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Country Lifers Reconsidered: Educational Reform for Rural America

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical aspects of Roosevelt's Country Life movement and the short-term and long-term effects it had on rural education. It also discusses the possibility that some components of the past curricula used during the Country Life movement may still be appropriate for rural schools today.

INTRODUCTION

In late Fall, 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech in Lansing, Michigan. In it he said that "there is but one person whose welfare is as vital to the welfare of the whole country as is that of the wage worker who does manual labor, and that is the tiller of the soil, the farmer" (Report of the Commission on Country Life, 1911, p. 121). Over the course of the next few months the Lansing speech became the rationale for the creation of the Commission on Country Life. For people concerned about rural education—whether they are aware of it or not—this historical episode has some significance. A close look at the circumstances surrounding the genesis of Roosevelt's Country Life movement provides an interesting perspective on current educational concerns.

Roosevelt and a few of his friends felt there was something wrong in rural America. The commission was created to make it right. But Roosevelt's speeches and the commissioners' report never specifically spelled out what the "problem" was. To solve it, however, the commissioners came up with several prescriptions, including better maintenance of rural roads, improving rural churches, creating a postal savings bank system, advocating the extension of the Farmer's Insitute concept and, the prescription that received the most emphasis, reforming rural schools.

Essentially there were but two Country Life prescriptions for reforming the country schools: 1) infuse a love of the countryside with an experience-based curriculum, and 2) consolidate country schools into one central location. Curricular prescriptions were grounded in the "new education" of the period. They were a reaction to the poverty of recitation pedagogy governed by the switch, as well as the fact that during the first ten years of the new century only one in four rural students was completing the eighth grade. Additionally, "new educators" were disillusioned by the statistics which indicated that only $13 was spent on rural students per year while $28 was spent on city pupils. Clearly there were grounds, at least, for some type of reform. It has been the commissioners' advocation of consolidation that has caught the eye of history-minded rural educators looking back at the circumstances surrounding the Country Life movement.

Because Roosevelt and company never precisely defined the rural "problem," it was easy to assume that this problem was essentially nonexistent, that it was fictitiously contrived to enable Roosevelt and his cadre of intellectuals to impose an urban school model on the countryside. Consolidation, it has been argued by present-day observers, is and was synonymous with urbanization. Current historical scholarship perpetuates this theme (Bowers, 1974, and Danbom, 1979). One historian has suggested that the Country Life movement was an opportunity for urban people to give voice to their notions of rural ignorance "which had lain just beneath the surface" of the commissioner's report. Others have contributed slightly more sophisticated analyses and have suggested that urban Country Lifers were trying to destroy the democratic district system because it was inefficient. The result of this type of

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analysis has been that the historical foundation of present thought about rural education maintains that scholars, intellectuals, politicians, business leaders, and urban people in general, have been out to "urbanize" (through consolidation) little country schools. And because most of the eight member Commission on Country Life were urban dwellers, the Country Life movement has served to legitimize this interpretation.

With this foundation, rural educational research has proceeded along certain lines with a somewhat predictable character. For instance, Alan DeYoung's (1987) review of rural educational research reveals that most studies fall in one of three categories. Either, 1) they seek to address staffing, expenditure, or instructional problems directly related to decreasing enrollments; 2) they contrast and compare rural with urban education to prove that rural schools can be viable; or 3) they prescribe innovative strategies (e.g. economic development, school-business partnerships) to combat decreasing enrollments. An underlying assumption in each case is that urban professional educators or politicians are out to destroy rural schools. Traditionally, the Country Life movement has served as a lightning rod for this view of the world. It is the purpose of this paper, however, to provide an alternative interpretation of the Country Life movement and the motives of the Country Lifers which might suggest that another line of educational research could benefit rural America.

WHAT WAS THE COUNTRY LIFE MOVEMENT?

A major drawback in current scholarship concerned with the Country Life movement is that little attempt is made to frame it within the broader context of the Progressive era in America. This is troublesome, for the movement was most certainly an outgrowth of prevailing political, economic, and ideological conditions that evolved during the crisis period of the 1890s.

