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The “rural effect” on dietary adequacy has gone virtually unnoticed to date. One way to alleviate dietary inadequacies among the rural poor is to design and implement nutrition education and assistance interventions better tailored to address the rural environment and limitations on access to certain foods and food assistance programs. This suggests a need for more detailed studies to specify the nature of potentially effective rural poverty-related nutrition programs. These studies would need to be specific to regions and localities, since food access and lifestyle factors differ from one area to the other.

The data suggest that rural poverty is associated with increased nutritional risk. These findings call attention to the need for unique policy options to address the nutritional shortcomings of the rural poor. In addition to reevaluating current nutrition assistance programs for their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the rural poor, new programs specifically tailored to their special circumstances and needs should be explored. A component of that might be new marketing and distribution strategies to increase access to crucial foods, like fruits and vegetables.

For Additional Reading...


Sonya Salamon

What Makes Rural Communities Tick?

Settlement patterns and cultural beliefs help explain how people relate to their communities and how concepts of community can differ. These factors play a role in how communities adjust to change. In the Midwest, for example, they suggest why many communities populated by descendants of Germans evolved differently from others populated by “Yankees” of British descent.

A traveler through the Midwest’s rural countryside is struck by the contrasts in vitality between villages only a few miles down the road from one another. One village has people visibly about and a bustling main street, while its neighbor has boarded-up storefronts and little sign of residents. My field studies of Illinois farming communities, populated by typical Corn Belt ethnic groups, produces a better understanding of how ethnic heritage and cultural beliefs affect the way rural people and communities respond to the economic and demographic changes they face. Different forms of community structure provide clues to why citizens become involved in local development activities, and whether such energy can be sustained.

Many involved in community development have assumed that most rural people react in similar ways to similar events. Such a supposition would lead one to expect similar farming communities, for example, to develop along similar lines. Yet when I compared communities in the same geographical area, with similar soils and crops, and served by comparable roads connecting them to cities equally distant, I found neighboring communities with very different personalities, depending on the dominant ethnic origin of the local population. When businesses died, churches and schools consolidated, or populations declined, local rural residents responded according to priorities about their way of life, their attitudes toward farming, and the relationship of households to the community derived from ethnic heritage. Ethnic origin obviously is not the only explanation, but within...

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People of like ethnicity, and a shared world view, tended to settle together because of migration chains. Their beliefs about family, farming, and community, I have found in a decade of field studies, remain surprisingly tenacious even after more obvious ethnic markers like language have disappeared. Contrasting behavior patterns associated with descendants of Germans and Yankees (see box on research methods for definitions), in particular, still are prominent in the Corn Belt. Over the 150 years since the frontier passed Illinois, my research shows these two distinct family, farming, and community styles have persisted, fueled by inheritance and succession practices. Germans typify what I term a “yeoman” farming style and Yankees an “entrepreneurial” farming style.

The distinctions I draw between yeoman and entrepreneur derive from their differing goals for landownership and family farm continuity. A yeoman farmer desires to reproduce a viable farm and at least one farmer in each generation. To meet this goal, a yeoman prefers to own the land worked and to expand the farm operation only enough to accommodate children wanting to farm. Such expansion is carried out conservatively, for yeomen avoid financial risks that could endanger continuity and threaten their family-owned land, which they consider to be sacred.

An entrepreneur regards the farm as a business that should optimize short-run financial returns and views land as a commodity bought and sold in response to market forces. Farm expansion is governed more by the entrepreneur’s managerial skills and capital than by family concerns. Because an efficiently run, profitable operation is the highest priority, entrepreneurs are more willing to take financial risks and to gamble as a strategy to achieve their goal. As a result, their operations tend to be larger and more specialized, compared with the often smaller, more diversified yeoman operations.

