

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

BEYOND THE MYTH OF RURAL AMERICA

Its inhabitants are as much creatures of state power and industrial capitalism as their city-dwelling counterparts.

By Daniel Immerwahr

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Grant Wood's sister, Nan Wood Graham, and his dentist, Byron McKeeby, stand by the painting for which they had posed, "American Gothic." Photograph courtesy Figge Art Museum, City of Davenport Art Collection, Grant Wood Archive, SB-4

Demanding that your friend pull the car over so you can examine an unusual architectural detail is not, I'm told, endearing. But some of us can't help ourselves. For the painter Grant Wood, it was an incongruous Gothic window on an otherwise modest frame house in Eldon, Iowa, that required stopping. It looked as if a cottage were impersonating a cathedral. Wood tried to imagine who "would fit into such a home." He recruited his sister and his dentist as models and costumed them in old-fashioned attire. The result, "American Gothic," as he titled the painting from 1930, is probably the most famous art work ever produced in the United States.

The painting was also decidedly enigmatic. Was it biting satire? Grim realism? Proud patriotism? In the words of the late Thomas Hoving, a longtime director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the image served as a "Rorschach test for the character of the nation."

For Wood, however, the meaning was clear. Although he faced "a storm of protest from Iowa farm wives"—one threatened to "smash my head," he recalled—he had painted "American Gothic" with sympathy. Cities dominated culture, he wrote, yet they were "far less typically American" than the rural places "whose power they usurped." In 1935, Wood, who was born on an Iowa farm forty-four years earlier, published the manifesto "Revolt Against the City."

In decrying urban dominance, Wood had a point. The 1920 census marked the first time that urbanites made up a majority of the nation's population, and city dwellers weren't humble about their ascendance. New magazines like H. L. Mencken's *The American Mercury* (founded in 1924) and, indeed, this one (founded in 1925) touted metropolitan virtues with more than a touch of

snobbery. “Main Street,” Sinclair Lewis’s best-selling novel from 1920, captured the tone. “There was no dignity” in small-town life, its protagonist reflects, only “a savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations.”

At first, Wood had nodded along. He’d devoured Mencken, adored “Main Street,” and tried to stir up Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with a “bohemian” art colony. He visited France and returned with a Parisian beard, a form of preening for which his Iowa neighbors had little patience. Yet his outlook changed—and so did his beard. The financial collapse of 1929 robbed the “Eastern capitals of finance and politics” of their magic, he wrote. He named Mencken and “Main Street” as part of the problem. It would be better, he thought, to take cues from the “extraordinary independence” of farmers and the sturdy, homegrown cultures of the provinces. A bohemian no longer, Wood shaved his face and put on overalls.

It was, in general, an overalls era. Many enduring images of rural America are from the nineteen-thirties—Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Little House on the Prairie,” Dorothea Lange’s classic photograph “Migrant Mother,” Margaret Mitchell’s “Gone with the Wind,” Zora Neale Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town,” and John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath.” The run culminated in the “Wizard of Oz” film, in which Dorothy spurns an Emerald City for a Kansas farm, declaring, “There’s no place like home.”

All that was generations ago, yet the obsession with rural authenticity sounds all too familiar. In 2008, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin insisted that small towns were the “real America,” where hardworking, patriotic people lived. That sentiment has only gained political potency since. Underlying the country’s red state–blue state polarization is a more profound, and widening, rural-urban split. Donald Trump’s election was, Politico

declared, the “revenge of the rural voter.”

Scholars who have spoken with those voters, such as Katherine Cramer, in “The Politics of Resentment” (2016), and Robert Wuthnow, in “The Left Behind” (2018), report a sense of deep alienation. Rural people feel—in terms much like those Grant Wood laid out in 1935—that their authentic, independent way of life is under threat from an out-of-touch urban élite.

But is that picture accurate? A piercing, unsentimental new book, “The Lies of the Land” (Chicago), by the historian Steven Conn, takes the long view.

