
Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests

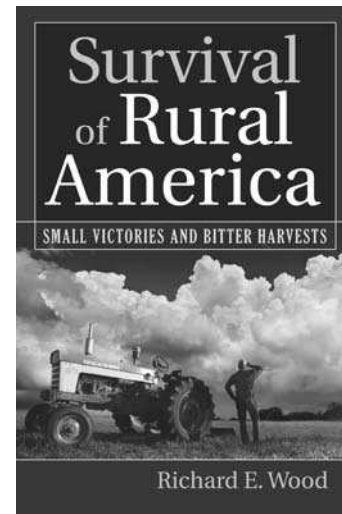
by Richard E. Wood

xvii + 223 pages, illustrations, maps, notes, index.
Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008, cloth \$34.95.

Rural America evokes images of both the pastoral life of isolated farmsteads, massive grain fields, and dusty country roads, and of small towns with assorted main street businesses, schools and churches, and close-knit communities that extend beyond the faint boundaries separating town from country and place from space. It is the decline of these small towns, “the epitome of what rural America means,” that is the focus of *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*. Richard Wood, a “son of small-town Kansans,” organizes his book into three parts: an introduction to declining rural communities, a presentation of several case studies of Kansas towns describing their fights for survival, and a discussion of “Policy Options for Rural America,” including the role of the federal government, the issues of sustainable agriculture and alternative energy, and the idea of the Buffalo Commons as a regional metaphor.

In the opening chapter, “Transition: the Depopulation of Rural America,” and tangentially in other chapters, Wood makes numerous references to the historical context of rural depopulation in phrasing such as “early stages” and “long-term trends,” and in the chapter, “Rural Communities at Risk,” he briefly outlines how improved transportation and the industrialization of agriculture “touched off an era of decline and depopulation that continues to this day—and that decades have not been able to improve.” Readers would have been better served by consolidation of these scattered references into a comprehensive chapter that explained how the dynamics of settlement led to overpopulation of the Plains, thereby setting the stage from the beginning for intensive competition for survival among places. Railroads, for example, created too many towns (those Wood discusses in chapter 6 are among them) as a sideline activity to their bread-and-butter land sales. This chapter should also include a broader discussion of how improvements in transportation technology—specifically in the form of railroads, automobiles, and mechanization of farm machinery—expanded the spatial dimensions of rural economies while reducing the number of farmers and ultimately the size of their families, in turn diminishing the size of the small trading centers dependent on them.

In chapter 3, Wood employs several literary references to justify the use of Kansas as a surrogate region for the rest of rural America. This sets the stage for “Strategies for Rural Survival,” the core of the book and the part most relevant for Kansas readers because through a series of community profiles it offers perspectives on the variety of issues faced by people in small Kansas towns. Short histories and numerous townscape images accentuate nicely the points of discussion, as does a Kansas map showing their relative location (though why the map appears in chapter



7 when the discussion of communities begins with chapter 6 is unclear). Among the key themes addressed are the “free land” movement (Marquette, Ellsworth), individual entrepreneurship (Plainville), isolation (Atwood), schools (Tipton), bedroom communities (Plainville, Minneapolis), and tourism (“The Amazing 100 Miles”). The failure in most cases of “elephant hunting”—efforts of rural communities to attract large businesses through tax abatements and land incentives—led to a modern version of homesteading with the “bottom-up” approach of offering city lots to small entrepreneurs and families with school-aged children. On the other hand, Wood describes the “top-down” approach employed in Sedan, where Bill Kurtis, television journalist, producer, and former CBS News anchor, has invested in renovating a number of businesses in the Chautauqua Hills community, as well as in the operation of the Red Buffalo Ranch, which markets grass-fed beef.

In the final section of the book, “Policy Options for Rural America,” Wood addresses national agrarian issues and their potential impact on rural communities. The prophetic perspectives of Wes Jackson, of the Land Institute in Salina, highlight a chapter on sustainable agriculture, including livestock operations. A balanced and informative chapter on alternative fuels, specifically ethanol, follows. Wood appropriately concludes with a chapter on the controversial idea of returning much of the Great Plains to its pre-agricultural condition, or into what has become known as the Buffalo Commons.

Survival of Rural America is very successful in conveying the complexities of small-town life, particularly the challenge of maintaining an independent viable economy in an increasingly interdependent world. What shines through in the human narratives is how the sense of belonging to small communities fulfills and enriches the lives of those who accept the challenges it imposes. That will always be part of the appeal of rural America and why we still care about the fate of its small communities.

Reviewed by Tom Schmiedeler, professor of geography, Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas.