

Spaces of Crisis

10.2478/abcsj-2024-0004

Crisis? What Crisis?:
Rethinking How We Talk about Rural America¹

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Abstract

It has become conventional wisdom to say that rural America is (and rural Americans are) in “crisis,” and this has generated a cottage industry of commentary from journalists, academics, politicians, policy makers, and others. Sometimes the story of crisis is economic: jobs harder and harder to find in the rural pockets of the nation. Sometimes it is social: rural isolation and desperation that lead to drug addiction and suicide. Whatever its cause, the result has been that rural America has been “left behind,” to borrow from the title of sociologist Robert Wuthnow's recent book on the topic. And the sub-title of his book encapsulates the politics this crisis has generated: decline and rage. This article interrogates the narrative of crisis and decline by historicizing it more deeply, by examining how enduring rural mythologies continue to shape our discourse about rural places, and to argue that far from being “left behind” in the national parade, rural America has often been leading it.

Keywords: rural America; crisis discourse; rural mythologies; *Little House on the Prairie*; nostalgia; race; anger; space/place.

“Rural America is an economic, social,
and educational disaster area!” (Swanson 34).

That is as succinct a summary as any of the way Americans have talked about rural America in the recent past – and especially since the presidential election of 2016, when rural voters turned out to express their

anger by voting for Donald Trump. Crisis. Decline. Disaster. These words, and their many synonyms, have come to dominate our discourse about the state of things in rural America.

This is not surprising, given the evidence so readily at hand. For at least a decade the opioid crisis has been the story dominating the national discussion of rural places. Before opioids, however, the addiction crisis in rural America centered around methamphetamines, crystal meth in particular. According to one journalist, meth appeals to a “rural constituency because it’s cheap, easy to manufacture at home, and requires no special equipment or expertise” (“Special Report”). Not for nothing has crystal meth been called “hillbilly cocaine” (“Special Report”). When journalist Nick Reding wanted to report on the explosion of meth addiction at the beginning of the 21st century, he embedded himself in the town of Oelwein, Iowa, with a population of less than 6000.

Overdoses have become so common that rural health systems strain to cope. That fact, in turn, exposed a crisis in rural health care altogether. In many rural places, rural hospitals and clinics have closed or been consolidated as their profit-driven owners seek economic efficiencies, never mind the consequences for the health of patients in those areas. The story that journalist Brian Alexander tells in his book *The Hospital*, a study of one hospital in rural Ohio – called by the locals “the Band-Aid station” – could certainly stand in for countless other places.²

No wonder that health outcomes continue to get worse across much of rural America by all kinds of measures – rural Americans have even grown more obese than metropolitan Americans, according to two studies published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2018 (“Obesity Higher in Rural Areas”). Just as tragically as the declining health outcomes, rural Americans are now taking their own lives at higher rates than metropolitan Americans. No one fully understands the causes of suicide, but there is some evidence to suggest that rural isolation, a rural culture that valorizes self-sufficiency, and the easy availability of guns – in other words, some of the very things rural people extoll about rural life – contribute significantly to these suicides. Economists Angus Deaton and Anne Case shocked the nation in 2020 when they reported that life

expectancies, particularly among white men and particularly in rural areas, were declining. They titled their study of this: “Deaths of Despair.”

Underneath these stories of despair is a deeper problem of economic decline. Alexander, Reding, and Deaton and Case all see untrammelled, unregulated neo-liberal capitalism as having had particularly pernicious effects in rural places. The large-scale data certainly confirm my own anecdotal experiences. When driving through small towns in many parts of the national midsection, one finds a dispiriting pattern: shuttered shops, vacant lots, an eerie sense of abandonment. In my own travels I have come to see a pattern in these rural towns. The commercial life of these places has been reduced to the following formula: one third “antique” shops; one third social service agencies; one third of the real estate empty, “for rent” or “for sale.” Meanwhile, virtually all retail activity has been swallowed up by the ginormous Wal-Mart discount store ten miles away.

