

# Wielding the Pen For and

*"The small community has been the very predominant form of human living throughout the history of mankind."*

—Robert Redfield in *Little Community* (1955)

A major event in the seventies—the comeback of American villages—has been largely overlooked by scholars and commentators alike. Indeed, only a handful of writers over the century has insisted upon the efficacy of village life; the rest have cheerfully and indefatigably predicted the death of small communities.

This essay focuses on the uneven intellectual struggle that has long been waged by opposing community scholars. At bottom, it is a struggle for our civic sensibilities, and thus for the survival of rural America.

Large and learned tomes have been devoted to demonstrating the inevitable disappearance of rural community life before the onslaught of urban technology and the social institutions it has spawned. Curiously, the social scientists do not stop at depicting metropolitan culture as the wave of the future; they also insist it was the wave of the past. No less fair-minded a sociologist than Scott Greer has claimed, in *The Concept of Community*, that although villages "have formed the economic and demographic base for the majority of the world's population since the Neolithic era . . . the high points of history have occurred in the city. The 'urbs,' the people of the cities, are the ones who have made his-

local power elite."

Nonetheless, a small number of social scientists and rural advocates has all along espoused a wholly different vision of community life, one more flattering and less fatalistic. Its flattering side is typified in the works of the late Arthur E. Morgan, who, among other things, was the Tennessee Valley Authority's first chairman and a long-time president of Antioch College. One of Morgan's books, *The Small Community: Foundation of Democratic Life*, published in 1942, is a 312-page hymn of praise to small-town America. In it Morgan made the familiar argument that the nation relies on small towns as a "seedbed of values." "The roots of civilization," he wrote, "are

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By Richard



of history have occurred in the city. The cities, the people of the cities, are the ones who have made history." (Well, certainly they are the ones who have written it.)

In general, most academic observers of the American social scene would probably endorse the saturnine opinions of William Simon and John H. Gagnon, as expressed in their essay on "The Decline and Fall of the Small Town": "The land and the economy of the United States will not support as many small towns as they did before. It is very difficult not to see the future as a long, drawn-out struggle for community survival, lasting for half a century, in



Walter Goldschmidt

which some battles may be won but the war will be lost. A future in which most such towns will become isolated or decayed, in which the local amenities must deteriorate, and in which there will finally be left only the aged, the inept, the very young—and the

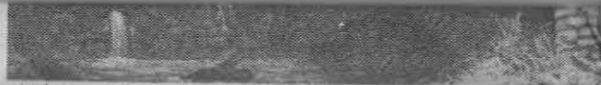
elemental traits—good will, neighborliness, fair play, courage, tolerance, open-minded inquiry, patience." He continued: "These finer underlying traits . . . are learned in the intimate, friendly world of the family and the small community."

Not surprisingly, Morgan was among the first to seriously challenge metropolitan determinism, a notion that would consign rural villages to the 20th century scrap-heap. He equated that estimate of the future with Social Darwinism, observing testily: "The doctrine of the 'survival of the fittest' means only that what survives is that which is fittest under the particular existing circumstances. In a crude society, fine qualities may be under great handicaps . . ."

Others after Morgan carried on the debate—none perhaps so passionately, but several, by force of their marshaled evidence, more persuasively. The anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt brought out *As You Sow* in 1947, his classic study of the effects of agribusiness on rural community life in California. The first sentence in the book told the story: "From industrialized sowing of the soil is reaped an urbanized society." Goldschmidt attempted to show that the presence of agribusiness in the San Joaquin Valley, with its aggregates of machinery and wealth, was antithetical to the social health of nearby villages.

Close upon the heels of Goldschmidt's lament came another. This one was an investigation into the problems faced by residents of a small town in the Southwest, Caliente, when their primary employer, a railroad company, switched from steam power to diesel power, thereby throwing a large number of villagers out of work.

What is notable in W.F. Cottrell's widely reprinted study, "Death by Dieselization," is the quietly effective way he questions the validity of our old friend, Social Darwinism. In response to the shibboleths commonly used to justify the railroad's virtual



Lithograph/E. Sachse & Co., 1872

abandonment of Caliente—"the inevitability of progress" and "the law of supply and demand"—Cottrell poses a different set of ideas—"protection . . . from technological change" and "intervention of the state"—that he insists are just as "natural," "normal" and "rational." Here again, the tenets of economic determinism are asked to yield to "higher," more "human" values, including those of community.

