

SMALL-TOWN DECLINE IN THE AGRARIAN MIDWEST

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INTRODUCTION

After urban industrial centers in the U.S. began to decline in the late 60s, the rural Midwest has often been viewed in the national imagination as a foil to the supposedly poorer, dilapidated, drug-ridden, and dysfunctional inner cities. The popular narrative implied that traditional American values, work ethics, and faith thrived in and supported Midwestern small towns, which supposedly existed in blissful cultural isolation and were insulated from economic turmoil.

However, with the farm crisis of the 1980s, this image began to fade as a regional economic depression ravaged the agrarian Midwest. Images of abandoned farm houses and crowds of farmers protesting in front of banks signaled that all was not well in the agricultural Midwest. Since then, much national attention devoted to the region has covered its decline. Examples of this include the abundant coverage of the meth boom in the early 2000s and the widespread depictions of white rural poverty which became incredibly popular after the 2016 election.

While it is almost universally agreed that the agricultural Midwest has seen serious economic decline over the last 40 years, there is not a consensus on the underlying causes or exact nature of that decline. Globalization, rural deindustrialization, farm corporatization and automation, and failure to compete with urban areas are some of the phenomena most popularly cited as central elements of the decline. Drug use, single-motherhood, population drain, and falling wages are typically noted as common traits of the decline.

This paper will first detail many of the socio-economic symptoms of the agricultural heartland's deterioration. This first section describes a class-based outward migration, the undermining of local institutions, drug use, and how attempts by small towns to attract jobs can accelerate the decline. I will then examine two main explanations of the region's issues.

The first explanation maintains that as economic growth began to center around mainly urban areas, rural spaces failed to attract younger workers and employers, sending small towns

into a downward spiral as economic activity drained to urban areas. It observes that smaller rural economies are not equipped to handle economic changes in the same way that cities are, and that rural economies are incapable of developing at the rate cities do. Small towns cannot institute new technologies and systems such as broadband internet without significant and costly aid from cities, or state governments. I will outline this idea in more detail in my second section.

The other explanation observes that the Midwestern farm economy has remained enormously productive; but that it has industrialized, forcing out the vast majority of independent farmers and concentrating land ownership - along with control over much of the food supply and farm policy - among a few agricultural corporations and big farmers. Paired with the rise of service jobs and low-paying manufacturing or food processing work, an extraction-based economy is created. Often used to describe the economies of many developing countries, extractive capitalism is an economic system in which wealth, resources, and labor are systematically drained from the region. One key element of such an economy is that the region is immensely productive, but its inhabitants live in poverty. I will examine the process of farm industrialization and consolidation in my third section, and the nature of extractive capitalism in my fourth and final section.

This article will not decide between these ideas - I am reviewing them, not trying to find which one is "correct". Rural Midwestern decline is probably a combination of these things - and many others. To say that one is right and another is wrong is both extremely difficult and somewhat reductive.

In addition, a number of farmers, ag business figures, and other subjects were kind enough to allow me to interview them. Relevant quotations from these interviews are spread throughout.

Let me also define the exact area that I am writing about. I will use "the agrarian Midwest," "the agricultural Midwest," and "the farm belt" interchangeably to describe the areas of Midwestern states dedicated to farming, especially crops like corn, soybeans, and wheat as well as

animals like swine and cattle. While the phenomena outlined are by no means unique to or universally applicable to these areas, they are extremely prevalent. I will most often mention Iowa and southern Minnesota, which I believe are indicative of the issues in this area. Note too that just because a state is mentioned, it does not necessarily mean that the state is a “farm state” or that the issues described are widespread statewide; Minnesota, for instance, has a southern part devoted largely to farming and a northern part devoted to lumber, fishing, and iron mining rather than farming, and as such is subject to somewhat separate socio-economic trends. I will also use the terms “Midwest,” “Heartland,” and “Middle America” to vary my writing when describing this region, although in reality they encompass much more than the agricultural rural Midwest.

SMALL MIDWESTERN TOWNS TODAY

In his 1990 book *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto* author Osha Gray Davidson writes the following:

Rural Ghettoization [can be traced] to an initial economic crisis, like a mine or a plant closing. Such a severe economic jolt sets in motion three interconnected processes: (1) it begins a pattern of intergenerational poverty that families have profound difficulty breaking; (2) it touches off a class-selective migration, in which more prosperous residents move, leaving behind a community in which poverty is even more concentrated; and (3) the social and economic structure of the rural community adapts to economic shock in ways that accelerate and ultimately lock into place the downward cycle of ghettoization. Poorer communities are more likely to attract low-wage, labor-intensive industries looking for inexpensive land and a cheap labor pool. Such industries insure the downward mobility of workers and their children. Then there is a great social and economic pressure in desperate rural communities to look the other way when firms pollute the environment, mistreat workers, or otherwise exploit the area and its resources. The local supply of goods and services will diminish and so become more costly, furthering the community's decline. As the tax base erodes due to falling incomes and as homeowners and industries disappear, the local government's ability to help those in need will also decline - just when the need for assistance is most critical (Davidson p. 54)

Economic decline is rarely a linear progression into poverty - it is a negative feedback loop. But it can also be viewed as a downward spiral; as the decline progresses, the community cycles through a list of social, economic, and communal losses. With each turn of the spiral, a community finds itself facing older issues, but with more severity and with fewer ways out. Below I will write about some of the main features present in this spiral.