The causes of rural economic stagnation are not entirely clear. Politicians and policymakers have struggled, whether looking at rural Kentucky or South Dakota or Nebraska, to figure out a cause-and-effect: do the young and talented leave rural places because of a lack of opportunities or does their departure keep opportunities from developing in the first place? Whatever the answer, the demographic data are unforgiving. Many rural areas have become older and less educated than the rest of the country. Rural counties, especially in the broad middle of the country, continue to lose population. Easy enough then to conclude that rural Americans have been “left behind” and have been “overlooked,” to borrow from the titles of two recent books (Wuthnow; Currid-Halkett).

Crisis All the Way Down

There are two obvious problems with using this language to describe rural America. First, there is no rural America, singular, at all. There are rural parts of every state in the union, and they range across the entire economic spectrum. In some areas, rural relies on agriculture; in others, the economic is driven by extractive industries or by manufacturing plants. Rural America includes the exclusive resort like Teton County, WY,

home to some of the nation's super-rich and which is the wealthiest county per capita in the country.³ "Crisis," of the sort reported on by the national media and studied by sociologists, certainly does not apply to the cosseted residents of Teton County.

But "rural" also includes Native reservation land, played-out mining areas in Appalachia and northern Michigan, and agricultural areas especially in the South where poverty is so desperate that it ought to shock the conscience of the nation. As of this writing, all ten of the nation's poorest counties are rural, and six of those are southern.

Likewise, though a popular perception of "rural" is that it is white and conservative, rural America includes people of all races, political persuasions, and religious commitments. Much of the nation's agricultural labor, whether in fields or in industrial scale slaughterhouses is done by workers from Central America, fishing on Louisiana's Gulf Coast by shrimpers from Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. And, as the writings of women from Rachel Kalof and Willa Cather to Sarah Smarsh remind us, there is a gendered aspect to the rural experience. Women have often felt the difficulties of rural life more profoundly than men.⁴

Given all this diversity, it is not surprising that there have been countless attempts to define "rural" with some kind of social scientific precision. None of them have been particularly successful. In January 2022, researchers at Ohio State University published a study defining five different kinds of "rural" in Ohio alone.⁵ Once, rural people were classified on the basis of the work they did, the assumption being that those people made their living directly from the land in one way or another. That is certainly not true anymore, and it has not been for some decades. Fewer than 2% of Americans now are full-time farmers. Their neighbors make their living in a whole host of ways: as factory and warehouse workers, truck drivers, county or state employees, and office workers who commute long distances to an office park to name just a few.

But there is a larger order problem with the language of "crisis." The quote with which I began this article is not a contemporary one. It was written in 1970, and it serves as a reminder that "crisis" has defined the way Americans have discussed conditions in rural America for decades, though often without any awareness of that pattern. Late in 2023,

to take another example more or less at random, economic historians Peter Coclanis and Louis Kyriakouides published an essay about the economic crisis in the rural South, noting, among other things, that twenty percent of rural counties in the South are marked by persistent poverty. They write that “Although the U.S. media sometimes pays attention to the rural South – often concentrating on guns, religion and opioid overdoses – it has too often neglected the broad scope and root causes of the region’s current problems.”

I take no issue with Coclanis and Kyriakouides’s research, but that statement is remarkable for its historical oversight. President Franklin Roosevelt repeatedly called the South “the nation’s #1 economic problem.” Speaking to a conference on Southern economic conditions in 1938, Roosevelt told the group: “There is the problem of labor and employment in the South and the related problem of protecting women and children in this field. There is the problem of farm ownership, of which farm tenancy is a part, and of farm income. There are questions of taxation, of education, of housing, and of health.” He might have added that the Tennessee Valley Authority, the New Deal’s most ambitious, comprehensive project, was designed to spur economic development across that wide Southern watershed.

The notion that the rural – primarily agricultural – parts of the country were in crisis goes all the way back to at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Faced with a perfect storm of conditions, including drought in some areas, over-production in others, railroad shipping rates, and a return to the gold standard, farmers across much of the South, Midwest and Great Plains faced economic ruin. They responded by organizing what remains the most significant third-party political movement since the Civil War. The *Kansas Farmer* predicted of this original Populist movement: “The year 1889 will witness the most stupendous uprising of farmers ever known in history” (“What Are We Going to Do About It?”).

