

The Family in America

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My Agrarian Fairy Tale

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“IT IS TRUE THAT I BELIEVE IN FAIRY TALES—in the sense that I marvel so much at what does exist that I am readier to admit *what might*.” So commented G.K. Chesterton in his 1926 book, *The Outline of Sanity*. He then described a fairy tale of his own creation: restoration in 20th-century England of a peasant class, composed of independent families working on their own plots of land and supported by a vibrant rural culture.

If already deemed a fairy tale in the England of 90 years ago, such enthusiasm for Agrarianism might appear as an almost pathological foolishness in early 21st-century America. All the same, the English anthropologist Hugh Brody captured the essence of the Agrarian Dream but a few years ago:

A family is busy in the countryside. Mother is making bread, churning butter, attending to hens and ducks that live in the yards and pens beside the house, preparing food for everyone. Father is in the fields, ploughing the soil, cutting wood, fixing walls, providing sustenance. Children explore and play and help and sit at the family table. Grandma or Grandpa sits in a chair by the fire. Every day is long and filled with the activities of this family. All the activities are contained, given purpose and comfort, by a piece of countryside at the centre of which is home. . . . The family in its farm is the family where it belongs.

The nature of American farming today seems radically different. The first reality is a shrunken U.S. farm population: 30 million strong in 1940, the true farm population today is perhaps 4 million. Indeed, in 1993, the U.S. Census Bureau stopped counting farm families as a special category, so few had their number become.

Second, these are generally not young families: farm residents are old, with the average age about 55. The average American farm today may better be seen as a working retirement home, with few resident children.

Third, these are not commonly the classic “yeoman” types trying to sustain themselves through diversified crops and animals. They are frequently the devotees of Agribusiness, capitalists in the full sense of the label, with a high degree of specialization, and no interest in production for home use. To illustrate, I would like to tell you a story about a modern farmer. A major agribusinessman, he maintains a big operation using massive machines. In one recent year, he drew about \$450,000 in Federal price supports for his corn and soybean crops. Our family, meanwhile, keeps a large vegetable garden, about an acre in size, on a nearby farm. We grow a little of everything—potatoes, squash, tomatoes, onions, snap beans, carrots—trying with varying degrees of success to provide for our own vegetable needs, with a little left over to sell or give to friends and a church food pantry. One day, this modern farmer brought his eight-year-old boy by to watch *us* harvest our potatoes, digging them up with a shovel in the old-fashioned, Neolithic way. He said that he wanted his son to see where potatoes came from.

The modern American farmer is also not self-reliant. After 80 years of massive Federal efforts to “save the family farm,” we have created a dependent welfare class of farmers on the dole: about \$20 billion spent each year in price supports, insurance guarantees, and other forms of subsidy. The vast majority of these funds go to older agribusinessmen who no longer even come close to the original vision of “the family farmer.”

So, why did I spend my time and good paper on producing a book a dozen years ago entitled *The New Agrarian Mind*? In part, I did so to identify the mistakes made by farm family advocates in the 20th century. And in part, I did so to underscore that “Agrarianism” has not entirely died. Indeed, it is showing new and unexpected signs of life, but in ways

very different from the past.

My first example is The Old Order Amish. While farming Americans fell in number from 30 million to 4 million during the last 75 years, the count of Old Order Amish climbed from 5,000 in 1900 to an estimated 300,000 today. Once confined to a corner of Pennsylvania, they are now found in colonies in 20 states.

Through home gardens and basic animal husbandry, the Amish remain true to the goal of self-sufficiency in food production. By rejecting Social Security and many forms of farm welfare, the Amish still hold on to the virtue of self-reliance. Their families remain large: six children per couple is still the norm; and they fill a countryside in a wondrously beautiful way. Visit Holmes County, Ohio, for example: a lovely landscape of pretty farms; productive, busy people; and scampering rosy-cheeked children. These communities survive because their members submit to a special authority—the authority of God—and to the authority of councils of male elders, who decide in intimate detail what members of their small society can and cannot do, so that their family-centered communities might survive.

My second example is Homestead Heritage, which began 40 years ago as a Southern Baptist congregation in the unlikely locale of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen. Today, it is a thriving religious community in rural central Texas, with about 1,000 members. They focus on homebirths, home gardens, house churches, and homeschooling. They farm some of their land communally, using horses and raising grain, milk cows, and beef. They aim at self-sufficiency in food, ignoring completely all conventional economic signals such as price and profit. They raise food as families and as neighbors because they believe that this work—done together—strengthens households and small communities. And I can testify that Homestead Heritage is a happy place, filled with solid families and beautiful children.

My third example is homeschooling itself, a nationwide movement to bring a critical family function back into the home. Perhaps three million American children are now in home schools. The movement's importance comes not so much from the educational benefits, which are real nonetheless. Rather, homeschooling changes the nature of a family, shifting its priorities, routines, and very psychology in profound ways

that strengthen the home as an institution. Many of these families, in turn, wind up building new communities of like-minded folk in semi-rural areas.

Beyond these examples—admittedly still on the margins of American life—what should we do about U.S. farm policy?

Most truly small farmers who still exist today seem to agree that they would be better off if the U.S. Department of Agriculture and all Federal farm support programs were abolished tomorrow. Such subsidies flow toward those already holding wealth and power: the agricapitalists who mine fields rather than farm them. Most small growers would prefer a truly free market.

All the same, I have a small fairy tale or fantasy of my own to share: What if we returned to Hugh Brody's description of the farm family with which I began, and what if we redirected the \$20 billion to be spent annually on farm programs toward the encouragement of these kinds of families? Instead of giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to aging, childless millionaires, let's spend it in a new way, in a bill I would call "The Honesty in Farm Policy Act":

- 1) Support would be provided to young married couples who settle on rural properties of 5 to 40 acres in size.
- 2) Each couple would receive \$10,000 in direct subsidy each year to support their land mortgage costs and related expenses.
- 3) They would receive another \$3,000 each year for every dependent child on their farm under age ten.
- 4) They would receive still another \$3,000 each year for each elderly parent brought to live on their homestead.

Recipients of these grants would agree to restore or maintain farm homes and outbuildings in traditional regional styles. They would agree to cultivate home gardens and practice simple animal husbandry. Subsidized loans would be available for building improvements, on the condition that the family members and neighbors provided the labor. Such recipient homesteads would also agree to open their properties to reasonable visits by city and suburban dwellers and school children seeking to learn where potatoes come from. Meanwhile, production of

food for market sale would be left entirely to market forces.

I estimate that about 1.2 million American families with 3.6 million small children would resettle in the countryside under this program. Critics would surely call it a boondoggle and a waste of money. Yet under my fantasy, we taxpayers would at least get what we thought we were paying for all along: a well-settled countryside of happy families and rosy-cheeked children.

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