

Rural Life under the Knife:
Rural Decay and Its Relation to Our Agricultural System

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Substantial Research Paper

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter One: Rural Decay.....	5
The Story of Gardner.....	5
In Depth Look at Rural Decay.....	8
Population Decline.....	9
Education.....	13
Health.....	14
Income, Poverty, & Unemployment	15
Decline in Goods & Services.....	17
Environment.....	18
Chapter 2: Agriculture.....	20
Why Focus on Agriculture.....	20
Population & Economy.....	22
Societal Issues.....	25
Environment.....	27
Chapter 3: Solutions.....	34
Shift in Thinking & Acting.....	34
Policy’s Role.....	43
Implementation of Local Food In Gardner.....	46
Conclusion.....	51
Bibliography.....	53

Introduction

The sun looks down on the small town of Gardner, reaches out with its long warm fingers over the Gardner Butte and lights up the one street running through town. The mountains create a circular embrace around the deep valley where the town is located, and on this bright morning, the only one around to take note of this natural spectacle is the one lonely tumbleweed that rolls through the town's main street. Rural change is nothing new to the history of the United States. Smaller towns gave rise to bigger towns, and things grew and expanded as population grew. Yet, now there is a new event taking shape, the shrinking of rural areas. They do not get bigger, they do not expand and intersect with other towns, and they do not stay small and quaint as in the olden days, instead they shrivel up and wither away. Rural decay is the breakdown of rural areas. It happens when a small town is no longer central to its own relevance and has no economy of its own. The people cannot support themselves either through their work or their old support systems. They can no longer make their own things nor grow their own food, and older skills and knowledge die out instead of being passed on to younger generations. Streets become ridden with potholes; cardboard and plywood becomes more common than glass; people drive farther and farther for a routine medical check up; and community events are replaced with long hours in front of the TV.

Rural decay is a heartbreaking and often misunderstood event that is taking place in my hometown of Gardner, Colorado, and in other rural areas all across the United States.

This paper is my attempt to better understand the dimensions that constitute this breakdown of rural communities and to look more in depth at one of its root causes,

industrial agriculture. By doing this, I hope to gain a working knowledge of this problem and find key areas where changes can be made to reverse this process. I believe that industrial agriculture is a main driving force behind rural decay, and that by implementing local food systems and changing government policies to favor small farmers, rural communities can once again start to thrive.

The first section of this paper will explore rural decay by looking at the small rural town of Gardner and its experience with this problem, and then relating this to trends that are affecting rural areas across the whole United States. I will do this by investigating various statistics, literature, and relating trends to my own experiences. The second section will examine how industrial agriculture has contributed to this problem by looking at literature and government websites surrounding the issue. The final part of this paper will look at how rural decay can be overcome by increasing local, organically produced food.

Figure 1: Picture of Colorado, highlighting Huerfano County where Gardner is located



CHAPTER 1: Rural Decay

The Story of Gardner, Colorado:

I became interested in looking at the topic of rural decay and the breakdown of small communities because these are issues that have affected me personally. I grew up in a very small, rural town called Gardner, located in the South Central part of Colorado. I lived there from the time of my birth in January of 1983 until I moved to New Jersey in 1998. Since my move I go back at least twice a year to visit with my parents and my grandma and to see some old friends that have lingered in the area. Over the past 26 years, I have witnessed enormous changes in the political, social, and economic structure of this area. Sadly, most of these changes have been for the worse, and have had a crippling effect on the town. Even more upsetting is that this phenomenon of rural decay is not restricted to my town but has become an ever-increasing trend in the United States.

