

5 of 16 DOCUMENTS

Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA)

September 17, 1984, Monday

## Preparing to love this place

**BYLINE:** Richard J. Margolis

**SECTION:** The Home Forum; Pg. 42

**LENGTH:** 1300 words

One of the nicest things about "consciousness-raising" is that it dispels self-hate. Where a group's consciousness of itself happens to be at any given point can be assessed through the writings of its poets. So it is with rural poetry - a growing but much-neglected art form - which can tell us a good deal about how it goes with rural people today.

Much contemporary rural poetry is accessible to readers anywhere. Who, for example, could fail to comprehend the melancholy lines of Dave Smith, a poet with "pine seed in my nose," who finds himself, through no apparent fault of his own, walking the streets of Chicago, when where he really wants to be is back in the rural South? As he laments, "My life lies loose like lint in my pocket" - a pretty good description of the consequences of rural-to-urban displacement.

And what rural citizen would not affirm the feelings of James A. Autrey, another displaced villager, who keeps wondering, "while sipping something chic and soda" at a citified cocktail party,

which of these ladies would bring  
 a covered dish and a quart of tea  
 to set among the prayers and songs  
 on the dinner grounds in the pine  
 grove.

Prayers and songs, casseroles and incantations - the lost joys of ruralism. But the new rural poetry has much more than nostalgia to offer. Even its reminiscent side speaks to the future, to a vision of America that contains the best and most enduring features of ruralism. "America," Smith cries, "sing to me now as you always claimed you would...." He is speaking about generosity and community, about prayers and songs that might exorcise the lint from his life. In short, he is a poet in search of meaning, which is why he looks to his rural roots.

But don't all poets, urban no less than rural, look to their roots? Well, yes, now perhaps they do - but for rural poets this rooting about is a relatively new phenomenon. In the dark ages of American rural poetry - that is, before the dawn of rural consciousness - we had something quite different.

The industrialization of America had a baneful effect on the morale of rural residents. They saw urban rule as the wave of the future, and in turn considered themselves to be a doomed remnant of the past.

Preparing to love this place Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA) September 17, 1984, Monday

The rural poetry that got written back then - I'm talking about after the Civil War - is what critics now call "genteel" verse. It romanticized the past while keeping a discreet silence about both the present and the future. If there is such a thing as "false consciousness," there may also be a false nostalgia - of the sort, perhaps that was practiced by James Whitcomb Riley, with his backward glances and folksy misspellings. Just two of his many forgettable lines will suffice here:

Let's go a-visitin' to Griggsby's

Station -

Back where we ust to be so happy

and so pore!

Riley himself was pretty rich but, in his view of things, rural happiness and rural poverty went together. You couldn't have one without the other.

By the early 20th century, rural nostalgia had given way to something more biting and more bitter - the first sign of incipient rural consciousness. Rural poets back then didn't like their small towns. They didn't want to be where they were. To Edward Arlington Robinson, the routines and rhythms of small-town life were as "Familiar as an old mistake,/ And futile as regret."

In those times that seemed so hard, and in those places that seemed so petty and mean-spirited, self-disparagement was a natural response. Edgar Lee Masters even mocked small-town poetry:

Seeds in a dry pod, tick, tick, tick,

Tick, tick, tick, what little iambics

While Homer and Whitman roared

in the pines!

(Poets always seem to have pine seed in their noses!)

What rural poets were facing in those days was a demographic disaster of historic proportions. Millions of young people were abandoning their farms and villages and seeking jobs or excitement in the cities. "The farmhouse lights are going out all over America," lamented the president of the National Farmers Organization. "Our world is vanishing."

In vain did rural poets battle the urban tide. Vachel Lindsay tried the hardest, going on foot from town to town, reciting his poems in praise of village life and dreamily prophesying a cul-tural rebirth that would someday transform small-town America.

But the national mood was metropolitan - bigger was better - and most of the major poets preferred city lights to harvest moons.

Then a funny thing happened to rural America on its way to extinction. In the late 1960s it began to enjoy a demographic comeback, one that persists to this day. The 1980 census shows the rural sector growing at a faster rate than its metropolitan counterpart for the first time in 160 years.

Preparing to love this place Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA) September 17, 1984, Monday

It would be unwise to see in all this the stirrings of a "back-to-the-land" movement, since the actual direction taken thus far has been nonagricultural.

"We have a new distribution of people upon the land," writes Howard F. Conklin, professor of agricultural economics at Cornell University, "one that has never before existed in the history of the human race. It is a pattern in which non-farm people live in the country, far outnumbering farmers in most rural communities."

Poets, of course, have been part of that new distribution; and their works, in my judgment, reflect the new rural consciousness. The dimensions of renewal appear broad and generous, covering a variety of groups and ethnicities. Blacks in the South share in it, as do Hispanics in the Southwest and Native Americans throughout the country. A 1978 anthology titled "On Turtle's Back" includes more than 100 rural poets, all from upstate New York. A recently published bibliography of "Contemporary Appalachian Poetry" lists 122 works produced by 88 poets.

The listings can be taken as signs of a desire among rural residents to make their local affections memorable and explicit. Writes Michael McClure in "At Night on the River":

Let

us

prepare

to love this place

before we leave it ...

The Nebraska poet John McKernan makes a similar point when he lovingly lists what he calls "The truly great works of man": "pouring milk into buckets of wood/ gathering long sheaves of prickling wheat .../ planting cabbage and garlic in the garden/ gathering the globed pear the parsley sprig."

Rural poets can extol the commonplace simply by calling it to our attention - even though the subjects may be beneath urban notice. This is a point not lost on poets like William Stafford, who loves to mock city ways as he quietly praises rural life. In a poem titled "Things I Learned Last Week," Stafford is full of valuable information.

Ants, when they meet each other,

usually pass on the right ...

A man in Boston has dedicated

himself

to telling about injustice.

For three-thousand dollars he will

come to your town and tell you

about it.

Though one should not read too much into Stafford's wry lines, it seems safe to say that he writes from a distinctly rural viewpoint. For instance, the quip about the Boston man asking \$3,000 to tell villagers about injustice draws some of its power from the familiar status of rural people. After all, when it comes to injustice, they wrote the book.

Preparing to love this place Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA) September 17, 1984, Monday

If rural poets are getting self-conscious about their rurality, can the rest of us be far behind? "Poetry," said Carl Sandburg, "is the achievement of the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits."

It is now possible to say "rural is beautiful" and mean both the biscuits and the hyacinths, the life people live as well as the aesthetics they absorb. That life comes replete with its own values and rhythms. It requires no apologies and no lament for the lint that lies loose in one's pockets. It is the stuff of poetry.

**LANGUAGE: ENGLISH**

COPYRIGHT 1984 THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PUBLISHING SOCIETY