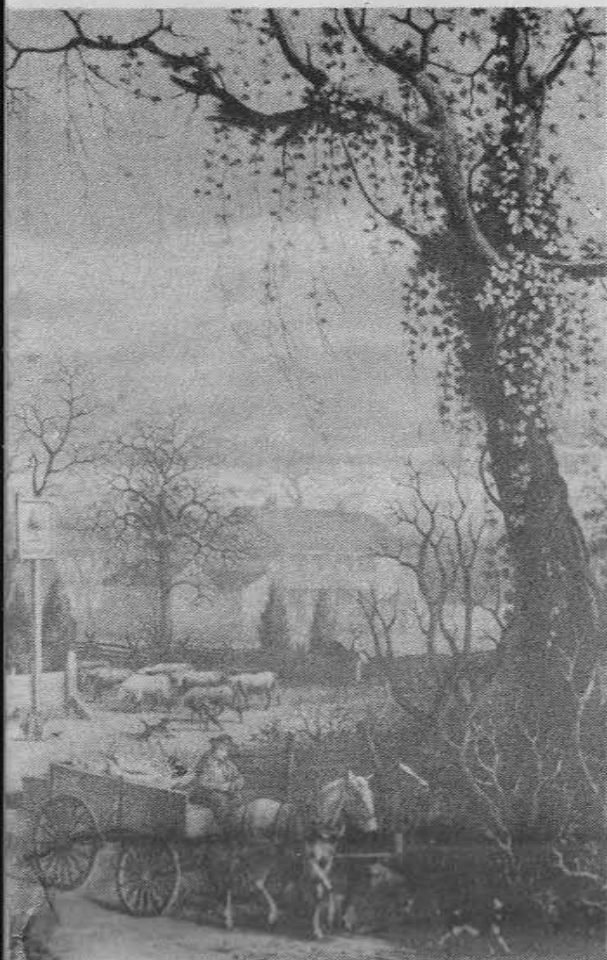
It was anything but coincidental that these village-oriented attacks on fatalism should appear during a period of near-catastrophic rural attrition—when, in the name of progress, thousands of small-town institutions were dismantled or allowed to die. In 1957 the social commentator Max Lerner, in *America As a Civilization*, accurately described the relentless process:

"Somewhere between the turn of century and the New Deal, the small town felt the withering touch of the Great Artifact that we call American society, and in the quarter century between 1930 and 1955 the decisive turn was made away from small-town life. The currents of American energy moved around and beyond the small towns, leaving them isolated, demoralized, with their young people leaving them behind like abandoned ghost towns."

Those were the years when rural schools by the thousands were consolidated out of existence, joining rural churches, banks and other local organizations in a parade of extinction. The federal government contributed to this rout during the '50s by closing nearly 6,000 small-community post offices, more than twice the number shut down in the previous decade. One could sympathize with Oren Lee Staley, president of the National Farmers Organization, when he uttered his dark, oft-quoted jeremiad: "The farmhouse lights are going out all over America."

# Against Small-Town Life

and J. Margolis

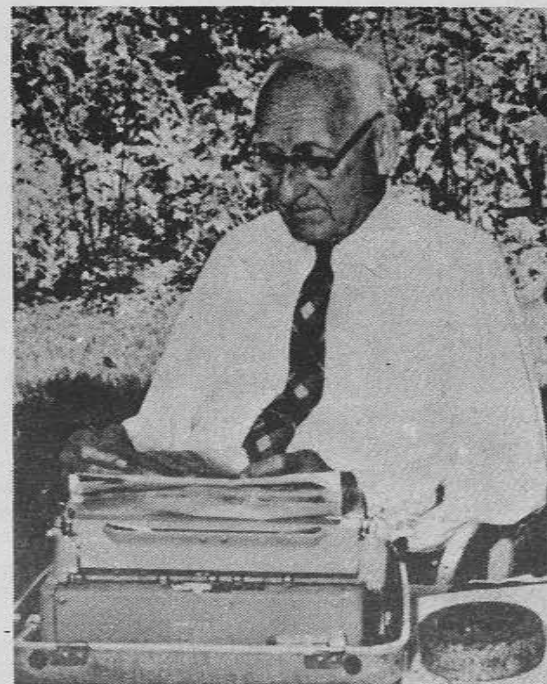


"As one who has studied small towns and villages for a number of years, I am struck by the fact that they prevail despite most people's efforts to write them off. They may not perform the same functions as previously; they may in fact serve as little more than population nodes; they may even lose considerable population; but somehow they stay in there for census after census. This was poignantly expressed by the headline of a recent newspaper: 'Small Town Dies, But Life Goes On.'"

The emerging trend that Fuguitt spotted in 1971 has been fully confirmed in subsequent years—and precisely summarized by Peter A. Morrison and Judith P. Wheeler in a recent *Population Bulletin* published by the Population Reference Bureau. The title of their study takes the form of a question, "Rural Renaissance in America?" The writers proceed to answer: "For the first time in this century, and probably in the nation's history, more Americans are moving away from metropolitan areas than are moving to them, in an abrupt and baffling reversal of the long established trend toward urbanization."