The Populist Movement all but petered out in the election of 1896, but the farm crisis of the late nineteenth century prompted the first national study of rural problems and the first set of proposals designed to address the rural crisis. President Theodore Roosevelt created the Country

Life Commission in 1908, and its chair, Liberty Hyde Bailey, described the goal of the “country life movement” as “the working out of the desire to make rural civilization as effective and satisfying as other civilizations” (1). Clearly, however, by the turn of the 20th century, “rural civilization” had somehow already been left behind.

By the time the Commission issued its report in 1911, conditions in many rural places had gotten much better. As the nation’s industrial cities swelled with new immigrants in the early years of the 20th century, demand for food went up. World War I was especially good for rural business. The war created demand and drove up prices for everything from wheat and pigs to coal and lead. But even high prices could not stem the depopulation from large areas of the country. The crisis became not so much economic as social. Commentators expressed shock and concern at the data from the census of 1910, which revealed that a significant number of rural counties had lost population, and those people who stayed were growing older. The population of Bosworth, Missouri, for example, founded in 1888 in the north central part of the state, peaked in 1910 and has been declining ever since (“Decline of Rural Population” 615). But of course, population loss had prompted journalist William Allen White to write his now-famous essay “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” in 1896. He opened the piece lamenting: “In five years ten million people have been added to the national population, yet instead of gaining a share of this . . . Kansas has lost population by ten thousands every year” (280).

The boom of high commodities prices became a bust after the First World War ended. With wartime demand gone, and with the flow of immigration turned off by Congress in the 1920s, agricultural America found itself in an economic crisis again, even as metropolitan America embarked on what F. Scott Fitzgerald called “the greatest, gaudiest spree in history” (87). During the interwar decades, the industrialization and consolidation of agriculture accelerated. These changes in farming – from small-scale to ever bigger, and reliant more and more on industrial technology – contributed to the fact that, by 1940, nearly half of all farms in the country were tenant farms, up from thirty-five percent forty years earlier (Wilson 51).⁶ Mechanization and consolidation affected mining as well, which we should also consider as part of the rural mosaic. West

Virginia remains among the most rural of states in the nation. Employment in the nation's coal mines topped out in the 1920s and has been declining ever since.

While it is a cruel and pointless exercise to gauge whether urban or rural America suffered more during the Great Depression, it is probably fair to say that, while in the cities things went from good to bad, in rural America they went from bad to worse. Nearly four in ten residents of South Dakota, one of the most rural states in the union, went on New Deal relief during the Great Depression, the highest percentage in the nation (Hurt 98). It is also worth noting that the rural crisis of the 1930s attracted more of the New Deal's attention than factory closings and soup lines in the nation's cities. Many New Dealers – and Franklin Roosevelt most of all – were concerned primarily with conditions in rural areas. In addition to the TVA, a majority of the New Deal's biggest programs targeted rural places – the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Rural Electrification Administration, and the Soil Conservation Act, to pick just three.

World War II revived both industry and agriculture, but, shortly afterward, the old pattern resumed. "Farm country," in particular, did not enjoy the post-war expansion to the same extent that the rest of suburbanizing, metropolitan America did. Between 1950 and 1970, the total number of farms continued to decline, this time by roughly fifty percent, while the average size of a farm nearly doubled from 205 to 400 acres. No surprise that the number of people living on farms declined from about twenty million to fewer than ten million during those two decades (Ganzel). In 1967, to take one data point, a presidential commission found that fourteen million rural Americans lived in poverty. "Rural poverty is so widespread," the Commission wrote, "and so acute as to be a national disgrace." The Commission titled its report "The People Left Behind," a phrase – and a phenomenon – that has echoed over the decades. Profitability has gone up and down in agriculture, but the number of people who make their livelihood that way has only gone down.

Then came the farm crisis of the 1980s, from which rural America, certainly agricultural America, has arguably never fully recovered.⁷ After helping to re-elect Ronald Reagan to a second term, farmers became charity cases in 1985, a century after the *Kansas Farmer* predicted a

farmer-led revolution. Inspired by the Live-Aid rock festival to benefit Ethiopian famine victims, Willie Nelson, Neil Young and other performers organized Farm-Aid to raise money for families losing their farms. The next year, farm prices had dropped to fifty-one percent of parity, a level not seen in farm country since the depths of the Great Depression (Dudley 151). The Farm-Aid fundraising project continues to this day. And in the early 21st century, many rural areas struggled economically during the longest economic recovery the nation has ever experienced.⁸

I have rehearsed this history because the semantics matter. Describing rural America as in “crisis” implies, as I have suggested, that there were times of normality, when rural America was somehow stable and healthy. But that raises the question of just when rural America was “normal.” When writer Dan Shauls returned to the small towns of his Missouri youth, he found them “uniformly drab.” He acknowledged that “life wasn’t beautiful” when he was growing up, but now those towns had collapsed “into ugliness of soul and body.” He took that trip in 1962 and was looking back on the 1930s (Shauls 16-18). Review the history, and it becomes apparent that Americans have seen rural areas as in crisis almost continually for over a century and a half.⁹

Crisis, by its very definition, is what we call a moment or episode of challenge or difficulty, a deviation for the normal state of affairs. We attach the word to events like the Suez crisis or the Cuban Missile Crisis because these tense moments resolve eventually, for better or worse. In this sense, rural America is not in crisis today. The complaints and laments we hear, and have heard over the decades, amount to something chronic. The refrain has been remarkably consistent whether in the 1880s or the 1980s: Rural America is in crisis and something must be done about it!

“Crisis,” then, will not do, but the persistence of this language requires an explanation.

Nostalgia and The Myth of the Rural

Nostalgia is a powerful drug and has shaped the way we think and talk about rural America, trapping us in the language of crisis and decline. For

many people, that nostalgia may be fixed to some very specific, local experience. A family farm lost to creditors or the high school of one's youth closed for lack of enrollment. But at a larger cultural level, that nostalgia is for an imagined time and place, a projection of cultural desires and expectations. Rural decline must be measured against the image of what we have, at various moments, thought rural America ought to be, as much as against what it has actually been. The perception of rural crisis is thus inextricably linked to our agrarian myths and pastoral ideals.

Richard Hofstadter elaborated on the agrarian myth in his 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Age of Reform*. The hero of the myth, as he described it, was the Jeffersonian yeoman, who was considered "the ideal man and the ideal citizen." Living in "close communion with the beneficent nature," Hofstadter went on, gave the yeoman "wholesomeness" and "integrity" that could not be found among city dwellers. More than a way of life, the agrarian myth posited a moral proposition: rural life was essentially religious, as the yeoman was seen to be the "central source of civic virtue" (24-25). That idea remains potent and persistent. "Don't just focus on your urban areas," one rural resident scolded a sociologist recently, "[f]ocus on your rural areas where you still have strong morals and values" (qtd. in Wuthnow 99). Or, to take another example, University of Nebraska agriculture professor Terence Centner, who grew up on a farm: "farmers tend to be friendly, healthy, honest, and hardworking. Farming is the most basic of occupations: humble, necessary, and worthy of support. Agriculture is like 'motherhood and apple pie' – it is America" (2).

But where did the myth come from? Not from the small farmers it extolled certainly. "In origin," Hofstadter wrote, "the agrarian myth was not a popular but a literary idea, a preoccupation of the upper classes, of those who enjoyed a classical education, read pastoral poetry, experimented with breeding stock, and owned plantations or country estates" (25). Which is a pretty deft description of Thomas Jefferson himself, a founding father of the agrarian ideal.