Yeoman and entrepreneur farming styles have implications for the solidarity and vitality of the communities where each dominates. German yeomen consistently support communities that derive their economic vitality from a single enterprise, agriculture. These communities are surrounded by relatively small, conservatively managed farms. Landowners typically are community residents, and the villages heavily populated by farm retirees. By contrast, Yankee communities have fewer farmers and farm-retirees living in the village, and the surplus housing produced by the farm population decline has lured renters who earn their living in a more diversified economy. Yankees are more dynamic, risk-taking individuals. They are less likely to regard community continuity as important, and prefer change to replicating the past. A higher absentee landowner rate brings in outside capital, but means many landlords have little vested interest in local issues. Yankee entrepreneurs tend to regard community well-being as best served by a strong, diversified local economy.

Key Dimensions Account For Community Differences

Small communities, originally founded with an agricultural base, vary according to a set of key dimensions, each with specific implications for producing a community personality. Even if farming no longer dominates the local economy, vestiges of traits inherent to a community’s founding and settling pattern influence its evolution. Yeoman or entrepreneur farming patterns and the community loyalty that results from these contrasting family goals help shape this personality. Some personality traits are apparent to both inhabitants and outsiders: homogeneity of residents, village activity, divisions by religious affiliation, land tenure, occupation, and age. Other traits are more subtle but also account for a community personality: commitment to public service, integration of residents, and support of young families and elderly citizens.

Settlers’ Background Affects Later Community Development

Rural communities evolved through different settlement mechanisms. Those mechanisms account for links among households, shape an ideology about community welfare, and govern the homogeneity of the local population. Communities settled by Germans typically developed via chain migration where the first settlers recruited others from their homeland villages. Such a settlement pattern ensured that those sharing language, customs, religion, and values would cluster together as a homogeneous group. Such a group was always integrated by kinship ties as well as, for Germans, an agrarian philosophy governing the community. The families that settled German communities shared a belief that farming was a blessed occupation, and rural living a superior way of life. Kircheberg (a pseudonym for a real town, see box on research methodology) attracted German immigrants from the Hanover region. Some, having settled first near Chicago, followed their kin to the new community where farmland was cheap. This migration chain led to a community homogeneous according to ethnicity, religion, and commitment to continuity, and linked by extensive kinship ties.

Communities like Commerce, settled by Yankees, evolved by accumulation, as families independently chose a locale according to individual criteria. Sharing Protestant upbringing and British origins, Yankees were members of the dominant group, and ethnic identity did not set them off from other settlers, as it did the Germans. Commerce settler-families tended to make a personal and independent decision about whether to buy land, a decision not based on kinship or common ancestry. As a consequence, the population of the community was more heterogeneous in background, kinship, and religion. Like Kirchebergers, Commerce settlers were looking for cheap, good land. But from the outset, absentee large-scale investors treated landownership as a business proposition. Commerce farmers have always placed high priority on commercial enterprise and individual advancement. Those who succeed set themselves apart from others; social distinctions are emphasized. The village of Commerce served more as a commercial center than as a locus for ethnic solidarity.

Religion Can Unify or Divide

Two church forms have been evident in rural communities. One form was com-

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munities with a single unifying church at their center. Old World Catholic or Lutheran churches guided immigrants from western and northern Europe and sought to establish stable settlements that would support a similar religious institution. Immigrants were encouraged to settle with their own kind, and at the outset religious leaders were dispatched from Europe and often made a lifelong commitment to the same community. Churches built with this organization are a prominent feature of the rural landscape and are typical of German yeoman communities. Although ministers no longer make a career in a single church, they continue to share ethnicity and often a rural origin with their parishioners. People generally are members of the same church in which they were baptized. The Lutheran church dominates Kircheberg, and church membership defines community membership. People say the church is “the spiritual and social heart of the community.”

Churches established by the American Protestant denominations such as Baptists and Pentecostals represent a second type of religious structure. These churches are concerned more with strictly religious matters than with establishing a strong community with a single church at its core. Members were recruited almost entirely from among those with Protestant British heritage. Ecclesiastical organization was subordinated to rapid expansion through converts. Competition for followers was great, and Corn Belt communities frequently had many small churches. These churches did not regard community stability as a high priority and did not invest resources in supporting aspects of members’ lives other than the religious. Ministers in Methodist churches, for example, were typically shifted every few years as part of the prescribed routine. Church membership rose and fell according to the charisma of the current preacher. People often joined several different churches over a lifetime, changing membership for pragmatic as well as religious reasons.