THE MIGRATION AND ADDITIONAL CONSEQUENCES

When faced with widespread community decline, an obvious response is to pick up and move. While young, educated people have been migrating to cities for decades, this process has been especially acute in the farm belt. Sociologists Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas extensively document this process in their 2009 book *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America*. Writers such as J.D. Vance describe brain drain as a process where the smartest, most upwardly mobile people in a troubled community recognize their situation and leave, effectively straining out all of the “smart people” - but Carr and Kefalas note that whether or not one leaves is dependent on one’s socio-economic status within a town’s local hierarchy. When the duo embedded themselves in a small town in northeast Iowa, they saw that the crucial moment where Iowans decided if they stayed or left came with high school graduation. *Hollowing Out the Middle* describes four main groups of young Iowans: Achievers, Stayers, Seekers, and Returners (Carr, Kefalas p.19-25).

Achievers are the children who come from wealthier, educated families and who are most likely to leave the state and attend college. Often being raised in well-educated, financially stable households, Achievers face few social or financial obstacles. Instead of taking up jobs or hanging out with friends after school or during summer, Achievers are encouraged to study or do extracurriculars which will look good on college applications - creating disparities that present

themselves well before senior year. In addition, many achiever students are able to afford newer cars, brand-named clothing, and other goods which give them social status in school. Stayers or seekers, by contrast, sometimes have to wear decidedly unfashionable work boots and hand-me-down clothes. Achievers are in many ways groomed to leave the town - viewed as “the kids with potential” achievers are often given the most support from teachers who are eager to produce successful students. They also receive the most support from the town’s community as a whole; people want to see their town produce the next famous academic or politician (Carr, Kefalas p.31). This immense amount of invested social capital places intense pressure on achievers to leave to “the big city”. Often, Achievers feel forced to abandon their smalltown identity and assimilate into the urban upper-middle or upper class, a process which can be distressing and painful. However, if achievers do acclimate to their new environment and identity, they find it harder to maintain their relationships with their hometown, returning only for weddings and funerals (Carr, Kefalas p.46-47). A few achievers do return to their hometowns, in many cases creating start-ups, venture capital firms, or similar projects. Farm belt areas typically try to fix the out-migration by spending huge amounts of money on ad campaigns designed to attract the “creative class” by emphasizing cheap housing, relief of student loan debt, or tax exemption. So far, these campaigns have seen limited success. (Carr, Kefalas p.108-109).

Stayers are children born into underprivileged, working-class or lower middle class families. In contrast to achievers, stayers receive little academic encouragement or support at home (not necessarily due to domestic conflict, even in perfectly harmonious families parents can be overworked or lack helpful academic advice). Stayers aren’t just unsupported, in many cases they are repeatedly told that they should focus on pursuing a career rather than education. (Carr, Kefalas p.57-58). Often unable to afford college, stayers may enter the workforce during highschool, accepting part time or full time jobs for personal income or to supplement family income.

There's not a lot of young people sticking around, and the ones that do are the ones that tend to not get higher education or didn't have the opportunity to... to move on or get more education.

- Kathy Phillips, Farmer

While some blue-collar jobs are stable and high paying, the majority of local jobs which do not require college education do not pay living wages. While substandard wages are fine during highschool, when students are still living with parents, they fail to enable most stayers to move out without falling into poverty. Paired with the fact that most stayers either marry spouses met in high school or marry before 24, providing for a family is near impossible, and stayers find themselves putting their children in the same economic situation they found themselves in. The intense demands of childcare can also limit upward economic mobility, especially without paid maternity leave (Carr, Kefalas p.70). In addition, stayers typically fail to anticipate or protect themselves against industry job loss, wage and benefit cuts, or other economic and political factors which can affect their lives (Carr, Kefalas p.66). Barely treading water, many stayers can resort to drug use as an emotional escape or drug production and distribution as a much-needed economic boost. In addition to these barriers to upward mobility, people choose to stay because they understandably feel deeply connected to their homes, and wish to remain in the community. When combined with the aforementioned socio-economic barriers, we can see why attempts to address rural poverty by suggesting that people "make it out" don't see much success.

Returners are young Iowans who come from a background similar to that of stayers, but frequently attend a state school or a local community college. They might return as nurses or having learned a trade, and are mostly women. Returners typically marry other returners or stayers (Carr, Kefalas p.108) .