By the mid-20th century, myth had been turned into policy, and indeed something close to an ideology. In 1940, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced, in yet another restatement

of the agrarian ideal, that “the welfare of agriculture and of the Nation will be promoted by . . . efficient family-size owner-operated farms.” Further, the USDA pledged to support “the establishment and maintenance of such farms” (qtd. in Griswold 15-16). That report projected a future set of goals but also summed up what the USDA has already been doing. As Yale scholar A. Whitney Griswold soon noted, the “rugged individualists” of yeoman lore had become “one of the principal beneficiaries of government support. [The farmer] asked and received economic aid on an unprecedented scale” (8). As Griswold summed it up: “the Jeffersonian ideal has been translated into policy” (15).¹⁰

Griswold and Hofstadter were among those who began to question the rural myth just after the Second World War. Driving from Atlantic City to Chicago in the early 1950s, writer May Watts noted:

The farms that had been bought up and absorbed into the wide fields that fitted the new machinery had usually left something to tell of their existence. Sometimes the foundation of the farmhouse and barn were still showing. . . . Sometimes the new owner had left the pump standing, or the cements stairs that had led up to the front porch. We watched hard for as many of these evidences as we could find, knowing that soon the powerful tractors will rebel at going around relics, and turn it all under and smooth it over for corn or soy beans. A way of life is past. (220)

At about the same moment, historian Lewis Atherton counted 2205 abandoned towns in the state of Iowa. “Contrary to nostalgic memory,” he wrote, “[small towns] have lacked the stability, the changelessness, and the sense of continuity which people ascribe to them” (336). What is more, those towns had been abandoned by 1930. What Atherton saw in those empty places “is a process as old as the town frontier itself” (355).

And yet the myth has persisted tenaciously. The “literary idea” of the 18th and 19th centuries became pervasive in the mass circulation magazines, radio, and television shows of the 20th. In all of these media, Americans found an idyllic vision of rural life – a healthy, simple life lived close to the soil and nearer to God. Newspapers printed columnists “who extol the virtues of ruralism” to their largely non-rural readers. The venues may have been different across the decades, but the message stayed largely the same. “The romanticization of rural life in press and

radio,” wrote sociologists Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman in 1958, “reflects the need of the urban dweller to conceive of rural life as simpler and freer from the complexities, tensions and anxieties which he faces in his own world. Rural life is thus conceived as a counter-image which highlights his own situation” (104). That description nicely captures the appeal of “country music,” which in recent decades has grown to be the most popular music genre in the nation. Peddling a perceived authenticity, country songs often tell tales of rural life that play exactly to the nostalgia and yearning – no matter how unearned – felt by the millions who consume them.

The *Little House* with Big Implications

No phenomenon – that is the only word I can use to describe it – embodied and shaped this rural myth in the 20th century more than the *Little House on the Prairie* series. A brief recap: Laura Ingalls Wilder published *Little House in the Big Woods*, the first of what would turn out to be eight books, in 1932. The last came out in 1943. The original version of *Little House in the Big Woods* was intended as an adult book, but through several editorial interventions, it and the other seven, became classics of American children’s literature. Classic and hugely successful. Roughly sixty million copies, and counting, have been sold and the books have been translated into forty-five languages. General Douglass MacArthur, presiding over the post-war occupation of Japan, had the books translated into Japanese, and they proved quite popular there.

The books tell the loosely autobiographical tales of the author’s childhood and her family’s experiences settling various parts of the American frontier. Born in Wisconsin in 1867, her family moved to Missouri briefly and then to Kansas, late in 1869. By 1871, the family was back in Wisconsin; off to Walnut Grove, Minnesota, in 1873, then to Iowa in 1876, only to go back to Minnesota a year later. The Ingalls spent the particularly punishing winter of 1880-81 in the town of DeSmet, in what was then the Dakota Territory. As Caroline Fraser put it, “[i]n a brief and concentrated span of time the Ingalls family had experienced virtually everything that would come to be seen as quintessentially Western:

encounters with wolves and Indians, angry disputes over open range, prairie fires, neighbors coming to their aid” (58). These were the experiences that formed the basis of the *Little House* books.