Some people would say, “why care about rural decay?” They believe that it is a necessary part of evolution for people to leave rural areas and head for urban centers. It is true that some rural areas can be “backward places” that have higher amounts of poverty, racism, and other issues that can make them difficult locations to live in. There are some who would say that for these reasons rural places should become a thing of the past. However, there issues occur all over the world and in all types of living situations. There are certainly poverty and crime in cities and suburbs; these are not site-specific issues. What makes rural areas so nice and appealing for some people is the lifestyle. It is quieter in the country. There is room to have a farm, let the kids wander down to the river, and do all sorts of outdoor activities. Also, the cost of living tends to be a lot lower so people can

get by on less money. Rural areas have the potential to be happy healthy places where people can raise children, have a garden and be a part of a strong community. Just because they also have the potential to be “backwards and slow” places does not mean that they always are. Just like inner city areas that have poverty and racism issues, they can change and become something wonderful.

In order to put the issues of rural decay into perspective it will be best to tell how these changes took shape visually in Gardner. Growing up in Gardner during the eighties the town felt a lot more alive. Yes, I was a child, but from speaking with my parents, other people in the area, and friends, I have found that this is a fairly widespread opinion. The area only had a population of a little over 500, but there were two gas stations, three churches, two restaurants, a co-op, a couple of bars, the post office, a community center that hosted events at least every month, a school, many small farmers who sold their food locally, and a health clinic that was open bi-weekly. This may not sound like much from an urban perspective but for the amount of people in the area it was fairly substantial.

A lot of this infrastructure had been built by an influx of farmers, Mexicans, and hippies that had come in the early seventies and again in the early eighties. There also was a large population of Native Americans in the area. This unusual mix of people may not sound like it would mesh very well, but it did. The educated hippies had left home to find a simpler more communal way of living, and while they did not know much about farming, they were able to fund the building of the school and the clinic and provided the educated work base needed to run both of them. The farmers provided local food and a

source of knowledge for the urban hippies on how to grow some of their own food supply. The Mexican immigrants were also well acquainted with the land and supplied the much-needed skilled labor for building and infrastructure maintenance. The Native Americans were the most knowledgeable of all these groups. They taught much of the community which foods to grow, what time of year to grow them, what plants could be harvested and used for medicinal purposes, and they also provided a very rich culture that helped to shape the area. Together these three groups prospered for two decades, but then it started to fade.

The latter half of the 80s marked the downfall for this small community. The clearest distinction for this in my mind was the night the Agnes burned down. The Agnes was one of the two gas stations and restaurants that we had in town. It was rumored that the fire was not an accident and had been set by the owners themselves to collect on the insurance, so this was not an actual cause to the decay that followed but more likely a symptom of it. However, I distinctly recall my father saying afterwards, “there goes the town,” and this stands out in my mind as a bad omen for things to come.

Anyway, in the two decades that followed it seemed that half of the town kind of shut down. The only other gas station started running out of gas on a continual basis, the co-op stopped stocking many fruits and vegetables and started selling commercial products, and the other restaurant kept shutting down and reopening with new owners. The younger generation started moving away and into the cities to look for better education, work, or to be closer to health care services. This in turn, started a downward cycle of fewer

educators, skilled workers, and health care providers since many of these people did not return to the area.

The farmers started moving away as well and selling their land to bigger cattle ranchers. Environmentally this led to a more intensive use of the land, increased water use, and in turn caused soil degradation and desertification. Socially it caused the area to become a food desert since there were less local farmers to supply the town with fresh food, and people were forced to drive farther and farther away to do their shopping, or were forced to eat only the processed food that was still being sold in the town.

Rural Decay- in depth look at the issues:

As you can see there are many issues that come through when looking at rural decay, which makes pinpointing any one cause extremely difficult. Complicating things further, it is also hard to tell cause from effect since most of the problems are interrelated or meshed together. As author Osha Davidson writes in his book *Broken Heartland, The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto*, “the most insidious part of this process [the process of rural breakdown] is its self-reinforcing nature; each downward step makes the next one more likely.”¹ This is probably why rural decay is so scary; once this downward spiral starts, it is really hard to reverse. Population decrease can lead to a decrease in education, health, and other services, which can lead to more population decrease. You can see where any one step in this cycle increases the likeliness of the next step, and it makes it very hard to draw a dividing line between the cause and effect.