Finally, *seekers*, who also come from the same background as stayers and returners, are young people who would otherwise become stayers but feel an intense urge to see the “outside world.” The most common way to do this is through military service - a fact of which military recruiters are well aware. U.S. soldiers, especially infantry, commonly come from depressed areas such as the agricultural Midwest. Army recruiters are trained to navigate high-school social networks and build rapport with potential volunteers, teaching kids to see military service as a sort of gateway to emotional maturity (Carr, Kefalas p.102).

Kefalas and Carr conclude that most of the town’s social capital and educational efforts are placed behind the achievers, who are already most likely to succeed. In addition, few achievers ever return home, so their hometowns are left with no creative class. Young, educated people have become an export like corn, produced locally and then shipped off to far-away cities (although there is no profit to be made by locals by exporting educated young people). As achievers migrate, an increasing percentage of the town’s population begins to consist of stayers, seekers, and returners, further cementing the downward spiral and creating more adverse consequences.

EROSION OF THE TAX BASE AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

If enough families leave a community, the tax base can severely erode, undermining funding for schools, police departments, local infrastructure, and more. Of course, all of these institutions face other problems as well.

A dwindling number of families can signal the end for local public schools, forcing towns to merge schools. Towns which come out on the short end of such mergers don’t just lose jobs in education, they also lose local sports games, school fairs, after-school programs, debate teams, and local student theatre: they lose a central cultural pillar of the community. Students from these

towns also face longer bus rides, which can add up over a year (one parent calculated that children in their town spent the equivalent of 65 school days each year riding the bus) (Davidson p.60).

So [I] have five small kids ranging from three to eleven. So I will have children in school, well I obviously do now, but I will for ten years plus. So my big concern is how education is really important and I think our school district does a great job educating our kids. My concern though is um, funding goes along with the number of children you have right? So the number of kids in your district. So as far as declining enrollments, what will our schools look like in the future?... Where is the funding going to come from since the population is going down?

- Sarah Rohmann, Farmer

Population age is another issue, with many Iowa towns having an average age of 60 or older. With smaller populations, many farm belt hospitals either close or shrink, a disastrous effect considering many people work in agriculture or other jobs where injury is common and with the aforementioned aged population. As of 1990, Iowa's cities typically had a patient to physician ratio of 270 to 1. In rural counties, that number may be 1,500 to 1 (Davidson, p.66).

METHAMPHETAMINES

Journalist Nick Reding points out that all of these issues are compounded through a problem which receives more national attention: the methamphetamine scourge, which became widespread in the early 2000s. Reding elaborates:

In truth, all drug epidemics are only in part about the drugs. Meth is indeed uniquely suited to Middle America...The rise of the meth epidemic was largely built on economic policies, political decisions, and the recent development of American cultural history. Meth's basic components lie equally in the action of government lobbyists, long-term trends in the agricultural and pharmaceutical industries, and the effects of globalization and free trade. Along the way, meth charts the fears that people have and the vulnerabilities they feel, both as individuals and as communities (Reding p.16).

While meth is both exacerbates and is caused by problems found in the agrarian Midwest its origin is deeply connected to the American work ethic which supposedly kept small towns immune

from drug issues. First synthesised in 19th century Japan, meth was first widely used by German and British soldiers during World War II, who used the drug to stay awake during days-long battles. But after the war, meth was prescribed to truckers, meatpacking plant workers, farmers, and people looking to lose weight (Reding p.54). Meth - an incredibly powerful stimulant - was at the time seen as a source of super-human energy and productivity. Meth was perceived as the responsible working-man's drug, not the urban junkie's addiction. After the drug became a schedule 2 narcotic in the 70s, meth disappeared for a while, only to creep back to the Midwest in the late 80s as workers responded to wage cuts by taking on extra shifts - and using illegal meth produced by California biker gangs to stay awake (Reding. p65). By the 2000s, Meth was a full-blown epidemic across the rural Midwest. According to the DEA, 2004 saw over 17,000 meth lab incidents across the U.S. - mostly centered around Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, and other farming states.

Meth is a serious drain on police forces and hospitals. Addicts coming down from a high can be psychotic, abusive, and difficult to manage. Providing addicts with medical assistance as they try to tear off their own skin to rid themselves of imaginary insects worming through their flesh is, obviously, both difficult and emotionally draining (Reding, p.54).

I've heard meth addicts say that that first high off of it, they're addicted. A number of them have said that they are hooked from the first time. What marvels me the most about it is how fast it takes a person down. In a year's time... I'm sure you've seen the before and after pictures on posters around town? A Lot of the time, in less than a year's time meth has done that to them and it just... takes them down so quick. It's disturbing.

- Brad Hughes, Chief of Police in Sherburn, Minnesota

Dismantling meth labs - which can be explosive or release toxic fumes and waste - is extremely expensive and requires specific training. Domestic abuse, child neglect, and birth defects from use during pregnancy also all create extreme strains on local social services. In smaller towns,

watching acquaintances and community members succumb to the drug can be deeply distressing and demoralizing.

