Changing to a New Lifestyle: 
the Little Things Do Add Up
By James Lewis, Ed Glade, and Greg Gustafson

Many people in urban areas have contemplated relocating to a relatively more rural environment. In fact, since 1970 the nonmetropolitan population has increased by about 6.6 percent compared to 4.1 percent for metropolitan areas.

The transition from an urban life to a rural environment can be a most rewarding and personally satisfying experience. It offers opportunities and relationships not readily available in the urban setting. However, along with all the benefits go certain responsibilities and adjustments which should be understood and carefully considered.

For many persons thinking of relocating "back to nature", these considerations are only of minor concern and may actually be part of their preconceived desires. To others, however, the necessary adjustments and occasional disappointments may be more than they bargained for. Nevertheless, an awareness and careful thought about all aspects of rural life will greatly enhance the chances of a successful transition.

This chapter is intended to point out some of the transitions in lifestyles which should be anticipated. Often we discount the personal importance of living adjustments due to the excitement and anticipation of changes.

For most people moving to rural areas the adjustments are welcome changes, but some have found the transition too much of a sacrifice. A number of people have become disgruntled, viewed the initial decision to move as a big mistake, sold their error at a loss, and moved back to an environment similar to the one they left for the rural area. This is partly because there are certain amenities in everyone's life style that don't appear to be very important—until they are given up.

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Perhaps this is nitpicking about a lot of little things but the little things do count and when everything about advantages and disadvantages to living on a few acres are added up, those little things can make the difference in whether or not you are satisfied and happy with rural living. The problem is that we seldom take the time to sit down and consciously evaluate the things that make us happy and the value of things we must either give up or put up with in a different environment before a change is made.

Many of the activities which are part of the urban community are not as accessible or abundant in rural areas. There are fewer choices available in rural areas for theaters, restaurants, bowling alleys, shopping centers, grocery stores, repair shops, physicians, medical facilities, etc. Some people get a great deal of satisfaction out of shopping and comparing from
one store to another. In many rural areas these choices are limited. The time and distance traveled to get places where these services are available is greater in rural areas. Fast food and all night drug stores with selected grocery items are conveniences in urban areas but are unlikely to be available in rural communities.

Radio and television signal reception may be relatively poorer in rural areas due to greater distances from the stations. An annoyance though a minor one, could be fewer stations with programs to your liking. Private telephone lines may not be available.

Public services such as police, fire protection, water, sewer, road maintenance, and garbage collection are not as abundant or accessible in rural areas. Many of these services are expected and readily available in urban areas but in rural living some become your responsibility. Garbage and trash disposal are good examples of something you must take the time to resolve.

Some Make Mistakes

There are examples of where a vacation or weekend place is acquired and then at some later date the decision to make it a permanent residence is made. When you first buy the place it is a delight to visit. Indeed there may be an abundance of things to do in the little time you have to spend on those long weekends and vacations. But you also find time to sit back, relax, and enjoy the peaceful serenity of your few acres and the sweet country air.

Upon making the place a permanent residence you may find yourself catching up on all the improvements and renovations that were planned. The lifestyle in general is at a slower pace than in urban areas. What once appeared to be peace and tranquility can become boredom and dissatisfaction for some people. This is not to imply that there is nothing to do in the rural area, but that the things there are to do may not be particularly satisfying for some on a routine basis.

Caring for livestock, for example, is a reasonably minor chore in good weather. When the cold hard winter comes and pipes freeze and burst and you have to go chop ice so the livestock can get water twice a day regardless of wind, rain, sleet or snow, all those fun things become a job. It's a good job if you like it. But if you're not sure, find out and seriously think about it before you get involved.

Other important considerations that can make a difference in how happy you are on your few acres include the availability
of off-farm employment opportunities, neighbors, friends, playmates for children, and the family's consent on making the change. There will be fewer neighbors, friends will be farther away as will be playmates for children. One unhappy member of the family can make all the rest uncertain about the new lifestyle. Getting back and forth to social, civic, and athletic activities will require planning, coordination, time, and sacrifice by some of the family members.

A family's desire concerning its mobility and leisure time must be balanced against the requirements in both work and money involved in alternative farmstead activities. Seasonal and daily patterns of life must be adjusted to accommodate these variations. The decision to raise a small garden or a few chickens is one thing, but the keeping of milk cows or dairy goats which must be milked twice a day about 300 days a year is something entirely different. All the pleasures and enjoyment of country life can be quickly lost when faced with a never ending cycle of chores. Poor choices of enterprises or combinations of enterprises can lead to trouble and frustration.

Therefore, to help avoid the danger of "getting in too deep", or the feeling that you're tied down to the place, be aware of the full extent of involvement required in each new undertaking. It's better to start a little slow in developing your "few acres" than to rush into something unprepared or unsuspecting.

By carefully planning, coordinating, and controlling the various farmstead enterprises and activities, rural living can provide a healthy, wholesome mixture of productive work and recreational opportunities. Local county agents and Extension personnel, along with information contained in this Yearbook of Agriculture, can offer significant help along the way.