It was during the 1890s that America came face to face with its urbanism. The overextension of American rail companies contributed to a financial panic, to that point, unparalleled in our nation's history. Sixteen thousand businesses failed, 70,000 strikes occurred, and the nation's unemployment rate reached an unprecedented 25 percent. Statistics, however, tell only half the story. The violence that accompanied corporate strike breaking activities astonished contemporary observers. In Homestead, Pennsylvania, for instance, 32,000 Pinkertons were hired to put down the 1892 Homestead Steel strike. That was more than the entire standing U.S. army at the time. Everything that occurred during the Progressive period should be analyzed with this backdrop, including the Country Life movement. Roosevelt's choice to head the commission, Cornell University Dean, Liberty Hyde Bailey, frequently voiced his opinion about the role of rural America in the conflict between labor and capital:

> Civilization oscillates between two poles. At one extreme is the so-called laboring class, and at the other are the syndicated and corporate and monopolized interests. Between these two poles is the great agricultural class, which is the natural balance-force or the middle wheel of society. (Bailey, 1911, p. 16).

Rail companies tried to squeeze out a troubled existence during the panic by severely taxing farmers who shipped grain on short hauls. Farmer protest was voiced in a surprisingly unified Populist movement which actually won control of a few farm-belt state assemblies. Although a variety of forces silenced the Populist movement, not the least of which were higher commodity prices and lowered rail rates, urban attention to rural affairs continued unabated. Historians dealing with the Country Life movement have generally failed to provide a framework for understanding this sustained attention to rural life and their efforts at delineating the motives of Country Life reformers were thereby diminished.

The first, and in some ways most significant, deficiency in current scholarship concerning the Country Life movement is the failure to acknowledge the prevalence of an organic scientific view. The impact of William Graham Sumner's essays explicating Social Darwinism on subsequent social science is a matter of record. It was a popular belief that societies existed as organic entities and that, like any organism, society possessed a life-cycle of birth, growth, decline, and ultimately, death. The signs of the times at the turn of the century seemed to indicate that America was in rapid decline. When the world was viewed in evolutionary terms, it is not difficult to comprehend how the fall of agriculture as the profession of nine-tenths of the population at the nation's founding, to one third in 1900, could be viewed as an alarming circumstance. Bailey (1911) saw the situation this way, "The city sits like a parasite, running out its roots into the open country and draining it of its substance. Mankind has not yet worked out this organic relation of town and country" (p. 20). Others

commented that rural communities were "vital parts of the economic organism of the world" (Anderson, 1906, p. 6).

Add to this Frederick Jackson Turner's (1920) contribution that as of 1893 the frontier was closed, that the vast expanses of available land had been purchased, and one might be led to ponder what impact this would hold for democracy; which, according to Turner, derived its virility from the frontier experience. Worried about what it all meant for rural America, Bailey wrote in 1911, "We have had a new-land society," but "we are now in an era when our real agricultural development will begin" (p. 6). Writing somewhat later, Turner (1920) himself expressed some doubt as to whether American institutions "have acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike those in the days of their origins" (p. 4).

The philosophy of William James also had an impact in shaping American questions concerning dramatic shifts in the political economy. James criticized the excess profit of gilded age capitalists and, as a Harvard professor, legitimized a sort of Thoreauvian conception of the sanctity of manual labor. For James (1911), "lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or on being" (p. 255). A contemporary of English agrarian intellectuals John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, James provided a philosophical foundation for lamenting the decline of agriculture as a profession and inspired the generation of "urban agrarians," as one historian has referred to them, who would become the standard bearers of the Country Life movement. Most notable among them, of course, was James's pupil at Harvard, Theodore Roosevelt.

But there were other factors involved. Sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1917) published *The Theory of the Leisure Class.* Like James, Veblen criticized the decadence, affluence, and "conspicuous consumption" of the wealthy classes. For many Americans, Veblen's work crystallized the polarization of moral agrarianism and decadent industrialism.

Ray Stannard Baker, a respected Midwestern journalist, became a popular novelist just after the turn of the century using the pen name David Grayson. Grayson's books built upon the implications of the work of James and Veblen. In *Adventures in Contentment* (1906) and a series of similar novels and short stories, Grayson idyllized the agrarian simple life. His books were very popular. *Three Acres and Liberty* (1907) written by Bolton Hall, was a prescription for urbanites who wanted to partake of the virtues involved with working the soil. Books in this vein demonstrate the pervasiveness of urban concern with the condition of rural America.

Many factors, however, served to highlight the rural-urban differentiation in American society near the turn of the century. On one hand, the political economy of a rapidly industrializing society led many people to question the stability of traditional American values and institutions. For many, the tenets of industrialism seemed degrading, harsh, even cruel, when compared to the tenets of agrarianism. One might expect an individual harboring this notion to feel an affinity for the Country Life movement.

