

Lecture #18: Back to Earth

Suggested Readings:

John C. Hendee, et al., *Wilderness Management*, USDA, 1978; David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness*, 2006.
R. Douglas Hurt, *Problems of Plenty: The American Farmer in the Twentieth Century*, 2003
David Shi, *The Simple Life*, 1985; *In Search of the Simple Life* (useful anthology), 1986.
Eleanor Agnew, *Back from the Land: How Young Americans Went to Nature in the 1970s...*, 2004.
Adam Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl & Rise of American Environmentalism*, 2001.

Outline

I. John Muir's Legacy: Loving the Wilderness to Death

Muir's message: wilderness as the best place for humanity to find spiritual rebirth
popularization of parks and wild lands led to increasing use, with paradoxical results
National Interstate & Defense Highways Act of 1956 instituted Interstate Highway system (90% fed funds),
linking major urban centers and giving easier access to parks and forests for city dwellers
NPS promoted use of parks through Mission 66 program: increased park infrastructure and publicity
result: dramatic increase in park visitor populations, in effect urbanizing the park community. auto
campgrounds furnished with running water & toilets, laundromats, etc.
appearance of woodfire and auto smog in Yosemite proof that city had reproduced itself
so retreat into wild had to follow more difficult paths: mountaineering and backpacking
populations choosing these generally more elite in class background and wealth than car campers, hunters,
fishers; but still bringing urban culture to back country
backpacker carries own food supply, own high-tech equipment: visitor, not self-sufficient
key role of automobile in creating city's problems, making escape possible, but reproducing problems in
natural settings as well: increasing back country impacts
Terry & Renny Russell, *On the Loose*, 1966, in Sierra Club series: escape car with car?
growing need for "wilderness management," title of 1978 textbook: contradiction in terms?
spread of giardia in back country water supplies by 1970s suggestive of urban linkages

II. Fleeing the Farm

populations seeking temporary escape in wild nonetheless supported selves with urban work
large-scale suburbanization post-WWII transformed urban areas with rise of automobile suburbs
as Americans sought out parks and wilderness areas for recreation, they also moved to suburbs in pursuit of
homes that combined best of urban and rural life
as such, reflected broad demographic trend in American life toward increasing urban populations: U.S. over
50% urban by 1920
flight from farms continued throughout this same period as fewer farmers provided food for growing pop
family farm already in serious decline by beginning of 20th century, object of concern
1910: Teddy Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life sought to ameliorate conditions of rural life; rise of
rural sociology as new branch of professional social science dedicated to making farms more efficient
and preserving rural community: contradiction?
but decline in rural populations persisted, along with growing size, scale, capital intensity, corporate
organization of remaining farm units: rise of agribusiness and increasing corporate ownership of ag
farm debts rise more dramatically than farm incomes, but new technologies require significant new
investment if farmers to compete: cf. rising inputs of fertilizer, hybrid seeds, pesticides, machinery,
petroleum for fuel
hybridization of wheat as a case in point: as late as 1930s, American wheat relied on 5 tall varieties; short
varieties introduced 1920 with Federation from Australia, then Alicel in 1932; advantages of short
included reduced lodging (falling over), mechanized handling, earlier maturity, but increased fertilizer
and capital inputs; Gaines introduced as first semidwarf in 1961, by 1984, 59% U.S. wheat crop is
semidwarf
F-1 generation hybrids (typically used) often more vigorous and productive, but sterile or not stably self-
reproducing, so that farmers must purchase seed from seed companies
these and other hybrids required increasing amounts of fertilizer to support, aided by 1909 Haber-Bosch
process using large amounts of energy to produce nitrogen-based fertilizers needed for ag productivity
at same time that agribusiness dominating increasing share of rural American landscape, image of earlier of
small family farm persists as pastoral ideal, if not for farmers, for cities

III. Fleeing the City

emptied rural landscape attractive to another segment of urban dwellers seeking escape
Thoreau as early defender of American notion of self-sufficiency: avoid urban dependency by moving to rural
site where all basic goods of life grown or made at home.

Brook Farm, 1841-6, founded by George Ripley as collective experiment in linking manual and intellectual labor on Fourierite principles, communal self-sufficiency

Greenbelt towns of New Deal's Resettlement Administration as suburban versions of this idea: farms and factories ideally combined in small-scale community

Louise Dickinson Rich, *We Took to the Woods*, 1941: Maine forest cottage, small garden

Ralph Borsodi, *Flight from the City*, 1933: marketing consultant for Macy's moved to farmstead in 1920 to explore decentralist libertarian politics, living on land

Helen & Scott Nearing (Tolstoyan socialist, vegetarian) moved to Vermont farm 1932 after blacklisted from teaching, practice self-sufficiency. *Living the Good Life*, 1954.

J. I. Rodale: founds *Organic Farming & Gardening* in 1942, became leading exponent of anti-chemical composted soil techniques as most appropriate form of farming

radical communes of 1960s as largest wave of rural retreats during 20th century: outgrowth of anti-war and drug culture protest movements. largely middle-class, white

strong attraction to farming, though rarely successful for long: Total Loss Farm typical

Indian teepee as one icon of romantic independence of communal life

most successful communes based on central charismatic leader with religious vision: Stephen's The Farm in Summertown, Tennessee

communes based on radical secular politics much less stable

mainstream version of communal utopian vision: smaller-scale self-sufficiency practiced at level of family.

USDA Yearbook of Agriculture in 1978: *Living on a Few Acres*.

self-sufficiency at level of garden rather than farm: production for immediate family, unable to sustain any larger population, and rarely successful itself in long run; often more an adjunct of suburban or exurban families who earn salary or wage in urban economy

IV. Culture and Agriculture

Wendell Berry: English professor, poet, novelist, farmer on land near Port Royal, Kentucky

culture as agriculture (*The Unsettling of America*, 1977), and the Mad Farmer's Liberation Manifesto: Leopold's stewardship