

# Loving rural America to death

By A.E. Luloff and Gene L. Theodori

There is no joy in being a myth-breaker, but the time comes when the truth must come out.

One of the most venerable myths in American society is that Americans cherish unspoiled nature and the great outdoors. It is in their blood to seek horizons free of billboards, cable TV dishes and high-rise motels.

In theory, this myth has a great deal of truth to it as a legacy of (Thomas) Jefferson and (Henry) Thoreau. In reality, while Americans praise the simple pleasures of the country, few want to live far from the amenities of the city. The implications for our shrinking rural areas could be ominous.

A study of four communities in semi-rural Pennsylvania counties illustrates these contradictions. Each site represents a different relationship between their urban and rural sectors, both from a demographic and cultural perspective.

The east central section of Snyder County, roughly proximate to Middleburg (the county seat), is overwhelmingly rural, with no urban presence or pressure. The situation is similar in south central Bedford County (the area surrounding Bedford, the county seat), which has limited urban presence but no urban pressure. Crawford County, south of Erie, is marked by an urban presence (the city of Meadville and its surrounding communities), but no urban pressure. Finally, the study area in Lancaster County, east of Lancaster and surrounding Leacock Township, is celebrated for its fertile soil and productive agribusiness, yet at the same time experiencing both urban presence and urban pressure in the form of pronounced population growth and suburban sprawl.

Conventional wisdom would have us choose the Snyder County area as the

most idyllic place. We would assume that folks there would have the most interaction with their neighbors, family and close friends and be most likely to feel at home and loath to leave. But, oddly enough, the most popular county proved to be the most urban, Lancaster. Residents of the study area in Lancaster County reported significantly higher levels of community attachment and feeling at home than the residents of both the Snyder and Crawford County study sites, although all four counties reported equal amounts of interest in their town.

An explanation seems simple: of the four counties, Lancaster offers the best example of small-town living within a metropolitan orbit. The presence of the Old Order Amish and the picturesque setting of the natural environment — coupled with its proximity to Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. — make Lancaster a most desirable place to live or seek retirement. Its physical location along with rural quality-of-life factors and accessible urban amenities all contribute to a high level of community attachment in Lancaster County.

In addition, Lancaster has a more robust economy with agricultural, residential, commercial and industrial

interests all prospering. While residents already face difficult decisions about agricultural preservation and growth management, the economic security plus urbanization and a strong agricultural presence in Lancaster County helps create contentment.

What all this suggests is that most Americans, when choosing between urban and rural surroundings, want to have their cake and eat it, too. That may be increasingly hard to do as times goes on.

Even as urban solutions are tried, many core cities continue to deteriorate. Urban solutions will be even less successful in rural areas. Rural districts, indeed, have serious problems of their own, not the least of which are poverty and the outmigration of young people. However, cloning suburban "development" in previously pristine rural areas does violence to rural America on two scores.

First, the ambience of rural locales, so attractive to city dwellers, will be destroyed by clusters of strip malls, fast food restaurants, motels and truck stops (even if these do, after a fashion, "create jobs.") A second factor, often overlooked by urbanites who hanker to "go back to the land," is that density of

population alone does not distinguish rural from urban America. People have different outlooks in rural America, and they do different things for a living. If they have decent options, they will choose to stay in a rural area and savor its slow-paced, more neighborly rhythm of life. For the most part, rural Americans are dedicated and industrious workers and would provide a solid labor force for companies with a social and ecological sensibility.

Urbanites who descend upon small towns have to be willing to accept the amenities that are available: a small liberal arts university, historic sites and museums, outdoor entertainment and state parks with ample opportunity for family activities. Other retail and culinary amenities, or rather indulgences, they would do well to leave behind. Otherwise, they have simply brought the city with them. Instead of having the best of both worlds, they will have neither, and rural America will be bequeathed to our descendants only in theme parks.

Like Lancaster, Centre County has viable agricultural, residential, commercial and industrial interests at play here. In some places in the Centre Region, these interests have coexisted nicely; in others, they have done less

well. Being able to coexist requires a commitment to community in the broadest sense of the word. To the degree that we can achieve a sense of community here, one visible from actions and not words, then we can very much reflect the Lancaster experience. Will we?

While the conversion of verdant farmlands and hardwood forests to commercial, residential and/or industrial development has been a common experience, the long-term results of these changes are only now being understood. A loss of open and recreation spaces, coupled with the movement of many urban amenities to the rural and small town communities, has been a double-edged sword. Jobs and income opportunities have not offset the loss of community vitality in many of these places.

It is time our policy-makers — local, state and federal — focus on the problems associated with unmanaged growth in our rural areas. Not all change is good or welcomed.

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