On a more scientific level, the demise of agriculture on a percentage basis within the population sounded an alarm among social evolutionists. The publication of Wilbert Anderson's, *The Country Town: A Study of Rural Evolution* (1906) clearly spoke of the dangers of the new industrial order. He wrote prophetically when he commented that "the first effect of farm machinery" will be the "departure of the farmer's boy from the home" (p. 23).

This, more than any other circumstance, was at the heart of the Country Life movement. To have a healthy society, many believed that a prosperous rural population was a necessity. If Turner, James, Veblen, Baker, Hall, and others had merely provided rationale for idyllizing agrarian life, there would have been no need for the Country Life Commission. However, each intimated that industrialism was creeping into rural America, threatening to do severe damage. In a Darwinian sense, Country Lifers believed that it was the fittest who were leaving the countryside for the city, and that this, in time, would leave a legacy of mediocrity in rural society. As Anderson (1906) put it, "Much has been said, and truly, of the removal of the upper stratum of country society to the city. . . it is the cream that is skimmed off (p. 23). No more evidence was needed than the tremendously popular works of Hamlin Garland in the 1890s. *Main Travelled Roads* (1893) was a collection of short stories which vividly portrayed the migration of rural talent down well travelled roads to the city. *Prairie Folks* (1899) was a less than complimentary account of the drudgery of farm life which led to cityward migration.

This is not to suggest that Country Lifers had no ulterior motives. Historians have shown clearly that the early 1900s were a time of rising food prices. A Country Life movement that made agriculture more efficient would certainly lower these costs. But there is a problem with suggesting lowered food costs were the primary motivation of Country Lifers. These reformers urged cooperation to attack and defeat the "middle man" system, something which would benefit producers as well as consumers. They acknowledged the fact that there would always be some country dwellers

moving to the city, but they certainly did not want this number artificially inflated by technological dispossession. In fact, most contended that America needed "more good farmers" (Davis, 1913). This would hardly seem to be the position taken by a group interested in lowering food costs. While Country Lifers advocated rural electrification, telephones, mechanization, etc., their reason for doing so was to improve the quality of rural living by tranforming agricultural labor into something less physical. This is why Country Lifers were so intent on cautioning farmers against land-hunger and greed. They hoped that countrymen could content themselves with the virtues of simple living. As one journalist put it:

> It is a pity that the money test has come to be, to so many, almost the sole standard of values. The elevation of country life, about which we are beginning to hear a great deal, must be attained, if at all, by a general recognition of the solid worth of other elements in the life work. We must all care more for the things that are worth doing in themselves and less for the immediate earnings in solid cash (*The Country Gentleman*, 1908, p. 910).

The Country Life movement was not about converting agrarian values along industrial lines, but rather it was about perpetuating existing rural values in the face of rising cityward migration. Increasing urbanization and immigration in the first years of the twentieth century frightened many observers who believed the strength of the nation was derived from "native stock" in the countryside. As one rural sociologist put it, "To those who hold the belief that the safety of a nation can be maintained only through sustaining a just communion of all its essential parts, and especially the purity of rural life, does it not seem an ever increasing and pressing necessity that the agrarian rights and powers of a people should be ever more vigilantly guarded?" (Bookwalter, 1911, p. 292). Bailey (1911) agreed, "In the accelerating mobility of our civilization it is increasingly important that we may have anchoring places; and these anchoring places are the farms" (p. 17). Although a few historians see it as an urban-based movement, largely because most of the eight commission members had urban backgrounds, the majority of the real catalysts in the Country Life movement were Midwesterners who grew up or lived in places like Crawfordsville, Indiana; DeKalb, Illinois; and Mount Vernon, Iowa (Bowers, 1974).

The impression left by current scholarship is that had Country Lifers "known rural America better," they would not have tried to implement the goals of their commission which were "perceived through urban glasses" (Danbom, 1979, p. 81). Without commenting on whether Country Lifers were right, wrong, good, or bad; however, I would like to suggest it was because they knew rural America intimately that they prescribed their reform agenda. In 1908 Bailey warned that those discussing rural social organization who "approach the subject with the idea that the countryman is unresponsive or incompetent, are not really in sight of the problem and would better let it alone. One who judges country life by city standards, as many persons do, would also better let the problem alone" (p. 66).

