Book Review: Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests

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Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests, Richard E. Wood. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008. 223 p. $19.95.

Surprised by a 2005 headline about free land for newcomers in his father's place of birth, Wood attempts to answer a simple question in this book – What has been happening to rural America while he was not paying attention? A first generation rural emigrant to urban America himself, Wood wants to find a reason to have hope for rural America's future, but fails to convince even himself. "Unless something can be done to stabilize rural population trends it is quite likely that by the twenty-second century most of small town rural America – and all that it connotes – will have disappeared" (p. xvi).

The book is divided into three sections that focus, in turn, on rural decline, strategies for survival, and policy options that might assist rural America to survive. In the first section, Wood argues against the political perspective of Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Frank blames free market capitalism for rural decline, but Wood provides a more nuanced and, in my view, accurate view of the century-long out-migration that is endangering rural America. Wood considers the evidence offered by others that rural decline is reversing in chapter two, but finds it unconvincing. Like others before him, Wood takes Kansas as representative of the rural Midwest in chapter three, but concludes in chapter four that rural America is at risk, especially those communities that are not adjacent to urban centers, near natural attractions, or that contain another form of "purple cow" to invite attention. Examples of "rural revivals" do exist, and much of the rest of the book looks into individual cases in detail, but Wood's tone is always muted by the reality that none of the revivals have been an unqualified success.

In the section on strategies for survival, Wood quickly dispatches free land programs and "elephant hunts" for large employer relocation as ineffective, broad-based solutions to rural depopulation, but then spends seven chapters trying to find isolated examples of grassroots efforts that are effective. These stories about Kansas communities in Rooks County, Rawlins County, Mitchell County, Ottawa County, and Chautauqua County are Wood at his best. Like a master storyteller, Wood encapsulates the contemporary struggle for rural survival with a sensitive awareness of each community's history, current challenges, and often eccentric leadership determined to prevail.

Two chapters are worth special mention in this second section. Chapter ten applies the same story-centric approach to "The Amazing 100 Miles," a 4,000 square mile section of Kansas between Salina and Hayes dotted with unique purple cows that include restored historic railroad

hotels and art communities. In chapter twelve, the focus shifts to an innovative E-Bay based real estate company that has had some interesting successes in marketing rural buildings to small businesses.

Wood summarizes his conclusions about what has happened to rural America, "Whether rural America grows or shrinks depends, primarily, on two things: jobs and lifestyle" (p. 187). Jobs are problematic simply because agricultural innovations do not require as many human inputs. When it comes to lifestyle, the quiet amenities of rural life (e.g., fishing streams, good neighbors, long conversations) are challenged to compete with the material amenities of urban settings. Federal policies have poured money at rural depopulation for 40 years to little avail (chapter thirteen). Sustainable agriculture and sustainable livestock offer opportunities from the perspective of some (chapter fourteen), but it is difficult to imagine the increased labor needs of sustainability to adequately produce the quantities of foodstuffs necessary to support worldwide population growth. Ethanol and other alternative energies (chapter fifteen) are offered by others as solutions to rural survival, but on more careful analysis seem to be a veneer of justification for additional redistribution of federal resources from urban to rural settings. It is perhaps quixotic that Wood's concluding chapter appeals to the Buffalo Commons as a regional metaphor to capture the appeal that freshly marketed rurality might offer to Americans.

Wood's attempt to find replicable patterns of rural growth underestimates the significance of regional centers. For example, in his discussion of Rooks County, he overlooks the vitality of a regional center like Hayes, Kansas, to lament the decline of Zurich and Codell. From this perspective, the survival of rural America depends on regional concentration in centers that blend the best of rural amenities with at least a taste of the material amenities of larger urban communities. In other words, the century-long trend of rural depopulation in America is probably irreversible unless the rural population clusters into regional centers with the critical mass to sustain jobs and lifestyles that are attractive to young families and competitive with metropolitan areas.

I recommend this book to two categories of potential readers. Urban dwellers interested in what has happened to rural America will find this book to be an interesting and even entertaining primer. Few university press books that I have read tell a story as well as Wood has here. The other category of readers who may profit from this book are leaders in small rural communities. Perhaps none of the solutions attempted by the places Wood visited will be directly applicable, but I suspect that even the failures will speak eloquently to others facing the same challenges.

About the Author:

"Denver attorney Richard E. Wood**,** the son of small-town Kansans, is a former reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News* and the author of *Here Lies Colorado: Fascinating Figures in Colorado History*." [back to top]

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