Martin county, we were probably one of the biggest sources of methamphetamine in the entire state. For the simple fact that we're the biggest pork producer in Minnesota. And we have a lot of anhydrous, which is one of the main ingredients to make methamphetamine...just in Sherburn [a town with a population of 1,300] back in the early 2000s we took down three labs in town... One of them [the cooks] was a classmate of mine... it was very prevalent and as a county we were hit hard and reduced it to where it was under control. Well every drug is cyclical, and in the last three years it increased again. Our number of convictions last year more than doubled. I can't count the number, but there are probably 75 to 80 households that are involved with human services and child protection because of meth abuse... it's a huge drain on our resources... meth is our biggest concern around here. It destroys lives and destroys families and it's just an ugly drug.

- Brad Hughes, Chief of Police in Sherburn, Minnesota

While regulations on pre-cursor ingredients have significantly helped fix the issue, super-labs in Mexico still manufacture the drug in great quantities, effectively making it impossible to fully suppress use of the drug within the U.S. It is also made more difficult by the extremely lucrative nature of the drug. A single gram of diluted meth can sell anywhere between \$20 or \$60, and each "cook" can produce pounds of pure meth. If one is suffering from withdrawals or is in deep financial despair, cooking and selling methamphetamine is an unmatched solution (Reding p.27).

THE RESPONSE

How do towns respond to these issues? Again, Osha Gray-Davidson writes

"Sometime in the mid-1980s, when it became obvious even to the staunchest supporters of President Reagan that the farm crisis was not merely a red herring cooked up by frustrated Democrats and that the rural communities supported by farmers were indeed in desperate straits, an old term was given new life: "rural economic development." Today, there are frequent conferences on the subject, which is also referred to simply as rural development. Countless newspaper and magazine pieces as well as dozens of scholarly articles have been written on it... Broadly speaking, the consensus is, we need it, and as much of it as we can get. Rural development is seen as a panacea for what ails our small towns. But while everyone sings praises for rural

development, there are few capable of defining exactly what it is they mean when they use the term...Many may say rural development means jobs (Davidson p.132)”

Proponents of rural development believe that by introducing jobs and turning the town’s population into wage-earners, the economic spiral can be reversed or at least halted. Of course, given the dire condition of small Midwestern towns, many figures in local governments focus intensely on rural development. While employers in manufacturing had been turning to rural America since the 60s, attracting jobs in manufacturing became viewed as a lifeline after the farm crisis. While many business figures choose to base their manufacturing operations in their hometowns due to personal reasons, many other companies are looking simply for the cheapest land, cheapest labor, and fewest regulations (Flora p.108).

Many manufacturing firms fled cities to escape unionization or find areas with better “business climates”. Attracting employers through deregulation is nothing new in depressed areas within the U.S. - many southern states repealed laws banning child labor and promised unwarranted subsidies to northern manufacturers following the civil war. Southern states and towns often still promise things like using local police to suppress labor organizing, and looking away from environmental destruction, wage theft, OSHA violations, and more. While it's likely true that these policies saved many towns from economic extinction, it's hard to argue that they revitalized them. Davidson points out that while in 1980 the south had 66 of the nation's 75 most industrial counties, it also had 61 of its 75 poorest ones (Davidson p.137).

Many Midwestern communities have now followed suit, pouring money into industrial parks and similar projects. Many towns have had success - but manufacturing is ultimately declining in the U.S, and there are simply not enough jobs to keep every town afloat. Even if a town builds an industrial park and promises tax exemptions and similar benefits, they are still competing with dozens if not hundreds of other towns across the nation. Moreover, companies can choose to move their plants to developing nations should the town not meet their desires, and if a company

decides to automate, the town finds itself back where it started and with fewer resources. Historian Joseph Amato adds in his book *The Decline of Rural Minnesota*:

“Rural development’s grandiose ideas and ambitions can undercut such modest but important achievements as building a new water system, starting an ice rink, or paving a road. Worse, they can turn managers and their colleagues into “program junkies” constantly in need of a new developmental gimmick to give them a high to escape the cramped and meager possibilities of everyday city life (Amato p.67).”

Certain industries are more tied to the agricultural Midwest than others. Meatpacking plants have to be within driving distance of both producers of livestock and stores, meaning that they have a much more narrow list of places to locate themselves at. But even if a town successfully attracts jobs through “smokestack chasing”, they often find that these jobs do not pay well enough to support workers and their families, or to strengthen the local economy rather than just keep it afloat. It also doesn’t fully fix the issue of brain drain, as students with college educations are unlikely to return home for such jobs. Even on the extremely rare chance that the tech industry expands into the rural Midwest, it often provides few jobs, typically building data storage banks or similar projects rather than centers of management or innovation.

So there's a neighboring county to us that I feel is doing a lot better at bringing in business to that community which helps people stick around and have decent jobs. They have a lot more industrialized jobs over there. Compared to my county, we just don't have a lot to offer if you're not in Ag or the health system. Best case scenario, we follow the footsteps of our neighboring county and just attract more businesses, whatever they may be... the biggest thing is decent jobs.