Commerce has three competing churches with membership related to social status. Wealthy farmers most often belong to the Methodist church, smaller farmers to the Baptist church, and blue-collar workers are likely to attend the Pentecostal church. Many people joined several different churches over a lifetime, changing membership for pragmatic as well as religious reasons.

Early Yankee absentee owners invested in land around Commerce during the mid-1800’s, developing the east central Illinois area into large-scale farms. In the late 1800’s, Commerce was settled by other Yankees who individually migrated there and bought farm lots when earlier investors sold off small parcels as cattle raising became unprofitable.

Commerce, typical of rural communities settled by Yankees, is not a highly cohesive community. Families are divided by factors that often serve to integrate rural communities of other ethnic origin—occupation, religion, and residence. Farmers, including most of the larger operators, live in the countryside. The village houses a few retired farm and business families, but recently many more blue-collar families who commute to jobs in nearby metropolitan areas. The landholding structure has created clear social stratification with a few very large operators who farm both their own and rented land, a block of smaller full owners, and a number of operators totally dependent on rental land. Tenants typically rent from absentee landlords who have little or no connection to the community. Related to these divisions, Commerce is less homogeneous, more individualistic in its composition.

In earlier times, schools helped to unify the community, but the village lost its local high school some years ago when the school district was consolidated. Competition with the neighboring villages being consolidated forced the new high school to be built in the neutral countryside and altered permanently the village life of Commerce and the other communities. Commerce has a cafe, grocery store, bank, and a weekly newspaper. All but the bank have experienced frequent turnovers of entrepreneurs and many are now owned by outsiders. For Commerce residents, who owns a business is irrelevant—access to the service or retailer is what’s important.

Commerce’s population peaked at 800 in 1920, reached a low of 550 in 1950, and gradually regained numbers to reach over 600 by 1980.

Kircheberg was founded as a north central Illinois railroad farm town in the mid-1800’s by settlers from northern Germany. German farmers soon bought out the few Yankee land speculators who had raised cattle on their large tracts. In the late 1800’s, the congregation obtained a minister who changed their Lutheran church’s affiliation to the conservative Missouri Lutheran Synod. Some church services remained in German as late as the 1950’s.

Despite half of Kircheberg’s small farmers leaving agriculture during the 1950’s, younger local families continue to live in the community, commuting to work elsewhere in manufacturing and service industries. The remaining farmers are typically part owners. Land tends to be owned by those who operate it or by local residents. Farming and landownership do not divide the community, for operations are rather similar in size. Farmers, like other residents, are actively involved in the community. Shared ethnicity, religion, kinship, and lack of stratification create a homogeneous and cohesive community. Kircheberg supports several taverns, a restaurant, a service station, a grocery store, and a grain elevator. Businesses owned by outsiders are viewed somewhat suspiciously, but still receive community support.

Kircheberg very gradually grew in size from a population of around 500 in 1910 to almost 700 by 1960, leveling off and then dropping to 600 by 1980.
people attend a church different from that of their parents, or even their siblings. Many attend churches outside of Commerce. Commerce’s churches effectively divide the community by reinforcing social differences.

### Community Contrasts in Attitudes Toward Young...

Keeping younger families in rural communities is an endemic problem. An aging population develops as young families, even those who wish to stay, must move away for work. Our two communities offer contrasting concerns about how to retain younger families, based on differing commitments to continuity. Commerce has allowed the market to take its course, though people worry about the fact that the community cannot keep its young families. As an example, even the more prosperous farmers often tell children, other than the designated heir, they should find a different occupation because their farm can’t provide adequate income for more than one offspring. These “extra” children typically leave Commerce permanently.

Kircheberg tries to make it possible for young families to stay in the community, if not in farming. The defeat of a water sewage treatment plant proposed by the village council, while potentially bad for the environment, illustrates how the community seeks to protect young families. Residents felt that young families would move to the countryside to avoid the higher taxes the plant would necessitate. People commented that “wouldn’t be good for Kircheberg.”