Wistful talk of “real America” aside, Conn, who teaches at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio, argues that the rural United States is, in fact, highly artificial. Its inhabitants are as much creatures of state power and industrial capitalism as their city-dwelling counterparts. But we rarely acknowledge this, Conn writes, because many of us—urban and rural, on the left and the right—“don’t quite want it to be true.”

The category “rural” spans a vast range, including small towns, reservations, timberlands, and ranches. One thing that unites such places, however, is that they’re rarely thought of as particularly modern. In the “natural order of things,” Adam Smith wrote in “The Wealth of Nations,” agrarian life precedes urbanization: history starts with people working the land, and only after they succeed are cities possible. In this account, rural people are, like horseshoe crabs, holdovers—living representatives of a distant past. Hence the frequent judgment that life beyond cities is more “rooted” or, less sympathetically, “backward.”

Events unfolded differently in the United States, though. There *were* long-standing rural communities that sought to pass their ways and lands down through history—but they faced a devastating invasion from across the

Atlantic. There are still places where people have lived continuously for centuries, such as the millennium-old Acoma Pueblo, in New Mexico. But the rural Americans with the deepest roots, the Native ones, were very often violently dispossessed.

The people who replaced them, meanwhile, were transplants, less sprung from the soil than laid like sod over Indigenous lands. Settlers liked to imagine that their takeover was swift and natural, that Native Americans were already en route to extinction. This was a consoling myth. The process of uprooting one rural people and implanting another took time, and heavy state intervention. By the official count, Indigenous people fought 1,642 military engagements against the United States. The ensuing treaties, the historian Robert Lee calculates, cost the U.S. government billions of dollars.

Settlers styled themselves as pioneers who had won their land with their bare hands. This is how it went in “Little House on the Prairie,” with the frontier family racing ahead of the law to seize Indian property. (“Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve” would have been a more accurate title, the literary scholar Frances W. Kaye has archly suggested.) Yet in the end land ownership came, directly or indirectly, from the state. The Homestead Act of 1862, along with its successors, gridded up and gave away an area the size of Pakistan. And although homesteading sounds like a relic from the sepia-toned past, its most active period came, the historian Sara Gregg has pointed out, in the twentieth century. The final homesteader got his land in 1988.

One irony is that—after Indigenous towns—it’s the havens of the East Coast élite, such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, which have the deepest roots. Most bastions of “real America” are, by contrast, relatively new. Wasilla, Alaska, where Sarah Palin served as mayor, really is a small town in a farming area. But most of its farms were created by a New Deal campaign to relocate struggling farmers from the Upper Midwest. (Hence Palin’s “you betcha”

accent, similar to the Minnesota ones in the film “Fargo.”) Palin’s proud patch of “real America,” in other words, was courtesy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The historically recent arrival of settlements like Palin’s Wasilla or the “American Gothic” town of Eldon gives them a copy-paste quality. The striking outfits of Grant Wood’s models weren’t homespun; he’d ordered them from Sears, Roebuck & Co. in Chicago. And the Gothic window that had grabbed his attention? It wasn’t the product of a distinctive local culture, either. Eldon had existed for barely a decade when that window was installed. It, too, had been mail-ordered from Sears.

Wherever the clothes were from, the image of a stalwart couple humbly working their own land came to represent rural America. Wood described the pair as “tintypes from my own family album,” and, indeed, his parents had tilled a plot in Iowa. Yet that sort of farming marked only a brief moment in Wood’s family history. His maternal grandparents were innkeepers, not farmers, and his paternal ones had been Virginia slaveholders. When Wood was ten, his family left the farm for the city of Cedar Rapids, where Wood set out to be a jeweller.

The Woods weren’t unusual. One of Steven Conn’s great themes is the evanescence of those “American Gothic”-style farms. Although “we tend to equate *rural* with *farm*,” he writes, small, general farms “disappeared more than half a century ago, at least.” Agriculture has become a capital-intensive, high-tech pursuit, belying the “left behind” story of rural life. Fields resemble factories, where automation reigns and more than two-thirds of the hired workforce is foreign-born. “To call 1,500 acres of corn, genetically modified to withstand harsh chemical pesticides and intended for a high-fructose corn syrup factory, a ‘farm’ is a bit like calling a highly automated GM factory a ‘workshop,’ ” Conn remarks.