Realistic Goals

No family should get its hopes too high in any new venture, and this is particularly true of adjusting to the rural scene on a full-time basis. While beginning stages of the transition can inspire one to try to be as self-sufficient as possible, the facts remain that the cost is just too high. Although making your own butter, bread, and preserving most of your foods may sound gallant, healthful, and natural, you must remember that only the experience of many years makes your dream come true.

Limiting the amount of necessary work, and adding more variety to your country place gradually, can ease the transition and prevent overwhelming frustration.
When you can handle a small garden with a few chickens, for instance, you may then consider the addition of a family milk goat, or even a cow. However, for the sport minded, happiness may be a horse or pony instead, or for the specialized hobbyist, a few sheep for wool to process, or a rabbit project for furs to work and sell. It's up to you, but proceed with caution.

Getting away from the routine of rural life may be necessary from time to time, and vacations should be part of one's established priorities. While it may be more difficult to get away than for urban dwellers, it is not impossible. With a little planning and preparation, various arrangements can be made.

For example, most people who relocate to a rural area still have urban friends who enjoy regular visits to observe the rural scene. They might dream of a future venture of their own. These families are usually more than happy to take over your feeding chores when given specific, written instructions, and emergency phone numbers, such as your veterinarian, an experienced farmer, and where you can be reached if necessary. While you may see this as an imposition, most people consider it a welcome learning experience for their children and themselves.

Other choices of arrangement might include paying a teenager from a nearby farmstead, or swapping chores during vacation with another family with a similar setup. An extended trip may mean using a combination of several people to help at different times.

Whether you attempt to become totally self-sufficient and live entirely off your few acres, or decide to just raise the family's fruits and vegetables in a backyard garden, be prepared for certain facts of rural life: water freezes in winter—crops fail—fences fall—and livestock get sick. Realizing that sickness, injury and disappointing harvests can occur, and being able to cope with these events, are all part of the rural experience.

So even though the best laid plans don't always pan out, more often than not it is an educational experience which provides an opportunity to understand your environment and to constantly learn new ways to use resources of nature to your advantage.

**Will you be happy?**

Not everyone would be happy on a few acres in the country. But, would you? This is not an easily answered question, and, in any event, only you can answer it.
If you are honest with yourself and know yourself well enough, you can find out a lot by taking a personal inventory. An appreciation and tolerance of nature, of course, is essential. The quiet of the countryside, the smell of freshly mowed hay, the sight of livestock grazing in a lush green pasture, and the taste of vine-ripened tomatoes are there to be enjoyed. However, nature can also be harsh and unpredictable.

Being resourceful is important. If you have to call in outside help whenever a fan belt in the car breaks or the lawn-mower needs a new sparkplug, a large amount of time and money will be spent at the repair shop. Minor problems, such as when Japanese beetles infest the vineyard or the calves get scour, are less bothersome when you can solve them yourself.

Patience is a must. Life in the country is slower paced. City dwellers seldom build or grow anything at the same scale as you will in the rural area. It takes time and planning to plant a garden or build even a modest-sized greenhouse. In the garden it takes from four to six months of careful nurturing before you can taste the fruits of your labor. In the orchard it may take four to six years before the first apple harvest from those newly planted saplings. An appreciation for and acceptance of nature's time schedule is a prerequisite to enjoyment of life in the country.

Country living offers some dramatic differences in lifestyle relative to the city. In general, rural life is more family oriented. There is less anonymity in the country—most rural residents know quite a lot about their neighbors. Some may find this openness to be a refreshing change while others might deplore any loss of privacy. Rural social activities also present a contrast to typical urban activities—church-related events, farm organization meetings (Farm Bureau, Grange, etc.), the local auction, county fair, 4-H events, garden club meetings, and local high school athletic events are traditional mainstays on the rural social calendar.

The bottom line, however, in evaluating your own suitability to country life will depend on how well you like the farm routine. On your few acres you will spend most of your time doing chores and performing seasonal tasks. Much of the time you will be working alone or with another family member. Hence, genuine enjoyment of this life requires that you like the work and that you enjoy your own company.

A final consideration, but one that's usually beyond the control of most individuals, is that of local ordinances and zoning laws. In many areas, the keeping of livestock and poultry is restricted to certain size acreages, and incorporates strict
boundary line buffer areas. These requirements, however, may vary widely from area to area.

In some counties at least 2 acres are required before livestock can be kept, and animals must be at least 100 feet from any property line. Restrictions are also placed on the number and kinds of livestock allowed. On the other hand, adjoining counties may have no restrictions at all and if they do, restrictions may be loosely enforced. Therefore, in order to avoid trouble which can affect plans and hamper efforts, check all aspects concerning local restrictions before engaging in any new enterprise.

People moving from urban to rural environments are looking for changes. However, the transitional adjustments may be too much of a change for some while not enough for others. Regardless of any promises or shortcomings of the rural climate in tangible terms, do not overlook close reflection on how much habits, preferences, or desires can weigh in whether or not a decision to live in a rural area is wise. Many people have moved to rural areas, become dissatisfied with their decision, lost time and money, and moved back to an environment similar to the one they left for the rural scene. Hopefully, you will not become one of those statistics.

You are the only one who knows what makes you happy. So before you decide to move and invest your resources, sit back and carefully reflect on the transition to a rural lifestyle.