As is the novelist’s prerogative, Wilder does not tell all the truth. The books recount gripping tales of adventure and danger, of warmth and support, of family and community, but not, it is important to note, of failure. Yet failure defined the Ingalls family during Laura’s childhood – the positively frenetic moving around I just recounted resulted from Laura’s father Charles’ inability to make a go of things as a homestead farmer. During that brief sojourn in Iowa, Charles attempted to run a small hotel, and it was such a fiasco that Wilder did not discuss the episode at all in the books. Things did not go much better for Laura and her husband Almanzo either. Their early married life was marred by crop failures, diphtheria, a still-born child, more crop failures, and a house that burned to the ground. In fact, in 1932, when the first book appeared, the sixty-five-year-old Wilder had decided to write the book because she was broke, the family having lost their modest saving in the Crash in 1929. Failure notwithstanding, she titled the last book in the *Little House* series, which ends with her marriage and before any of these disasters, *These Happy Golden Years*.¹¹

It is easy enough to see these books as saturated in the nostalgia of an older person looking back on her childhood which, with some judicious editing, seemed less precarious and more reassuring perhaps than the present or the future during the Great Depression. That nostalgia surely helps explain the books’ initial appeal, as plenty of anxious Americans cast their eyes backward to find refuge in the past during the Depression decade. In this sense, the *Little House* series engaged in the same kind of mythmaking as Margaret Mitchell’s epic *Gone with the Wind*, the best-selling book of 1936 and 1937. Just as Mitchell codified and helped perpetuate all the pernicious mythologies about the “Old South,” Wilder’s book traded on mythologies of the American “frontier.” As historian Patricia Limerick has summed it up, the *Little House* books made Wilder “a pre-eminent figure in the shaping of the myth of the West – that seductive collection of icons, images and articles of faith installed in millions of minds and souls worldwide” (11). I will draw the analogy

tighter by noting that *Gone with the Wind* became what is still, in inflation adjusted dollars, the highest grossing film in history, while the *Little House* books became the basis for a wildly popular television series that ran from 1974-1982.

The Political Valence of Rural Nostalgia

A race problem sits at the center of the *Little House* oeuvre, as a number of recent critics have noted. Pa Ingalls puts on black face and sings a racist song in a minstrel show at one point. Native people, when they appear at all, are portrayed as savage, and, perhaps most jarring, is the pronouncement uttered by one character: “The only good Indian was a dead Indian” (Wilder 211). At a more abstract level, none of the characters in the books ever seem cognizant that the land they occupied was, and in one case remained, Native. When the family moved to Kansas, they occupied land that was still in the Osage Diminished Reserve, prompting the writer Frances Kaye to argue that “Wilder, writing as honestly as she knew how, spun a tale that, because of her very decency, makes ‘ethnic cleansing’ appear palatable” (126). Kaye played with the title of the book, suggesting “Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve” instead.

But, in terms of our rural yearnings, there is nothing particularly unusual about Wilder’s racial erasures. While rural spaces have always been multi-racial and multi-ethnic, “rural” has always summoned an image remarkably white in the American imagination. From Jefferson’s Platonic yeomen to the all-white cast of “The Andy Griffith Show” (which ran from 1960-1968), Black, brown, and Asian people have had little place in America’s rural mythologies. Their problems – Black land dispossession, working conditions for Mexican labor, endemic poverty on reservations, violence visited upon non-white rural people – are not, therefore, included in the discourse of rural “crisis.” Country musicians love to croon about truckers and farmers and cowboys, but no one writes country songs celebrating the hard-working slaughterhouse worker from Central America or the Louisiana fisherman from Southeast Asia.

Whether or not you hold Wilder to account for her racial portrayals, it is certainly true that the books feed another central piece of the rural myth: that independent self-sufficiency and up-by-your-bootstraps individualism define rural life and stand in opposition to city life and as a bulwark against an intrusive and overweening Federal government. As scholar Penny Linsenmayer has noted, “Wilder’s novel depicts her family as the victim of a capricious and overreaching federal government” (169).

