

# Nix Pix of Stix as Hix

By Richard J. Margolis

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GEORGETOWN, Conn. — Much of American history comes down to the people's erratic pursuit of equity in the face of obdurate privilege. During the nineteen-thirties that pursuit was expressed largely in terms of class; in the nineteen-sixties, in terms of race. Now the time seems right to speak also of *place*, and of those Americans who by virtue of where they live are deprived of full participation in our political and economic system.

Sixty million Americans live in small towns and rural areas—outside what the Census Bureau calls Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas. By and large, our national policy vis-à-vis these rural citizens has been one of ferocious neglect. Their voice has been drowned in the urban hubbub; their needs have been continually overlooked.

Indeed, the illusion is widespread that rural America no longer exists, that it is in fact a dead letter, and that sooner or later all but the minions of agribusiness will live in megalopolis. The illusion is self-fulfilling; it promotes policies that ultimately drive people off the land and into the cities.

Because of these policies, many people suffer.

*Item:* Although less than one-third of the total population lives in non-metropolitan areas, fully 60 per cent of the nation's substandard housing (as defined by the census) can be found there. Yet all but a thin sliver of the total Federal housing subsidy—less than 20 per cent—goes to our cities and suburbs.

*Item:* The so-called "health delivery system" in rural America is a disaster. Rural communities suffer from a perpetual shortage of doctors, dentists, nurses and other essential health specialists. Whole counties—138 of them—and whole towns—more than 5,000 of them—must somehow get along without the services of a single physician. Nevertheless, as with housing, Federal funds are tilted in an urban direction. For example, only 7 per cent of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's clinic-assistance money goes to non-metropolitan areas.

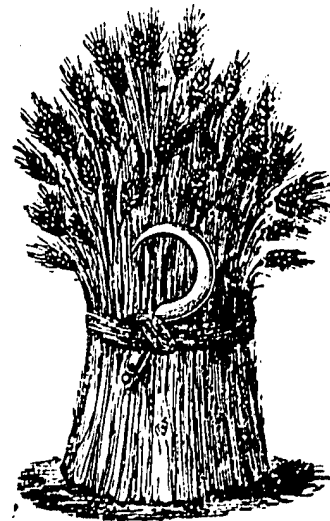
*Item:* Public-transportation facilities are declining everywhere, but at a faster rate in small towns and rural sections. In the last fifteen years, 146 bus companies have disappeared, most of them from towns of less than 25,000 population. Yet nearly all Federal transportation assistance is directed

toward the cities. In fact, only \$500-million of the \$11 billion authorized to administer the 1974 National Transportation Act is earmarked for rural areas.

Need one continue? The figures trace a similarly skewed picture in education, employment, welfare and most of the other categories that, taken together, go far to define the

quality of life in America. Invariably, it seems, rural Americans finish last.

This is not a new story. In a sense, rural Americans have been in trouble ever since Alexander Hamilton's vision of a society powered by urban capital triumphed over Thomas Jefferson's dream of a society harnessed to agricultural yeomanry. From that point on the city held sway.



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By the end of the nineteenth century, although we were still predominantly a nation of farmers, the city's economic triumph was absolute. As the historian E. G. Nourse was later to note, "At the opening of the twentieth century American agriculture stood in just the same subservient position to American industrialism that the colonies had occupied toward England a century and a quarter before."

The new colonialism brought on fresh miseries. Land values plummeted; farmers abandoned their bucolic but profitless holdings and headed for industrial jobs in the city.

In 1908 President Theodore Roosevelt, sensing that something had gone sour in rural America, appointed a high-level Country Life Commission to recommend remedies. Eventually the commissioners issued a long and thoughtful report. "It is peculiarly necessary," they noted, "that government should give the farmer adequate consideration and protection. There are difficulties of the separate man, living quietly on his land, that government should understand."

Government did not understand. The Congress, after due debate, refused to appropriate a single dime toward the report's dissemination. One concludes that the supply of bad news

about rural America has always exceeded demand.

Six decades after Roosevelt's commission, Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a similar investigative body, this one known as the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. The result was a melancholy but moving report on "The People Left Behind"—the 14 million rural poor. But by the time it came out the President had lost interest; he was already hip deep in Vietnam. Once again, in their long pursuit of equity, rural Americans would have to wait.

Now a growing number of rural and small-town residents are saying they are not willing to wait. They are calling for a fair share of society's goods and services. Last week, for example, some 1,500 rural-America advocates met in Washington and wrote the broad outlines of an economic and political agenda for rural America. One hopes they will be heard and heeded.

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*Richard J. Margolis is chairman of the Rural Housing Alliance and of Rural America, Inc., the private organizations that convened the Washington conference and that are concerned respectively, with improving the quality of rural housing and life.*