The author of such insights scarcely seems to merit the characterization of "ignorance, arrogance, and an undemocratic tendency" (Danbom, 1979, p. 58). The commission report itself urges that "centralized agencies should be stimulative and directive, rather than mandatory and formal" (Report of the Commission on Country Life, 1911, p. 113). Bailey (1908) added later that "no movement educational or philanthropic, has adequate justification unless its one purpose or effect is to allow native individual responsibility and initiative to develop" on its own (p. 75).

There was essentially no facet of country living about which Country Lifers did not comment. Rural schools, churches, local government, home life and labor, clubs, newspapers, postal services, Farmers' Institutes, mechanization, automobiles, telephones, electric lights, parks, fairs, roads, ditches; they were all a source of discussion and study for people concerned with improving the rural living environment.

Although current scholarship suggests that the movement was an attempt to reduce food costs and an opportunity for urban people to give voice to their notions of rural ignorance which "had lain just under the surface," I believe the motives of the Country Lifers were far less simplistic. Right or wrong, their chief concern was the dimunition of the rural population in the face of rising rates of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. Although there were some county superintendents or occasionally State Board of Education officials who revealed some anti-farmer sentiment at NEA or state education conventions, by and large, the record of true Country Lifers reflected genuine concern with rural affairs rather than arrogance and condescension.

THE SHORT-TERM RESULTS OF THE COUNTRY LIFE MOVEMENT

Concerning most issues discussed by Country Lifers, much was accomplished with a measure of success. Clubs were formed. Boy and Girl Scout organizations came within reach of rural children. The Young Men's Christian Association responded to a directive from the Commission report to extend its work into the country. The 4-H movement got its start during the Country Life movement. The national agricultural extension program initiated by the 1914 Smith-Lever Act is a direct manifestation of the fervor concerning farming and rural life. Rural Free Delivery programs were expanded, miles of telephone lines were laid in the countryside. There was even a great deal of experimenting with wind-powered generators for electrifying various farm operations.

The greatest failure of the Country Life Movement was in the area where they desired the most success. Almost all Country Lifers agreed that it was in the schools where the rural "problem" would be most effectively addressed. What was the rural "problem?" Mabel Carney, a rural teacher and later teacher educator, was one of the most active figures in the movement. She interpreted circumstances this way: "The farm problem, in its most important aspects, is the problem of maintaining a standard people upon our farms." Bailey viewed the "problem" as how to develop and maintain "on our farms a civilization in full harmony with the best American ideals" (Carney, 1912, p. 3). Again, the thread which seems to tie all Country Lifers is the frightening consequences of fewer and fewer farmers. They believed that in order to stem the tide of cityward migration, they would have to instill a dignity in rural living and an intellectual attachment to the countryside. This desire is reflected in the numerous "creeds" and "pledges" created for rural children. The intent of the rhetoric is obvious: "I believe the country which God made is more beautiful than the city man made" (Fiske, 1913, p. 35). Carney's "Country Life Creed" (1912) maintains the belief that the schools should be "temporarily first in leadership and influence because cooperation is a question of education, and education is the special responsibility of the school" (p. 203).

Country Lifers were not exclusively concerned with country boys, however. Martha Foote Crow (1915) published a book-length guide called *The American Country Girl.* It begins with her definition of the problem:

> The reason why the American people care so much for the ideals presented to us in the Country Life Movement is that there is something very deep-seated and permanent within us to which these motives can appeal. We are a Country Life people. The bogy of the overshadowing city, threatening to spread and spread until, like a great octupus, it should suck all the sweet fields into its tentacles and cover the green areas with a complete blackness, has given us a definite fright. The result of our terror is the Country Life Movement. (p.15)

The assumption in Crow's book is that if the confinement of household labor, intensified by rural isolation, can be overcome by the goals of the Country Life movement, the life of the farm girl will permit her to become all "she is capable of becoming" (Foot, 1915, p. 31).

How were the schools to dignify rural life and instill an allegiance to rural living? Generally, most Country Lifers concurred with Carney's (1912) suggestion that:

> Daily farm life experience should be the backbone of everything in the whole school course. Arithmetic, reading, geography, and all other subjects, though not limited by it, should originate from it and maintain direct connection with it. Agriculture should be taught, in other words, because it is the basic experience of country children, and all real teaching builds upon past experience (p. 240).