This rugged pioneer myth is demonstrably, almost ludicrously, not true. Wilder significantly failed to note that everything about their frontier life had been facilitated by Washington in the first place. The Ingallses, like thousands of other white settlers, took advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862, occupying spaces that had first been violently cleared of Native people by the US Army. But no matter. The *Little House* books blame the Federal government for the families’ woes. Countless rural Americans, who receive disproportionate levels of aid from Washington, continue to do the same.

In this sense too, Wilder captured and perpetuated an attitude that endures to this day. As one scholar has noted, people in rural communities have continued to evoke “frontier images of close-knit communities” even as they promote “the very forces that led and continue to lead to their demise – free enterprise and corporate capitalism” (Hickey 252). Squaring that circle has forced all manner of mental gymnastics. Farmers may have received considerable federal aid during the Great Depression through a variety of New Deal programs, but that certainly did not accord with their own sense of self-sufficiency and independence. So, in the post-war period, they simply pretended it never happened. Or as David Danbom has put it, they repressed their memories altogether: “They were so successful that it is difficult today to find anyone in rural communities who will admit that people in his or her family received relief during the 1930s” (205). Few in rural America today, I suspect, know just how much Federal subsidy they receive. None other than William Faulkner, in 1956, quipped about the South he knew so well: “Our economy is no longer agricultural. Our economy is the Federal Government” (qtd. in Shulman 135). Yet even as he wrote that, Southern leaders howled bitterly at

having Federal laws and policies about racial discrimination “imposed” on them.

I have spent some time considering these children’s books because, while they neither created the rural myth, nor did they refashion it in any significant way, the books have been put to work politically more than other exemplars of the myth in American popular culture. That task was taken on by Wilder’s deeply troubled daughter Rose. During the 1930s, Rose launched a career attacking the Federal government and its intrusion into people’s lives. The New Deal seemed to drive her – literally – insane (she apparently suffered from some sort of mental illness and endured several mental breakdowns). “I could kill Roosevelt,” she wrote to a friend in 1935, “with pleasure and satisfaction. If living got too much for me so that I really wanted to die, I would go to Washington first and kill that traitor” (qtd. in Limerick). Her campaigns have earned her a place in the genealogy of American libertarianism, having achieved some national fame with fevered attacks on the intrusion of federal power into the lives of citizens. Rose promoted the *Little House* books as an antidote to New Dealism. While Wilder was not the political activist that her daughter was, her biographer Fraser concluded that Wilder supported her daughter’s views “wholeheartedly.”

Wilder died in 1957, but Rose maintained her control over the books until her own death in 1968. Through her crusading, the *Little House* books have become adopted as agit-prop by a wide swath of right-wingers and devout Christians. Late in her life, Rose partnered with Roger MacBride, an editor at the right-leaning middle-brow *Readers’ Digest*. He wound up controlling the copyright, and it was MacBride who brokered the deal to bring *Little House* to television. In 1976, he ran for president on the Libertarian ticket, backed by the Koch brothers.¹²

The *Little House* series helps us understand how the rural myth has moved from the realm of the sentimental and nostalgic and into the arena of poisonous anti-government politics that came to define the New Right. They are deployed this way still. Consider the risible essay by Meghan Clyne published in *National Affairs* in 2012. After rehearsing a tale of American history not at all updated from Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier,” Clyne offers Wilder’s auto-

fiction as a manual for Americans to rediscover their “self-reliance” (a phrase she uses eighteen times in this modest piece). Never mind the historical facts, the myth will not die.

Conclusion

I have begged an obvious question: if “crisis” is not the right way to think about rural America, why do we persist in talking about it that way? My own sense is that, for at least a century, and probably longer, the language of crisis measures a distance between rural realities and rural mythologies.

Put another way: we think of rural in terms of “place” when, in fact, most of the American rural should be thought of as “space.” The distinction between the two is important. Place is what we use to describe a physical location that carries meaning for us. It carries connotations of permanence, authenticity, and stability. Places are where things, large or small, personal or collective, happen. Architects and designers talk about “place making” as they plan the built environment in order to create a “sense of place,” a desire we all share.