Corporate dominance is hidden in agriculture: Apple products are sold by a high-profile, publicly traded multinational, but actual apples come from private companies that few people have ever heard of, like Gebbers Farms or Zirkle Fruit. The government classifies most as “family farms,” but this doesn’t mean they’re diminutive. “Family corporations” is what Conn calls the agribusiness operations that maintained family ownership for legal reasons. In agricultural processing and retailing, the mom-and-pop pretense quickly drops. The country’s largest food company is PepsiCo; it owns Rice-A-Roni, Sabra, Rold Gold, Doritos, Gatorade, and Quaker Oats.

You might think that this is how things work under capitalism, but U.S. agriculture is far from capitalist. Since the Depression, the government has aggressively managed the farming economy, variously limiting supply, ginning up demand, and stabilizing prices. “When it comes to agriculture, there is no such thing as the free market,” the head of the food-processing-and-procuring conglomerate Archer Daniels Midland explained in 1995. Certainly, the overall effect of government policy was to favor large firms like his.

As conglomerates grew, most farmers and farmworkers were edged out. In the years since “American Gothic,” more than two-thirds of the country’s farms have disappeared, and tens of millions of people left for cities. Black farms were hit especially hard. In 1920, there were nearly a million of them; now there aren’t even thirty-five thousand.

The small farmers who stayed faced their own hardships. Performing at a Live Aid concert to benefit Ethiopian famine victims in 1985, Bob Dylan wondered if some of the money could be spared to support debt-ridden small farmers in his own country. It couldn’t, but Willie Nelson and others started an annual benefit concert, Farm Aid, treating farmers as charity cases. Farm Aid started during a downturn called the farm crisis, and it’s still going nearly forty years later. Small farmers have been in crisis so long, Conn observes, that the word

“crisis”—which suggests a deviation from the norm—has lost its meaning.

In truth, the ostensible norm, household farming, was a transitional phase—surprisingly brief, in many places—between Indigenous and industrial. Even in the heyday of pastoral mythmaking, when Wood froze the farming couple in time as the essence of rural America, that image was badly outdated. The Eldon house that Wood depicted, built in 1881, wasn’t the ancestral home of sturdy agrarians. The first owner lost it because of overdue taxes, the next tried unsuccessfully to turn it into a candy-and-novelty store, and the property changed hands many more times before Wood’s 1930 visit. By then, Eldon’s population decline had started. It had some eighteen hundred residents; it has less than half that now.

The small farmer, standing on his property with a pitchfork, has been an endangered species for a century. Today, a leaf blower would be a better symbol for those who tend the land. As the economist Brad DeLong notes, the Bureau of Labor Statistics counts more landscapers and groundskeepers than people working on farms.

If small, rugged farms have not filled the countryside, what has? This is Conn’s second great theme. For the past century, rural spaces have been preferred destinations for military bases, discount retail chains, extractive industries, manufacturing plants, and real-estate developments.

Consider Appalachia’s legendary southern mountains. These are the supposedly independent, isolated, and tradition-steeped hollows (or “hollers”) where moonshine was made, Hatfield-and-McCoy feuds once raged, and Dolly Parton’s Tennessee mountain home still stands. The venture capitalist J. D. Vance’s best-selling 2016 memoir, “Hillbilly Elegy,” is another unavoidable reference. Vance was born and raised in urban Ohio, but he grounded his

identity in the “beloved holler” in eastern Kentucky where his grandparents had lived until they were teen-agers. (“As Mamaw used to say, you can take the boy out of Kentucky, but you can’t take Kentucky out of the boy.”)

Conn rolls his eyes at much of this. The southern mountains aren’t exactly isolated, he says. Rather, since the Civil War they’ve been at the forefront of lumbering and coal mining; corporations have felled the forests, fouled the land, and then, for the most part, left. “Never mind the sentimental invocations of ‘hollers’ and moonshine and kinfolk,” Conn writes; a lot of Appalachian coal country is a “postindustrial moonscape of slag heaps, eroded hillsides, toxic retention pools, and abandoned towns.”

