and indifference, of being left out, ignored, forgotten, shoved aside. Still I couldn't help thinking that I'd only scratched the surface, that there were bound to be many more reasons why rural matter and likely hundreds of nuisances and qualifications to the ones I'd already covered. I thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson's admonition: The great gifts are not got by analysis.

The dog let out one of those whimper-snorts that dogs do in their sleep. I sighed, well aware that some of my reflecting was pure nostalgia and a little idealistic. I worried that I was just pandering to the wealth of rural mythology. And, here I was after a full day's worth of focusing on this dam question without any definite conclusions or revelation. I felt like the guy who goes into the wilderness and gets lost; wanders around for days only to end up at the same place he started, still lost.

Looking at the way the current of the river meandered from one side to the other, I thought: "As a culture we have always been somewhat ambivalent about rural. On the one hand we see rural as the locus, incubator of traditional American values, a place where the best of who we are comes from. On the other hand we see rural as the strong hold of conservative, and at times extremist, political views that limit progress on civil rights and environmental protection. Rural is at once both welcoming and insular; combining the notions of small town friendliness and suspicion of outsiders, taking care of our own and intolerance of the different, coming together in the face of adversity and family feuds that last for decades." I wondered just what rural was to most Americans today. As Hal Crowther says: Americans never turn sentimental about something of real value—wilderness, wild animals, small towns, baseball, mountain music, our privacy—until the way we live and do business has pressed it to the edge of extinction. Then we administer affection last rites to that which we failed to love enough.

The darkness deepened and the stars came out. The Big Dipper rose to the north, balancing on the horizon just above the hill. This was not the sky of the city where refracted light dulls the stars till they seem to be struggling to poke through a perpetual haze. In the country the stars jump out at you. Their brightness shines and twinkles the way they do in nursery rhymes. The night sky presses down on you, not in an oppressive sense but in a commanding, inspiring sense. It demands your attention. The stars give dimension, depth to the darkness and you truly began to feel the infinity of the universe. You understand ancient people's fascination with the stars and their naming of the constellations. Rural is where we connect with the sky, night or day; it is the only place where the heavens are truly open to us. Surely, that matters!

As I sat there, half-dozing, I could feel myself floating; as if I was some how suspended in the heavens, drifting, slowing turning like the rotation of the constellations. I remembered years ago the same Big Dipper hovering on that same hill as the northern lights danced in shimmering waves of translucent color before it. Like a dancer with swirling veils that changed from green to red to purple to white the sky that night was alive and I sat there transfixed by it for what seemed like hours. The Big Dipper, in its slow march across the stage of heaven, hung suspended behind the soft rainbow colored curtain, alive as it danced in the night sky. It was experiences like that which allowed me to understand the words of Sharon Butala: Yet driving home from some errand in Regina, late at night on a deserted and lonely highway, I often looked out my side window and saw above the hills a few small white stars, points of light in boundless darkness. Once, as I gazed up at them, my heart, a live thing in my chest, leaped, cracked and then hung there, aching. At that moment it seemed a thing apart from the me I knew, and it yearned with an intensity that was deeply sorrowful to go back to the immensity from which it declared itself to have come.

I felt a great sense of peace, a confidence that even if I couldn't make my case to suburban soccer moms from New Jersey, in the great scheme of things, rural mattered. I thought of Clay Jenkison's admonition, In the ideal existence, the essential moments of life are rooted in a meaningful landscape and they are inconceivable elsewhere. I pulled the blanket around me and drifted off to sleep thinking again of the quote from Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.

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