

States of the Union

NEW LIFE IN THE OLD VILLAGE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLS

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 of the '70s, the comeback of American villages, has been largely overlooked by social commentators; their heads remain stuffed with Marshall McLuhan's electronic contrivance of the '60s, the Global Village. That anyone can still seriously entertain McLuhan's oddly urban notion, replacing the warm satisfactions of face-to-face human intimacies with the cool communications of video, suggests that some village idiots may have migrated to the city.

Other Americans, meanwhile, have been traveling in the opposite direction, affirming with their feet the efficacy of small communities. But before exploring the new demographics these citizens have wrought, let us first examine the uneven intellectual struggle that has long been waged by opposing community scholars. At bottom, it is a struggle for our civic sensibilities and can even be traced in our literature.

In the early part of the present century, writers like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis made small towns notorious as mean-spirited islands of provincialism in a sea of civilized urbanism. Later—in the '30s, and again in the '60s and '70s—some writers reversed the picture, portraying American hamlets as oases of old-fashioned virtue in a desert of industrial venality. While neither of these views is wholly accurate, both do reflect authentic facets of village life; moreover, the wild swings in our literature from cynicism to romanticism tell us much about our own vacillations regarding community. The American public's attitude toward small communities has been characterized by a strange ambivalence, a mixture of affection and scorn, attraction and repulsion.

America's modern scholars, though, have seemed more sure of their ground. Most have written off the village as a quaint anachronism at best and a barrier to "progress" at worst. 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, these 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 history." (Well, certainly they are the ones who have written it.)

In general, most academic observers of the American social scene also 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 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 local power elite."

Nonetheless, a small number of social scientists and rural advocates have all along espoused a wholly different vision of rural 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 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, ready as early as the '40s to 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.

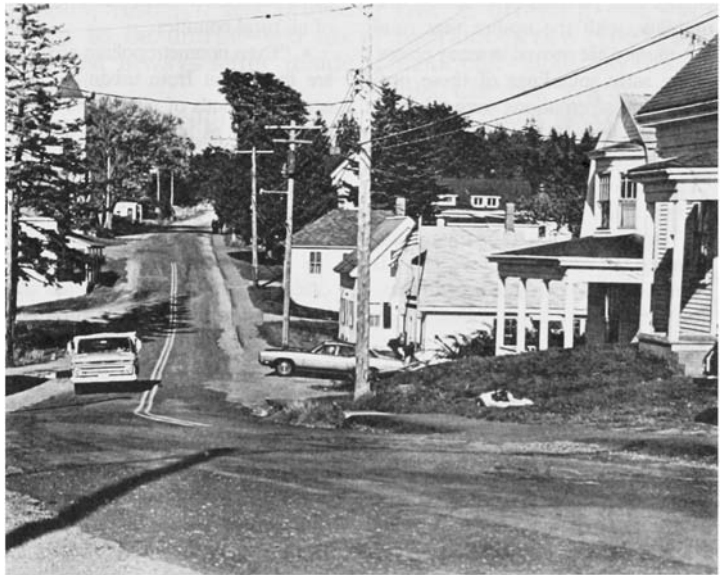
What is notable in W. F. Cottrell's widely reprinted study, "Death by Dieselization," is the quietly effective way he questions the validity of our old friend, Social Darwinism. In response to the shibboleths commonly used to justify the railroad's virtual abandonment of Caliente—"the inevitability of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

dated 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."

If the long rural night appeared oddly "all-of-a-piece"—complete, ubiqui-



PORT CLYDE, MAINE

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 consoli-

tous 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, individual 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 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:

"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 nonmetropolitan 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."

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 isolated the yeoman 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 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 global enthusiasts seem to have written them off. The emotional blend is nicely exemplified in a town plan that was published recently 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 or-

derly 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."

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 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.

HOW TO SAVE YOUR LIFE AND THE ONE NEXT TO YOU

OVERCOMING YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESISTANCE TO SEAT BELTS MAY BE THE KEY.

The facts are startling. Experts estimate that about half of all automobile occupant fatalities last year might have been avoided if the people had been wearing seat belts. That's because injuries occur when the car stops abruptly and the occupants are thrown against the car's interior. Belts prevent this.

Many people say they know the facts, but they still don't wear belts. Their reasons range all over the lot: seat belts are troublesome to put on, they are uncomfortable, or they wrinkle your clothes. Some people even think getting hurt or killed in a car accident is a question of fate; and therefore, seat belts don't matter.

If you're one of those people who don't use belts for one reason or another, please think carefully about your motivations. Are your objections to seat belts based on the facts or on rationalizations?

Here are a few of the common rationalizations. Many people say they are afraid of being trapped in a car by a seat belt. In fact, in the vast majority of cases,

seat belts protect passengers from severe injuries, allowing them to escape more quickly. Another popular rationalization: you'll be saved by being thrown clear of the car. Here again, research has proved that to be untrue—you are almost always safer inside the car.

Some people use seat belts for highway driving, but rationalize it's not worth the trouble to buckle up for short trips. The numbers tell a different story: 80% of all automobile accidents causing injury or death involve cars traveling under 40 miles per hour. And three quarters of all collisions happen less than 25 miles from the driver's home.

When you're the driver, you have the psychological authority to convince all of the passengers that they should wear seat belts. It has been shown that in a car, the driver is considered to be an authority figure. A simple reminder from you may help save someone's life. And please remember children can be severely injured in automobile accidents, too. Make sure Child Restraint Systems are used for children who aren't old enough to use regular seat belts.

Because so many people still don't use their seat belts,

the government has directed that some form of passive restraint—one that doesn't require any action by the occupant—be built into every car by the 1984 model year. GM is offering one such restraint—a new type of automatic belt—as an option on the 1980 Chevette to gain insight into its public acceptance.

By the 1982 model year, we must begin putting passive restraints in all full-size cars and, eventually, into the entire fleet. But until you purchase one of these cars of the future, you can protect yourself and others by using seat belts and urging your family and friends to follow your example.

At GM, we're very concerned about safety. So please fasten your seat belt, because even the best driver in the world can't predict what another driver will do.

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