Other features of the southern mountains reward a second look. The bloody Hatfield-and-McCoy fight, which killed a dozen people between 1878 and 1890, is remembered as the eruption of an ancient honor culture. Yet the conflict, in which some McCoys took the Hatfield side and vice versa, is better understood as a logging-rights dispute prompted by deforestation and the arrival of the railroad. The Prohibition-era moonshine stills, similarly, can be seen as a desperate strategy—manufacturing and trafficking a controlled substance—by dispossessed people who had lost surer means of getting by.

If railroads allowed corporations to reach into Appalachia’s hollows, cars and trucks let them go everywhere. They could shift operations to the countryside, toward cheap land with few neighbors. Relocating also let employers outrun unions; when workers organized urban factories, firms opened rural branches.

This is the story of slaughterhouses. The perishability of meat used to mean that slaughterhouses had to be placed in population centers, near consumers; that’s why many cities have former meatpacking districts. Urban slaughterhouses were noxious environments, as Upton Sinclair’s Chicago-set novel, “The Jungle” (1906), described in excruciating detail. Understandably,

workers sought strong unions. After decades of trying, they prevailed in Chicago, in 1943.

Their victory was short-lived. Refrigerated trucking gave stockyard owners the flexibility to move wherever business conditions suited, which frequently meant anonymous, horizontal structures in the countryside. Someone writing “The Jungle” today, Conn speculates, would probably set it in Gainesville, Georgia, the self-described “Poultry Capital of the World.” Gainesville’s immense chicken-processing plants are heavily staffed by low-paid immigrants, non-unionized and often undocumented.

The story of how cities such as Chicago lost industrial jobs is well known; the story of how small towns gained them isn’t. Still, the “rural industrial boom” that started in earnest in the nineteen-sixties was, the historian Keith Orejel writes, “the defining economic process within the American heartland” in the latter part of the twentieth century. Faced with unrecoverable job losses in agriculture, small-town leaders courted manufacturers with subsidies, obliging regulations, and a cheap, non-unionized workforce.

Manufacturers, accepting this invitation, industrialized the rural landscape. Meanwhile, the Pentagon, also seeking cheap land, militarized it. The U.S. now contains more than four thousand military bases, with a combined acreage the size of Kentucky. Conn observes how this has fused rural people to the armed forces. By early 2007, nearly half the U.S. service members killed in Iraq had come from towns smaller than twenty-five thousand. A fifth were from towns smaller than five thousand.

For Eldon, jobs came from meatpacking, based in the nearby coal-mining town of Ottumwa. The “American Gothic” house looked onto an area called Pole Tail, where cattle were fed, herded with poles onto railroad cars, and sent to the slaughter.

Live by the meat hook, die by the meat hook. The financier Eli Black bought the Ottumwa meat plant in the late nineteen-sixties; before long he merged it with United Fruit and started trimming costs with layoffs. Then Ottumwa's meatpackers pushed back, and in 1973 Black shuttered the plant. Production was shifted to South Dakota, where he had found a more compliant labor culture. The blow hit Eldon and its environs hard. Trucking firms, utilities, local schools, and sports leagues all "went bye-bye," one employee recalled.

As the region staggered, the "American Gothic" house fell into disrepair, with its windows broken and its white paint fading to gray. By 1977, it had acquired a bullet hole—in a bedroom wall. In the eighties, a family of four rented the house. The father had been a factory worker but was now unemployed; a newspaper described him as a "weed cutter." He and his wife had chosen the house because it was cheap, "on account of tourists sometimes nosing around." Even so, the couple's parents had to pay the rent.

This is how it goes, Conn argues. With so few income sources available, rural people depend heavily on each employer. The opening of a mine, a factory, or a military base might bring flush times, but their closure spells ruin. While cities are, by their diversity, hedged against economic fluctuations, small towns lie dangerously exposed. That's why they were so devastated by the trade liberalization of the nineteen-nineties and, particularly, China's entry into the World Trade Organization, in 2001. Jobs that had once left the city for the countryside moved abroad, causing a rural manufacturing collapse that rivals the urban one of the nineteen-seventies. Rural deindustrialization has received less notice, but it's been potentially "more painful," Conn observes, given workers' lack of other options. Where metropolitan employment bounced back from the recession of 2007-08 in five years, rural employment still hasn't recovered.

As jobs rush out, discount retail chains swoop in—notably Dollar General, which has more than four times as many stores in the U.S. as Walmart.

Although its former chief executive, Cal Turner, Jr., has written a book about Dollar General’s “small-town values,” the corporation essentially preys on distressed rural communities. It pursues profits by minimizing staff and pay, and by shutting its stores whenever they stop making money.

You can find a Dollar General half a mile from the “American Gothic” house; the store is now one of only two places in Eldon to buy groceries. But there is no guarantee it will stay. “We’re kind of gypsies,” Turner has bragged of his company. “We can close a store and be gone in 24 hours.”

A laid-off veteran buying Rice-A-Roni at Dollar General isn’t our favored image of rural life. But it’s more accurate than the farmhouse tableau of “American Gothic.” And it’s an image especially worth contemplating today, as rural discontent increasingly drives politics.

Although politics has always had an urban-rural fissure, in the past decade it has become a clean break. Democrats dominate in high-density places. Not one of the ten largest cities chose a Republican mayor in its most recent elections, and only two of the top thirty did. Republicans, meanwhile, reign in low-density places, with the notable exceptions of Native American reservations and the Black Belt, in the South.

It’s now possible to interpret elections in geographical terms: Democrats win cities, Republicans win rural areas, and the main question is which way the suburbs will break. Although we normally think of suburbs as outgrowths of cities, Conn notes that they sit on formerly rural land and are often filled with formerly rural people. They are as much “post-rural” as “sub-urban,” and their politics show it.

For city dwellers, this geographical line-drawing is ominous. Rural people are a fifth of the population yet punch well above their weight in elections. The constitutional allocation of two senators for every state gives low-density states outsized representation. This is why, in the past six senatorial elections, Democrats received thirty-four million more votes over all and yet had an outright majority of senators only once. Since a state is allocated two Presidential electors for its two senators, the rural advantage skews Presidential elections, too; in the past six, Democrats won the popular vote five times but the Presidency only three. “Why Cities Lose,” a clarifying book by the political scientist Jonathan A. Rodden, explains how similar mechanisms, operating in district-based elections, give Republicans an edge in the House of Representatives and state legislatures.

Still, it’s not as if rural people—who die younger and are far more likely to take their own lives—are winning in a larger sense. The surprise hit song of the summer, topping the *Billboard* charts, was “Rich Men North of Richmond,” by Oliver Anthony, a onetime factory worker from the former coal-mining town of Farmville, Virginia. The song is a furious protest aimed at a distant élite. One might regard Anthony’s anger, which includes a dig at welfare recipients, as misdirected. But half the households in Farmville make less than thirty-seven thousand dollars. Can anyone really say that his rage is baseless?

In the past decade, rural voters have transformed the Republican Party, pushing aside élite-favored politicians like Jeb Bush in favor of ones like Trump. Although some of Trump’s hobbyhorses—windmills, low-flush toilets—are idiosyncratic, his talk of “disastrous trade deals” and shuttered factories is not. Trump took rural deindustrialization seriously and, astonishingly, turned the market-friendly G.O.P. against globalization. The high-profile “hillbilly” J. D. Vance is now a Republican senator of the MAGA persuasion.

In 2020, Trump lost the national popular vote by four points but won the Iowa

county containing Eldon by twenty-four. The “revolt against the city” of Grant Wood’s day has become something like a war. Understanding it will require setting myths aside and grappling with what the rich and the powerful have done to rural spaces and people. Such demystification, Conn rightly insists, is long overdue. Because, when you look at “American Gothic” today, it isn’t the architecture that catches your eye. It’s the pitchfork. ♦

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