Some of the "baffling" facts cited by Morrison and Wheeler are as follows:

- Each year between 1970-75, for every 100 people who moved to the metropolitan sector, 131 moved out.
- During this period three-fourths of all non-metropolitan communities registered population gains, and those gains occurred in more than two-thirds of all rural counties.
- "Even nonmetropolitan areas that are far distant from urban . . . influence—the kinds of places that used to be regarded as 'nowhere' in the 1950s—have been registering net migration gains instead of their once perennial losses."



The late Arthur Morgan

cently by St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

"There is a need for intimate human relationships," the planners write, "for the security of settled home and associations, for spiritual unity and for orderly transmission of the basic cultural inheritance. These the small community . . . can supply. Whoever keeps the small community alive and at its best during this dark period, whoever clarifies, refines and strengthens the small community may have more to do with the final emergence of a great society than those who dominate big industry and big government."

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If the long rural night appeared oddly “all-of-a-piece”—complete, ubiquitous and irreversible—the reasons for it seemed to differ in each darkening town. Scott Greer shrewdly touched on this in a comment he made, in 1969, on Cottrell’s “Dieselization” study. “The Caliente he speaks of,” wrote Greer, “may stand for hundreds of other towns, from Jerome, Arizona, which died as its copper deposits reached unprofitable levels for extraction, to Baird, Texas, which died as the improvements in roads and automobiles brought it into competition with the much larger city of Abilene.” Indeed, diverse as the reasons were, to Greer they had a single cause: a changing technology placed at the service of profit.

And Greer went on to ask, profit for whom? “The slogan ‘Progress Requires Sacrifice,’ ” he noted, “conceals the question: Who will benefit and who will lose? Accepting the *laissez faire* philosophy of social change, one must say that those who control and execute change will win, (and) those who represent the old order will lose. Such an outcome, as Cottrell points out, punishes the virtuous and rewards the wicked.”

Yet both the new order and the old had more surprises in store. In the 1960s and ’70s, Americans began to change their patterns of settlement and mobility, with the upshot that rural community life revived in many places. Some early soundings of those profound transformations were taken in 1971 by Glenn V. Fuguitt, the highly respected demographer, in his study, “The Places Left Behind: Population Trends and Policy for Rural America.” In the first paragraph Fuguitt announced the startling news: “There is evidence of an emerging decentralization trend around larger nonmetropolitan centers.” Then, after documenting the trend, he came to an interesting conclusion:

With the new demography new hope has come to small-community advocates. A spunky revisionism has set in—a reaction to what one rural commentator has called “all the dangerous ‘-ations’ ”: dieselization, consolidation, regionalization and the like. The rhetoric of this revisionism goes beyond mere Jeffersonianism and its promise of a democracy kept green by the labors of small landholders. That vision iso-

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lated the yeomen farmer, tethering him to his land while separating him from his community. It was 18th-century individualism with a vengeance. By contrast, the new utopia focuses on the village and the intimacies it can provide.

The declarations that now issue forth from small communities combine pride and resentment in about equal proportions—pride in civic possibilities and resentment at the way urban enthusiasts seem to have written them off. The emotional blend is nicely exemplified in a town plan that was published re-

ing this dark period, whoever clarifies, refines and strengthens the small community may have more to do with the final emergence of a great society than those who dominate big industry and big government.”

Similarly, the Nebraska writers of a series of village histories, in a Morgan-like manifesto, have declared: “In a time when the nation and the world are wondering why the countryside is being depopulated, why small towns are being destroyed, it is too easy to answer, ‘Because they have too little past, too little excitement, too little future.’ This (idea) may be a product of the media and of the massive centralization of things in our society—the cult of bigness. But genuine culture, true human community, is not manufactured in a television studio, and it is not primarily bought and sold. It exists where women and men come together to create symbols of their common life.”

That the Nebraska project sanctifying small-town life gets its money from big government—through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities—should not surprise us. The dictates of the new demography are likely to impose many such anomalies, whereby we depend on centralized authority to promote decentralization. We have, by way of example, the White House press conference of last December 20, when President Carter, amid much fanfare, proposed to create a new position in the Federal bureaucracy—an under-secretary of agriculture for small communities and rural development.

What we can look forward to, it seems, is a readjustment of some old habits of thinking. In our rush to industrialize and to prosper we have become a nation of strangers, a mass society that appears distressingly transient and impersonal. In the ’70s it occurred to us that small is beautiful; in the ’80s we may also learn that it is durable—a fixed imperative of our national life.

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