- Kathy Phillips, Farmer

Towns that win the smokestack chasing auction may also face sudden waves of immigration, causing housing prices to go up and potentially driving out locals looking for housing in their hometown. However, attracted workers are often equally if not more desperate than the town itself. Many workers come from other nations. Historian Aidé Acosta writes:

“The contemporary migration shifts in the United States are intimately linked with neoliberal economic restructuring. In Mexico, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has widened the gaps of inequality, facilitating an exodus of emigration. Simultaneously, with neoliberal practices of downsizing and outsourcing, cheap labor became a necessity for U.S. industries. The intensified growth of Mexican labor migrants in Midwestern rural areas is linked to the restructuring of agriculture and food processing, which in turn has caused a widespread reliance on Latino labor. Rubén O. Martínez argues that despite deindustrialization in the Midwest, labor demands in the service sector have contributed to the geographic dispersion of Latinos/as who have become overrepresented in nonunionized poorly paid jobs, which are often monotonous and dangerous (Acosta p.60).”

Acosta writes that some immigrants may also feel drawn to the Midwest by comparatively low costs of living and lower crime rates, as well as simply enjoying slower small-town life. Either way, many Americans see immigrants as signifiers that the “old days” of white-dominated, high paying agriculture or manufacturing are over (Acosta p.60).

But if this meatpacking or factory wage-fed consumer class is financially unable to support stores on main street with local owners, where do many of them spend their money? Wal-Mart, Dollar General, Family Dollar, and other chain stores frequently move into small towns and use their unmatched low prices outmuscle all local competition. The issue that comes with larger chain stores is that profits generated from these stores go to CEOs and shareholders, not back into the town. In addition, these stores rarely pay employees what local competitors used to, further cementing local poverty (Davidson p.49).

Left Behind: The Agrarian Midwest as a Dying Periphery

The unspoken, underlying assumption about rural decline that permeates national dialog is that rural America is “failing to keep up” with cities. This narrative states that cities have consolidated technological and economic innovation, allowing them to zoom ahead and leave rural America in the dust.

I'm worried that some of our towns will become ghost towns, that businesses you know will shut down, we have a bit of a manufacturing base here but not much, so if those businesses were to close... that would be my worst case scenario.

- Al Bruderie, Farmer

Indeed, this assumption is what drives many attempts by small towns to attract industries which will allow them to remain competitive and attract educated workers. One of the key features of this narrative is that rural decline is a natural consequence of economic advancement - that the death of small towns is an unfortunate "side effect" of national growth. Joseph Amato writes a somewhat more crystallized, academic version of this idea:

"As the mass increases at the center, so do its functions, whereas while the functions increase at the periphery - as they must given the uniformity of market and state, the mass decreases, leaving it to do more, with less. Short of people to carry out multiplying functions, the periphery must do - or at least claim to do - more with less. Increasing want and necessity registered in the growing specialization and multiplying complexity at the center of the society. In turn, increasing functions, articulated by law, implemented by bureaucracies, and supported by rising and diversifying expectations, require rural institutions, at ever accelerating rates, to do more and more, with fewer people and with less funds...This applies to rural Minnesota. It is an periphery to which it is increasingly costly for the metropolitan centers of St. Paul and Minneapolis to deliver services and goods and implement law (Amato, p.16)."

Amato depicts this process as a natural, near-universal product of the economic advancement of any society. The countryside, or the periphery, is incapable of meeting the ever-increasing requirements of the society set by the center, or the city. Amato writes that in any society, the countryside loses population, loses resources, and becomes unable to deal with new issues and meet new demands.

When this narrative informs one's view of these issues, a few options for the future of the countryside become evident: (1) enable small towns to imitate the economic advancement of cities, (2) use economic policy to mitigate the worst effects of small town decline and make the process a painless, victimless one, and finally (3) accept that nothing can be done to fix small town issues

without hampering national economic progress and adopt policies which facilitate people to flee economically depressed areas. Popular methods of addressing these issues, such as state or federal policy, non-profit efforts, and business-focused projects operate on some combination of these or assumptions.

While many core features of this sketch are likely true, it's also worth considering that the narrative leaves out some important parts of the story unique to the history of the agricultural Midwest. Native Americans, European colonists, American frontiersman, immigrant farmers, and modern Agricultural corporations all recognized the immense productive capacity of the region's fertile soil and well-suited climate. The possible inevitability of small-town decline is a key part of the story of the agricultural Midwest. But the region's story is also about who it fed, who worked it, how they used it, and who it made rich - as well as who it did not. While I cannot give a complete history or summary of the farm belt, I can point to several of the key moments where these questions came into play.

CORPORATIZATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION OF AGRICULTURE

Many would label the farm crisis of the 1980s as the end of small farmers and farm-supported towns, and the start of small town decline. However, the farm crisis could be more accurately described as a period which saw the acceleration and culmination of several trends which actually started decades beforehand - namely farm industrialization, combined with the much-covered economic crisis.