The church’s financing of the parochial school and daycare center are also calculated to support these families. Such commitment has kept young local nonfarming families living in the village and willing to travel some distance to work. The benefits received from proximity to family and the parochial school outweigh the costs of commuting.

### Toward Old...

The actions of retired farmers, whether they move to town, leave the area altogether, migrate annually according to a “corn, beans, and Florida” pattern, or remain on their farmsteads, are critical to a community’s cohesiveness. Younger farm families are less motivated to come into town or be concerned with village politics if their retired parents live elsewhere. Farmers become detached without a vested interest in the village, particularly if the village attracts non-native renters into surplus, inexpensive housing. An exaggeration of differences between social groups may result. Commerce farmers and farm widows have traditionally retired into town, but those now nearing retirement, if they plan on moving, are thinking of Florida or the Southwest. Kircheberg, by contrast, still retains the custom of retired farmers moving into town to be close to elderly friends, the church, and the grocery store.

The Kircheberg and Commerce communities have essentially the same population, but they developed differently. Kircheberg grew steadily by keeping the families who were born there, despite an exodus from farming in the 1950’s. Kircheberg’s households remain tightly knit by kinship. Those ties have enabled some frail elderly residents to stay out of a nursing home. Commerce’s size diminished with the same farming exodus, but has rebounded in the past several decades through an influx of people new to the community. Farmers comment that the town has attracted some unsavory people, “who probably don’t work and are on welfare,” and they resent tax initiatives required to improve the village. These families appear ignored, unintegrated into any community kinship or social network.

### Gown and Town...

Schools, businesses, and activities help to integrate residents who are otherwise separated by geography and social class. Coming together in common areas fosters development of a community identity. A distinctive identity produces cohesiveness and attachment. Schools are particularly critical as a community focus if residents’ religious affiliations are divided. Yeoman communities dominated by a single church will still have a unifying institution if they lose their school. But Yankee towns lose the heart of their community with the loss of a school.

Schools help to bring Commerce citizens together only when their children are of school age. As soon as their children mature, most parents lose interest in school affairs. For example, older, wealthier landowning families 5 years ago fought hard to defeat a school bond issue for a second time. The outcome was deeply affected by land tenure: less affluent tenants with younger families advocated passage, those opposed wrote to absentee landowners about their tenants’ voting for higher taxes. The issue split the community along class lines, and village versus countryside lines.

Kircheberg has maintained a parochial school, tuition free, as a lure to keep younger families in the community. The quality of the school often was cited as a reason for their remaining. After much discussion, the church council recently added a daycare center for pre-school children at the school. Though the church tenets taught that a woman’s place is in the home, daycare center advocates prevailed despite the opposition of conservative church members. Community continuity, represented in the effort to keep young families in town, took precedence over religious ideology.

Without some core businesses like a cafe and grocery store, a village as a physical place dies because it provides no services and lacks a gathering spot. Rural businesses often cannot compete with regional malls that lure shoppers with low prices and city ambiance. Yeoman communities help to maintain their towns through commitment to local businesses. Kircheberg formed a community development corporation, almost entirely of church members, in response to the loss of a local grocery store. The corporation built a store and leased it to an operator because the leaders felt loss of this business was “not good for people.” Whether the store will be successful over the long term is still questionable. Another Kircheberg initiative involved formation of a cooperative to retain the grain elevator, considered a critical community institution. Non-farmers and farmers alike bought cooperative shares to finance the operation. Though poor management and too few farms eventually caused its sale to a larger company, the transition provided by the cooperative kept an elevator in Kircheberg.

An entrepreneurial spirit has kept businesses alive in Commerce. Female entrepreneurs returning to work once
their children have grown up have undertaken the purchase and management of the cafe, the newspaper, and several other businesses. But Commerce’s businesses have not had continuity of ownership. A restaurant now closed has had three owners in 5 years. People try to patronize the businesses, but there are many turnovers of owners as a result of business failures. Farmers often bypass the local grain elevator “because we can make more money” elsewhere, they said. Individual interests guide choices; the larger good of Commerce is a lower priority in residents’ decisions. Entrepreneurial optimism still abounds, however. A retired farmer for instance, bought the old elementary school to remodel for rental housing. Before that, while still farming, he built, ran, and eventually sold the village restaurant.

