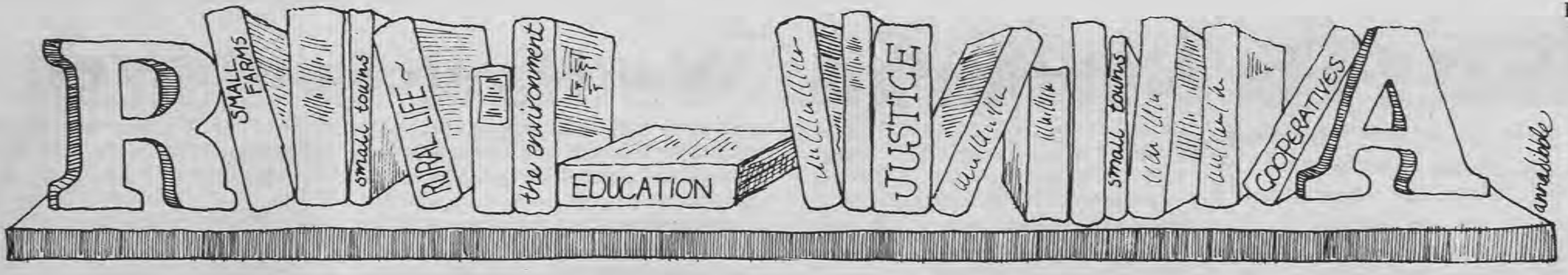

Ten Books You May Have Missed

by Richard J. Margolis

Books on rural themes often suffer a fate similar to that endured by rural people: they are overlooked. During the present decade dozens of worthy, rural-oriented works have been consigned to limbo by a complacent urban press that exists, it appears, not to praise such books but to bury them. Our purpose here is to disinter a few of the best and the brightest.

John Nichols' **The Milagro Beanfield War** (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $8.95) is a very funny,wry shrewd novel about a haphazard Chicano uprising in a New Mexico village—a "war" waged by the peasants there to recover lost land and water rights. It begins when a "little half-pint son of a bitch" named Joe Mondragon taps into the county's main irrigation channel in order to water his beanfield. From then on confusion reigns. As one of the characters notes, "United we flounder, divided we flounder." Nichols writes stories, not sermons, but he makes a point that's worth quoting: "It's an ill wind that blows *no* good."

New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village (norton, $9.95) by John Baskin is not fiction, though much of it reads that way. It's Baskin's hymn to the residents of an Ohio farm village that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers chose to [illegible] Baskin, a young

A more conventional approach to the same problem—vanishing villages—can be found in **Communities Left Behind** (Iowa State University Press, paperback), a collection of papers presented at a 1973 symposium held at South Dakota State University in Brookings. As Larry R. Whiting, the editor, makes clear, it's essentially an upbeat book: "I believe we occasionally ignore some topics that need to be discussed and studied in a positive way." The studies discussed in the volume include rural development, "Feasible Options for Social Action" and "Enhancing Economic Opportunity." Not all of it is as positive as Whiting may have wished. At one point even Cicero is dragged in to prove that the problems small towns face today may be several millennia old. Apparently, "Cicero thundered against the depopulation of the rural districts through similar attractions which draw young men and women from the farm today." Cicero aside, the contributors have much to tell us about the decline and fall of small towns in America.

In the Deep South, small-town attrition has been more or less synonymous with black out-migration. Dwayne E. Walls' **The Chickenbone Special** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $2.95 paperback) offers a sensitive evocation of that sad and continuing event. The blurb on the cover tells it all:

Little-known but gallant predecessors of the Chickenbone migrants were the **Exodusters** (Alfred A. Knopf, $12.95), ex-slaves who sailed up the Mississippi towards Kansas in search of land and freedom. Nell Irvin Painter lovingly describes the trials of those rural pioneers who fashioned the first black migration to the North. "The Exodus," writes Painter, "was a rural-to-rural migration . . ." It "presented proof that Afro-Americans did not queitly resign themselves to the political or economic order of the Redeemed South. They cared that their civil rights were extinguished; they missed public school education for the children . . . But lacking the classic tool for public redress—the reasonably independent exercise of the vote—their best alternative was flight."