Space, on the other hand, is an abstraction, disembodied and without association. Empty space; spaced out. Place gives us a feeling of belonging and rootedness, while space implies something free-floating and disconnected. Place has the capacity to generate its own force; by contrast, power acts upon space (Lefebvre 8-9). For geographer David Harvey, that force is capitalism, and he sees the dichotomy between space and place as a central dynamic of capitalism, what he calls a “tension between place-bound fixity and spatial mobility” (296).¹³ (Spatial mobility certainly describes the Ingalls family). In this sense, spaces do not embody sets of values or ideologies; they conceal them.

David Foster Wallace, who grew up in downstate Illinois, captured the affective experience of rural space and the disconnection it can foster, and it is worth quoting at length:

Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness is both physical and spiritual. It is not just people you get lonely for. You’re alienated from the very space around you, for here the land is not an environment but a commodity. The land is basically

a factory. You live in the same factory you work in. You spend an enormous amount of time with the land, but you're still alienated from it in some way. (38)

Emptiness and its attendant alienation are decidedly not what we want to believe about rural America, despite the novelists, journalists, and most recently economists who have pointed this out.

My contention is that the United States has created rural spaces in vast abundance but precious few rural places. Further, my suspicion is that we have confused the two. As Americans ponder rural space – from their cars, on their televisions, or in the lyrics of country music – they project all the values associated with place onto the blank screen of rural space. Maybe a nation of metropolitanites (fewer than 20% of Americans now live in rural areas) need a way to imagine an alternative to their own lives; perhaps we need to believe that the Jeffersonian dream of rural placeness, sustained and nurtured through the interactions of intimate community, remains alive.

The rural anger toward metropolitan America, and the way that anger has manifested itself politically over the last decade, results from a clash, almost a dissonance, when the mythology of rural American “place” collides with the realities of rural “space.” Given the great burden – cultural, social, even moral – with which we have freighted the rural myth, real life is bound to come up short. The language of “crisis” really describes the disappointment that rural life cannot live up to our enormous expectations of it.

Notes:

¹ Acknowledgement: This article was drawn in part from my book, *The Lies of the Land: Seeing Rural America for What It Is – and Isn't* (2023), by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

² See also Frakt, “A Hospital Die-Off Hits Rural America Hard.”

³ See Farrell, *Billionaire Wilderness*, and Ian Frazier’s lacerating review of this book: “The Plushbottoms of Teton County.”

⁴ See Smarsh, *Heartland*; Westover, *Educated*. For more on the recent experience of farm women see Jack, *The Midwest Farmer's Daughter*.

⁵ For a report on the OSU research, see Grabmeier, “There’s No Longer One Rural America – Could There Be Five?”

⁶ For the 1900 figure see Fife, *American Agriculture and Farm Policy Since 1900*. Who actually owned the land is harder to figure out. Some of it was surely owned privately and rented out by people who no longer wanted to farm (or who owned more land than they could farm themselves); some of it was probably owned by banks or insurance companies who had foreclosed on property during the Great Depression.

⁷ Much has been written about the 1980s farm crisis. See Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*; Riney-Kehrberg, *When a Dream Dies*.

⁸ For example, Williams, "Many Ohio Towns Left Behind Despite Stronger Economy."

⁹ To underscore this point, I note that Wuthnow subtitled his 2018 book *Decline and Rage in Small-Town America*.

¹⁰ More recent scholarly work has certainly confirmed Griswold's insight though in ways he could never have foreseen. The federal government was central, for example, in creating a tourist infrastructure for the rural west and for creating the "modern" south. And, of course, military spending may have altered both regions more profoundly than anything else. See Shulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*; Nash, *The Federal Landscape*; Markusen et al., *The Rise of the Sunbelt*.

¹¹ See Fraser, *Prairie Fires*, and also two excellent reviews: Messud, "Wilder and Wilder," and Limerick, "Little House on the Prairie' and the Truth about the American West."

¹² Fraser's biography is really a study of how the Little House books became political fodder.

¹³ See also W. J. T. Mitchell's useful summary discussion of this in his "Preface to the Second Edition of *Landscape and Power*."

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