INTRODUCTION OF INDUSTRIALIZED FARMING

One of the main forces driving these changes was concerns from turn of century-Americans about the durability of the nation's agricultural industry. In the early 20th century, all land in the American frontier had been completely conquered. American economic growth no longer relied on

westward territorial expansion. Suddenly, populations started moving to cities for work, rather than to the frontier. As America's population expanded, cities grew much faster than the agrarian countryside, which still relied on older forms of production. While many farms sold most of their crop on the markets, they still raised a significant portion of their own food and had fairly diverse farms (Stoll p.9). But soon, concerns were raised about the agricultural industry's ability to feed more people with fewer farmers. After all, the country's population had risen 39% from 1900 to 1920, yet agricultural output had only grown 17% at a decreasing rate. Acreage devoted to wheat had actually decreased, driving up prices (many other crops additionally saw price increases) (Stoll p.9). In his book *The Fruits of Natural Advantage, Making the Industrial Countryside in California* Fordham historian Steven Stoll explains how these trends were interpreted at the time.

"The appearance of disorder in the places where food came from unsettled city people. In a nation that somehow managed to consume its "inexhaustible" frontier, no assumption about the countryside seemed safe. Higher-than-usual prices coincident with some farmers leaving the countryside spread the fear of shortages...A rise in the urban cost of living signified to consumers that cities had come to depend on a backwards hinterland that might soon languish and whither to the point that it could no longer support the progress of the nation or even feed itself... Complained one writer in the *New York Times* 'Farmer Brown still crops his land in a wasteful fashion, gathering one-half the harvest that moderately intelligent management would insure, while his son John has left the homestead for life in the city'(Stoll p.9)."

High prices were seen only as signs of America's food supply wavering, not as a sign that farmers were profiting enough to pay off mortgages and live comfortably. California would be the first state to practice new forms of Agricultural production equipped to meet these new demands. California farming was run mostly by large scale agricultural corporations, with many farms specializing to extreme degrees in order to optimize output of crops suited specifically to their environment. Many California farmers soon grew one crop and one crop alone; they no longer grew their own crops or raised their own livestock. Farming in California was now about obtaining surplus - and farmers fed themselves by purchasing food rather than growing it, further connecting

themselves to the national economy. This completed a process that had been slowly taking place over the last half century, and in the coming decades would spread eastward (Stoll p.20).

Another major step towards farm industrialization came with WWII, when Midwestern farms were organized and specialized to maximize food production (both to generate food for a ravaged Europe and to automate sufficiently to allow young farmers to enlist). After the war, the chemical and mechanical manufacturing infrastructure built to create weaponry, explosives, tanks, and goods was repurposed to produce things like nitrogen-fertilizer and tractors (Flora p.105)

The massively increased output of machinery equipped for large-scale farming encouraged farm consolidation and specialization, as seen in California. The number of farms in the Midwest decreased by about 30% between 1945 and 1969 alone, sending many farmers looking for work in cities like St. Paul or Chicago. (Howard p.45).

Nobody could start farming and farm the way we do. Nobody could do that unless they inherited a farm or had a family member take them in. So honestly when we're done farming, and we're not that far away from retirement, I don't know what's going to happen with our farm. They might have to bring it into an existing operation. It's just gonna happen and there's nothing you can do to stop it. The little guys are gonna go out, the small guys, you know, will leave and the larger farmers will continue to get larger. That's just how it will be... its just kind of the way technology works and its just the direction [that things will go].

- Al Burdelie, Farmer

One of the main ways in which industrial farming furthered consolidations was through dividing and massively scaling up the production of certain crops and livestock which previously would have all been managed by one, smaller farm. In her article *Ecology, Economy, Labor: The Midwest Farmscape Since 1945* Kendra Smith-Howard points out that before nitrogen fertilizer, farmers responded to the eroding nature of corn by using a crop rotation of oats and hay after corn, maintaining soil health and producing food for livestock (who could be eaten or employed to produce fertilizing manure and to pull equipment). Fertilizer allowed for "continuous corn",

eliminating the need for corn farmers to produce animals or any other crops while also allowing for vastly increased corn production, at the cost of the need to pay for the fertilizer and the equipment to spread it. Anhydrous ammonia, a common fertilizer, was used almost 90 times more in 1958 than in 1950 (Howard p.47) (Interestingly enough, anhydrous ammonia is also a common ingredient in methamphetamine, and cooks sometimes severely burn themselves trying to drain tanks of the fertilizer) . Continuous corn also required the use of artificial pesticides, weed control, larger storage bins, and drying equipment, which made the costs of farming gigantic.

The advent of continuous corn and things like that where the big get bigger and small guy gets pushed out has definitely made a difference, theres less competition among businesses... there will be some change, and you have to adapt to that... we have a saying here on our farm "we try to be on the cutting edge but not the sharp edge.

- John Theobald, Farmer

Many corn farmers also raised hogs, as during years where crop prices were low corn could simply be fed to the hogs and profit could be maintained. But raising hogs required land which many farmers figured could be used better for continuous corn, and their manure was made less valuable by fertilizer.