Harry M. Caudill is well-known as an Appalachian commentator, but his latest book, **A Darkness at Dawn** (University Press of Kentucky), seems to have slipped between the cracks. It's a slim volume, too slim perhaps to contain Caudill's towering rage. His theme, as always, is the rape of the Cumberlands by lumber and coal companies, but this time he strikes a note of truculent hope, comparing Kentucky's energy opportunities with those of the oil-rich Arabs: "As matters now stand the Arabs work to turn their desert lands green while we reduce much of our green land to desert. The world is willing to play the game either way, but Kentuckians alone will make the ultimate decisions. The dice of destiny are in our hands alone."

Rural and Appalachian Health (Charles C. Thomas) is worth a browse. Edited by Robert L. Nolan and Jerome L. Schwartz, (with a foreword by Edward M. Kennedy), the book is a collection of papers presented at a 1971 conference in West Virginia. The papers are scholarly and in general written from the point of view of the health care provider rather than that of the consumer, yet some clues to the egregious state of health care in Appalachia—and across rural America—do manage to seep up through the jargon. "Throughout the region," Schwartz tells us, "there is a shortage of health practitioners, and the few practicing physicians and dentists are overworked. Physicians practicing alone can find no relief and report that people are [illegible] leave town for even one good."

New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village (norton, $9.95) by John Baskin is not fiction, though much of it reads that way. It's Baskin's hymn to the residents of an Ohio farm village that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers chose to liquidate six years ago. Baskin, a young carpenter with writing ambitions, arrived in New Burlington shortly before the disaster: "The villagers told me that before long they would be gone. The Corps. . . was building a reservoir over their village and soon children would waterski in 175-year-old cornfields." He decided to chronicle the lives of the villagers as a kind of antidote to the impending deluge. The result is a series of very moving portraits, which together make up an informal history of the place, a record of small-town life in America. But Baskin, quoting a villager named Abigail Winas, tells us to beware of history. "History," said Abigail, "is a drunk in the snow with his feet sticking out."

In the Deep South, small-town attrition has been more or less synonymous with black out-migration. Dwayne E. Walls' **The Chickenbone Special** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $2.95 paperback) offers a sensitive evocation of that sad and continuing event. The blurb on the cover tells it all: "The story of the largest migration in history—from rural America to the cities—told by black pioneers who have taken the long road north." The Chickenbone Special is the nickname blacks have given to the train that carries so many of them to New York. While riding the train as a reporter, Walls writes, "I realized fully for the first time . . . that the migrants were significant beyond the sheer fact of their numbers. These people were not moving solely to find greater opportunity, as my parents had . . . The important thing about this migration, I determined, was that it was an *unwilling* migration. Human beings were moving not because they *wanted* to move but because they *had* to move."

From the Walker Evans book jacket

Nell Irvin Painter

For a gut understanding of what happened to many of the Southerners left behind—white as well as black—get a copy of **Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938** (Da Capo Press). The pictures are unforgettable, and many of the shack-scenes, alas, remind one not of the history but of the rural South today. Evans' prints are available from the Farm Security collection in the Library of Congress.

Three neglected books about Appalachia are worth noting here. **We Be Here When the Morning Comes** (University Press of Kentucky, $7.50) is a sympathetic, text-and-picture account of the mountaineers' thirteen-month strike, starting in 1973, against coal mine owners in Harlan County, Kentucky. Writer Bryan Woolley and photographer Ford Reid lived with a miner's family during the last weeks of the strike—a period that saw one miner shot and killed. The main issue of the strike was safety. As a miner told Woolley, "I've worked in mines where there's such little air that you might have to strike ten matches to light a cigarette. I seed a feller hold a handful of matches in his hand and struck them all at the same time, and he never got to light a cigarette off of all them matches. You just don't forget things like that." In August, 1974, the company capitulated, and the miners got some air.

yet some clues to the egregious state of health care in Appalachia—and across rural America—do manage to seep up through the jargon. "Throughout the region," Schwartz tells us, "there is a shortage of health practitioners, and the few practicing physicians and dentists are overworked. Physicians practicing alone can find no relief and report that people are resentful if they leave town for even one afternoon or evening."

We began with a novel about a Chicano uprising, so it seems appropriate to conclude with **Chicano: The Beginnings of Bronze Power** (Morrow, $4.95 paperback), an anthology edited by a trio of teachers, Renato Rosaldo, Gustav L. Seligmann and Robert A. Calvert. It's the best explanation extant of Mexican-American grievances and their efforts at redress. For the uninitiated, there's a useful glossary of terms, including "jefe" (a local leader), "patria chica" (loyalty to a region) and "troquero" (the owner of the truck that migrant farm workers travel in).

"We be here when the morning comes"