A similar contrast exists in community activities in the two communities. Kircheberg has sustained the commitment needed to support its parochial school for 70 years, run a church without a minister for a year, and maintain a development corporation. Commerce’s citizens plunge into innovative activities with great energy, but lose interest if the participants feel no direct benefit from the time invested. Several families, for instance, erected lights on a ballfield and organized children’s and adult softball leagues. When they cut back on their donated time, the leagues folded. A few very interested individuals keep organizations going, such as 4-H or a men’s service club, but the sustained commitment to group welfare so noticeable among Kircheberg’s yeomen is lacking.

... Kith and Kin

A natural byproduct of midwestern farming and settlement patterns is that households are physically separated by open spaces. Farm consolidations have intensified this separation; one operator may farm what four or five did before. Though fewer farmers populate the countryside than a generation ago, more nonfarmers live there now. Country dwellers without kin nearby are most isolated in contrast to families whose kinship ties ensure social contacts and support. The frequency of interactions among networks bridging the social and physical space between households affects community integration.

People in Kircheberg say “everyone is related to everyone else,” and act as if it were true. The church women’s group meets twice weekly, bringing several generations together socially. Their gathering functions as the community newspaper. Middle-aged women bring their older, more frail neighbors and kin to the meetings. In Commerce, a few older women “go around and help” the elderly by driving them to the hospital or taking them meals, but contacts are more an individual initiative. Family members are assumed to take care of their own and general community monitoring is not the norm.

A highly cohesive community is one in which conformity to understood rules is effectively controlled through gossip and peer pressures. Where people worry about what happens to a community, they monitor peoples’ activities, and residents behave as if they care what others think. Conformity constraints can be oppressive and may have forced out dissenters in the past. In the more heterogeneous Yankee communities—characterized by different religious membership, occupation, and social class—local opinion is divided too, and more tolerant of diversity. The entrepreneur community values individualism and independence. People in Commerce are quick to say that others are entitled to their opinions and free to do as they wish, “if they can afford it.”
A more diverse, individualistic population may encourage less commitment to maintaining community cohesion. In Commerce, for example, farmers want to achieve a secure, independent operation so that "no one can touch me." If they achieve financial security, they tend to withdraw from the community activities that give them no direct benefit. Respected individuals or distinguished families were not persistent leaders. Commerce therefore lacks consistent role models for community responsibility. In Kircheberg, by contrast, an elderly landowner-businessman, descended from one of the town's original families, worked tirelessly with a group of church elders for the good of the community. Until his death, he was actively involved in fund-raising projects, including the volunteer fire department, the grain elevator cooperative, the community development corporation, and most others. People held him in high esteem and his actions set a standard for unselfish community service against which others were measured.

### Each Community Has Advantages and Drawbacks

These Illinois cases do not exhaust ways that communities work. However, the characteristic yeoman and entrepreneur traits are associated with dominant Corn Belt ethnic groups and thus the cases are highly representative. Ethnic beliefs shaped family attitudes about the importance of working toward group welfare beyond the family. To a considerable extent, these beliefs explain how rural people relate to their communities and respond to social and economic changes.

Yeoman populations are community oriented, a personality highly suited to cooperative efforts. They are willing to work toward sustaining communities because they believe that what benefits the community benefits them. Strong agreement about what a community should be facilitates mobilization of its citizens, but also makes them more concerned with preserving things as they always were rather than with promoting development for its own sake. Their innate conservatism makes it less likely that yeoman communities will take risks or develop innovative ideas.

Entrepreneur communities tend to lack a unifying institution. Their basic divisions make community mobilization more difficult. However, the greater diversity of entrepreneur communities yields a variety of perspectives and experiences, a situation favoring innovation. These communities bubble with ideas and energy, but lack the yeoman consistency and leadership required to sustain initiatives. Projects that promise growth and economic payback best capture entrepreneurial energies. Clearly both styles can foster community well-being by pursuing contrasting ideals about development.