To meet the demands of consumers, hogs still needed to be raised, so some farmers began to focus mainly on producing hogs on a scale never before seen. This included building hugely expensive hog houses, waste storage facilities, and buying antibiotic infused feed. Like the adoption of continuous corn, this encouraged massive farm consolidation: in 1950, 55% of all American farmers reported raising hogs. 19 years later, that number was 25% (Howard p.52).

Surprisingly, the Midwest also grew a wide array of fruits and vegetables; Mint, tomatoes, cherries, cucumbers, and other goods were all commonly grown in the Midwest, only to be consolidated or automated. Michigan employed 45,000 people to harvest the state's sour cherries, before adopting mechanical harvesting techniques in the early 60s. Chickens, who historically were

a staple of farmer diets nationwide, underwent massive consolidation and industrialization alongside cattle (Howard p.60).

Advances in American agro tech were almost entirely focused on producing more goods with less labor. This meant that advances usually destroyed certain smaller roles in agriculture (such as picking), encouraged farmers to specialize their farms and maximize production of a few crops, and all required massive investments on the part of farmers, pushing many farmers out of the industry.

I think every year, even on a day to day basis, we've had to make things work more quickly or more efficiently. We have the technology technically to make a tractor drive itself, but most the older-generation farmers, they say that's not why they got into farming. I don't want to be at a desk with a bunch of computer screens showing exactly what's happening you know in every spot that you have a machine. Maybe someday that will work really well for people. But for my operation, the goal is always to stay current but not necessarily jump on every technology wave, just make sure that its what we want to do, and also the financial peice of it is if we have a return on investment or not. I guess things will look different even in ten years.

- Sarah Rohmann, Farmer

A particularly telling thread through the story of Midwestern farm industrialization is the experience of the region's few black farmers. While many black families relied on farming historically, only 1.1 percent of black farmers in 1940 worked in the Midwest. While black farmers were often banned from buying neighbor's land and unable to take out the farm credit loans necessary to industrialize, 50% of these farmers owned their farms - meeting niche demands that did not require industrialization (like raising goats for black muslims). Before industrialization, black farmers and white farmers would sometimes work together out of sheer economic need, forcing them to maintain stable social relations (Reid p.207). When Industrialization did come, it affected black farmers much more than white ones: between 1940 and 1997, the number of African-American farmers declined by 97.3%. While the few black farmers who did manage to

expand their operations and compete with their white peers, the story of Black farmers can effectively demonstrate how industrialization resulted in consolidation (Reid. p.212).

THE ROLE OF AGRO COMPANIES

While it is farmers using and buying these new technologies, it is often agricultural corporations selling them and buying the products they help produce. Companies such as Bayer, Cargill, ConAgra, Monsanto, and Tyson foods all seek to vertically integrate food production, but they also have pushed federal policy to benefit themselves. Lobbying, super PACs, and other forms of political influence are used by Agro companies, who are able to outspend environmental activists, animal rights activists, or organizations supporting small farmers (Davidson p.32).

Many of these groups also donate to agricultural schools and research institutions, motivating researchers and engineers to create products which allow for large-scale farming rather than smaller farming (which is more popular in Japan). Big Agro also manages to place many of its employees in positions of political power, be it within the EPA, managing parts of agricultural import and export, or even as the secretary of Agriculture. Nixon's first secretary of agriculture resigned after a corruption scandal, and went on to be the vice president of Ralston Purina. He was replaced by Earl Butz, who had just retired from being the director of the same corporation.

However, Earl Butz separated himself from other business-friendly Ag secretaries by promoting federal farm policies which would later be seen as one of the causes of the farm crisis of the 1980s.

THE FARM CRISIS

In 1971, Butz abolished several-new deal era pieces of legislation aimed to prevent overproduction. Encouraged by high crop prices and an increased food demand from the USSR,

Butz proudly told farmers to “get big or get out” and to “plant hedgerow to hedgerow”. These policies created a boom in farming that lasted throughout the 70s. The boom was so prosperous that the average age of farmers started *decreasing* rather than increasing: younger people were becoming farmers (Barnett).

Farmers expanded their operations, taking out loans to buy more land and more inputs to take advantage of the boom. The farm credit system started giving out loans with interest rates up to 21%, pushing American farm debt to top out at \$215 billion - fifteen times more than what it had been 30 years before and more than the combined debt of Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. Farmers expanded, buying newer, larger machinery and finally switching to more modernized operations. Overproduction eventually led to falling crop prices, and a grain embargo was placed on the U.S.S.R. after its 1984 invasion of Afghanistan. Farmers began defaulting on their loans en masse, or selling their houses and farms. At its peak, 250 farms were closing a day, along with 62 small-town businesses. Average net farm income in Iowa went from \$17,680 in 1980 to \$-1,891 in 1983 (Davidson p.16). Ag lenders, equipment manufacturers, small-town banks, and other industries which relied on farmers were either destroyed or faced financial damage (John Deere laid off thousands of workers). The economic devastation was so immense that by 1984, the rural population was a third of what it had been just 50 years ago (IPTV).