Another Country Lifer agreed, "Good teaching demands that all learning be based upon experiences and interests of the one receiving instruction. Country people think in terms of agriculture" (Davis, 1913). Nature-study and field trips were to be a big part of the rural school experience. It was a Dewey-like conception of how real learning might take place. Journalist Clarence Poe (1903) added in his article "Farmer Children Need Farmer Studies," that "we must instill a love of nature and joy in country living." Regrettably, larger urban industrial education programs coincided with university attempts to put the scientific study of agriculture into the high schools. The fact that Country Lifers favored graded instruction and school consolidation has led many historians to the conclusion that the movement was nothing more than an attempt to ubanize the rural schools. Actually, Country Lifers were

horrified by that thought. Carney (1912) contended that "What we need and must have, to solve the problem of rural education, is not an urban school whose influences lead young people of the farms directly away from the land, but a country school, a country school improved, modernized, and adopted to the needs of present country life" (p. 177). Another Country Lifer was convinced that "there is better work done in a [rural] school than is possible in a large system of graded schools in the city" (Kennedy, 1915, p. 36).

To fully understand the Country Life position regarding school reform, one must keep in mind that their ultimate goal was to keep cityward migration at a minimum. To urbanize rural schools, then, would have been self-defeating. In fact, the evidence indicates that there was no such desire, although many Country Lifers expressed envy over electrified city schools equipped with laboratories, gymnasiums, central heating, and plumbing. But as one Country Life advocate put it, "to speak of rural social life as 'urban' because of better plumbing or screens on the door of the farm kitchen is simply to confess a poverty of words" (Wilson, 1915).

The methods used by the Country Life Commission to explore rural conditions included a twelve question survey, to which they received more than 115,000 responses; and a series of thirty hearings in towns across the country. The hearings were designed to allow farmers to interact face to face with commission members. One such hearing took place in Champaign, Illinois, on December 14, 1908. The Champaign *Daily Gazette* covered the event and their description suggests that while the issue of paving roads in Illinois was unpopular, the real sticking point was discussing the reorganization of rural schools: "The twelve principal questions were asked at the morning session and they brought out a flood of information much of which was not entirely to the credit of the great state of Illinois, that part relating to the country schools system, at least" *(Daily Gazette*, 1908).

With respect to curricular reform, there were some rural residents who saw "nature-study" and "physical education" as a lot of nonsense and preferred that their teachers did not "dabble in too many fads" (Danbom, 1979, p. 77). But real resistance was reserved for those who advocated school consolidation. It would be easy to suggest that farmers opposed consolidation because of costs. However, many Country Lifers pointed out that such a strategy could save money in time. Others openly admitted consolidation would raise taxes, and well that it should. When they considered that only one child in four in the nation's rural districts was completing the eighth grade, slightly inflated tax rates seemed a small price to pay to raise educational standards.

The goal of Country Lifers was to improve rural education and thereby improve rural living. It was hoped that if the material conditions of rural life were improved, the cityward drift of talented youth would diminish. For some scholars of the period, this was a matter of most urgency. In "Country Versus City", minister and sociologist Warren Wilson (1915) argued that rural America was "predominantly older colonial stock" that needed to be preserved for the good of the country. University of Wisconsin sociologist Edward Allsworth Ross (1922) argued that the "folk depletion" caused by talented rural youth leaving the countryside left the farming areas of the rural Middle West "fished out ponds populated chiefly by bullheads and suckers" (p. 47). Furthermore, according to Ross, this folk depletion meant that America was committing "race-suicide" for the superior intelligence of Anglo-Saxon farm kids was corrupted when mixed in the city with less intelligent peoples of southern and eastern Europe (Ross, 1916).

This matter was taken so seriously that eugenics societies were established nationwide and twenty-one states actually legalized the sterilization of the feeble-minded. In fact, over 8,500 such sterilizations took place (Karier, 1972). The development of IQ testing suggested to many Americans that undesirables could be identified and that, with careful planning, American society might pull itself out of a dismal period of decline. In nearly everyone's book, however, this entailed putting an end to the outmigration of rural youth. Rural life needed to be improved so that the rural population could continue to act as the balance wheel of a healthy, growing society. In this light, the creation of the Commission on Country Life becomes a logical, predictable episode in the historical record. The "problem" was not contrived. It was believed to be real. Indeed, it was painfully real for Country Lifers like Roosevelt and Bailey.

THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON THE COUNTRY LIFE MOVEMENT

We have been too quick to condemn the Country Life movement as something fundamentally anti-rural when, in fact, Country Lifers were interested in perpetuating and improving country living. When we think about the historical grounding of our present concerns in rural education, if we think about it at all, we think in the mode perpetuated by the least context-

driven interpretation of the Country Life movement. That is, that the Country Life movement was a frontal assault by urbanites who wished to urbanize rural schools. But the historical evidence suggests that this is inacurrate. The character of rural educational research that springs from such a foundation is necessarily defensive. And certainly this is appropriate. However, if the legacy of the Country Life movement was correctly interpreted it might cause interested researchers to take a more "offensive" approach.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Country Lifers were concerned about rural depopulation when farmers represented 33 percent of the population. If it is not the educational spokespersons of rural America, who will take the lead and say "enough is enough" when farmers represent a mere three percent of the population? Fewer and fewer farmers are the result of deliberate economic policy decisions. Although the dominant ideology passes dispossession off as progress, there is no need to accept such a questionable view. Approximately 1400 families are forced off farms each week in this country, an excess of 70,000 each year (Berry, 1987). In what sense can this be defined as progress? If it is progress, it is the most brutal sort of Darwinian determinism we could ever imagine. Therefore, it seems that an interpretation of the Country Life movement as a genuine concern for the viability of rural life might lead some rural educational researchers to critically appraise this version of American "progress".

Since World War II literally millions of Americans have been forced off the land. Yet, invariably, we see the same amount of land under cultivation. We see bigger and bigger tractors, but take little notice of fewer and fewer people. Since we see that the land of the dispossessed does not fall idle, we entertain weak attempts to write this demographic shift off as progress. Yet, most of us know at an intuitive level and, if we are willing to admit it, at an anxious level, that chemical-laden meats, soil erosion, and groundwater pollution have replaced the people who used to care for farms.

In every Midwestern state traces of treflan and sonalan are found in groundwater samples. In countless cases, farmers simply cannot drink the water that flows beneath their farms. And water is not the only environmental problem. Current topsoil erosion rates in Iowa are much greater than in the days of the dust bowl. In fact, the weight of topsoil lost each year of the 1980s in Iowa has been five times heavier than the weight of its total grain harvest. In a little over 50 years, if current practices are not altered drastically, Iowa, one of the most fertile of American states, will be without one inch of topsoil (Berry, 1987; Jackson, Berry, & Colman, 1984).

It appears as if we cannot look to colleges of agriculture for help. Commissioned in 1882 to be of service to farmers, their research agendas have been almost totally usurped by for-profit agribusiness corporations. The Worldwatch Institute's valuable report, *State of the Earth* (Brown et. al., 1990) put it this way:

> Several of the larger agrichemical firms see the most potential profits in selling farmers integrated packages of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. In conjunction with subsidiary or affiliated seed companies, they are combining research on chemical plants, developing crop varieties that will be compatible with their own products. Although pest and disease resistance are commonly touted as major goals in corporate crop development programs, resistance to herbicides—which will in fact increase the use of these chemicals—is receiving R + D priority (p. 70).

The ascendancy of agribusiness has been detrimental to the rural environment, the rural community, and, therefore, the rural school. The only inevitability in all of this is that if it continues, corporate profits remain high and fewer people will live in the country. If it is discontinued, rural communitites may regain a measure of health. But how do educators combat a trend that is sanctioned by our media, by our political leaders, even by our current interpretation of history? To the extent that there is condescension, arrogance, and outright ignorance behind educational policy as it applies to rural schooling, we need to be on the defensive. Yet there is enough of the spirit of Jeffersonian agrarianism alive in America today to rally support for rural education. The Country Life movement was an expression of concern, not disdain, for rural life. What we need to do is capitalize on public concern by taking an offensive approach that exposes the rhetoric of inevitability surrounding rural decline as false and self-serving for a small, powerful, wealthy elite in American society.

Just as Country Lifers prescribed eighty years ago, I believe we have to bring the "rural" back into rural schools. This is no easy task. It means, among other things, battling against the currently popular testing movement, convincing legislators that "outcomes" need not be the same in rural schools as in city schools, it means encouraging teachers to infuse their lessons with critical questioning about the forces that affect the lives of rural students and their communities. The essential mission of rural schools, as I see it, is to equip

rural citizens with the ability to come to understandings about the concerns that profit from the demise of their neighborhoods and communities. A different interpretation of the Country Life movement might suggest to researchers appropriate avenues to that end.

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