The suicide rate among farmers quadrupled, and many farmers resorted to using violence against bankers, as farmers who had inherited operations passed down through generations felt they had failed. Masculine ideals and Midwestern distaste for emotional expression made it difficult if not impossible for farmers to even describe their struggles to peers, leading many to believe that they were alone. While activists did their best to shed light on the situation by holding hundreds of rallies and marches, as well as by forming

organizations like Farm Aid, less than 3% of farmers became activists. Eventually, Reagan finally acknowledged that the farm crisis could not be resolved through a “small government” approach, and bailed out the farm credit system. But the damage had already been done (IPTV).

While large agro-companies did not cause the farm crisis, the trends they contributed did. The crisis also helped establish corporate dominance in agriculture; Agribusiness saw a 13% increase in profits in 1986 while farm prices fell 9%, and had an average return on equity of 15.1% - 2.5% more than average U.S. industry (Davidson p.30).

EXTRACTIVE CAPITALISM

It's appropriate to call the farm crisis the “initial economic shock” Davidson describes as the first step in the agrarian Midwest's downward spiral into poverty. Agriculture cannot support rural communities as it used to, not because it lacks the means to, but because it has outgrown them. Farming is more productive now than ever, yet the region which has historically nourished the nation is facing economic issues seen more commonly in developing countries - with no light at the end of the tunnel. This idea that modern Midwestern towns experience *exploitative* economic activity rather than purely a *lack of* economic activity is central to the extractive capitalism explanation.

It is not the case that agriculture has become unprofitable, it is not the case that there is no demand for retail in small Midwestern towns, and it is not the case that purely importing jobs will revitalize a town. Agriculture's profits have become available only to those who own the new industrial means, retail (while dying in some towns) is alive in many but now dominated by massive chain stores, and in the quest for jobs many small towns forget that the reason why the

jobs are needed is to inject wealth into the economy - raising the standard of living and attracting a creative class - a task which low-paying industries fail to do.

However, the symptoms of the downward spiral, while often connected to corporate policy, de-regulation, and economic exploitation are not purely *caused* by these issues; deciding how prevalent they would be had this economic trend or that farm policy bill existed or not is nearly impossible to do with certainty.

CONCLUSION

During my research for this project, I tried to look at many of the material socio-economic issues which face Midwestern farm towns, and I tried to learn some of the historical trends that brought us to this point.

This paper lays out a portrait of farm town decline, including a class based outward migration which concentrates poverty, the downfall of local schools, hospitals, and other institutions, the rise of drug use, and the dangerous compromises small towns make in the pursuit of new jobs in industry and retail, as well as the affects of those compromises like immigration and the death of a local consumer class. I also covered the history of farm industrialization since world war 2 and how it was linked to the farm crisis and small-town decline. There were many parts of this story I was not able to add because I wanted to narrow the scope of the project. These include Midwestern Native American agriculture, the uneven establishment of farms and small towns, political movements and radicalism among farmers, the role of farm women, ethnic conflict between early European settlers, and proposed policy to alleviate the issues described.

Much of my reading and conversations with farmers and mentors were very analytical and practical, looking issues from the birds-eye-view of a policy maker, historian, or economist.

With a few sobering exceptions, this view somewhat deprived me of the real human cost and emotional trauma that accompanies the issues described. Small-town decline may result in increased poverty rates, tax base erosion, and shrinking population figures, but behind each of those statistics and economic explanations are experiences like the slow dread of watching your home's population grey and realizing that your children may be the last class of the elementary school, the existential feeling of empty numbness that comes with years of repetitive, low-paying labor, or the shame and confusion from having one's belongings repossessed by the bank after a bad year. But my project was also unable to cover the amazing resolve that people have fought with in order to protect their homes and livelihood, the patience and effort farm management advisors demonstrate when coordinating with a family exactly how to save their farm, or the joy and pride that is still seen on 4th of July celebrations or local traditions. I was also unable to examine in any depth the effects of Covid-19 on the farm economy (some interviewees did mention that their peers are having to kill livestock en masse as meatpacking plants shutdown, and one interviewee was one of the first cases of the virus in their county).

However, perhaps most importantly, is the shared extreme frustration that comes from the feeling that one is struggling in the dark, that comes from the ignorance or apathy of consumers, that comes from the fact that most of America still pictures only red barns and quaint mainstreets (or simplified images of abandoned houses and trailer parks) when conjuring an image of the rural Midwest. In a time where we question wealth, power, predatory economic behavior, deindustrialization, and the consequences of our economic model and activity more than ever, it is essential that the issues facing Midwestern towns are understood, especially as these are often the same issues affecting poorer urban areas and when other parts of the national dialog like race and gender also affect the rural Midwest. I hope that this paper can inform readers about some of the serious social, economic, and political issues that are present in the region.

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