¹ Davidson, Osha Gray. *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto*. 1996. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, page 54

POPULATION DECLINE

I will start by looking at population decline since this is the most measurable issue. This is a concern that has been called a cause of rural decay and also a symptom of it. It is one

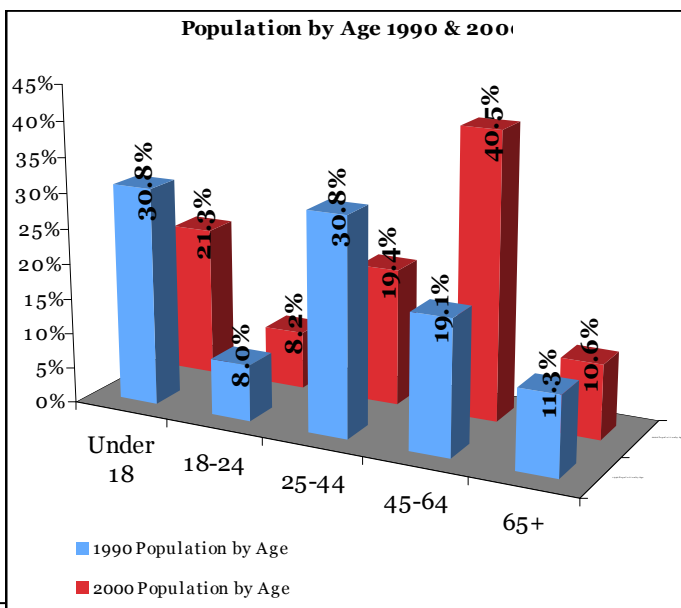


Figure 2: Graph of Population Distribution

Data from: www.city-data.com

of those issues that is especially hard to label. From the year 1990 to 2000 there has been an increase of population in Gardner by 8 people.² Imagine that, in ten years population has only risen from 575 people to 583 people. Furthermore, when you count the whole county subdivision, which spans about 15 miles around Gardner, not just the town itself, the population has

actually decreased by one. This is especially striking since in general there has been a huge population growth in Colorado during this time, from 2000-2007 population for the state has grown by over 430,000 people.³

² “Cities of the United States.” City-data.com. [Advameg, Inc < www.city-data.com >](http://www.city-data.com), accessed on April, 20 2009

³ The map on the top is a state wide map generated from ESRI data. Dark blue represents negative population growth, light blue shows population growth of up to 150,000, light tan shows 150,000-300,000, dark tan 300,000 to 400,000, and red shows over 400,000. The map on the bottom shows population growth per county of Colorado, dark blue representing negative growth, light blue up to 1,000, light tan up to 10,000, dark tan up to 40,000, and red over 40,000.

Aside from the extremely low population growth, there has also been a change in demographics. There has been a twenty percent decrease in the number of people under the age of 44. This means that most of the young people have left the area, to be replaced with an aging population.⁴ I can attest to this trend, since I myself am one of these statistics. I left when I was a teenager, as did many of my friends. In fact, whenever I go back it seems that one of my friends has moved away, leaving only younger siblings or aging parents behind. The worst affect that the decrease in people under the age of 45 has had is to decrease the labor pool, so that there are fewer teachers, health care providers, skilled laborers, farmers, storeowners, and less people to add to the economy of the area. Basically this change in demographic makeup of the population has led to a decline in the number and quality of services, such as health care, education and a breakdown in infrastructure.⁵

This change in demographics is also true for farmers; in 1992 the median age for farmers was 53 years old and this has only been increasing.⁶ This shows that most of the younger generations are leaving the farm. This coupled with government policy has led to a consolidation of farms and a decrease in the local sale and access to fresh foods.⁷

⁴ Data taken from the U.S. Census Bureau, "1990 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Tape File 3; Matrices P13, P31; generated using American FactFinder; <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>, accessed April 20, 2009 and from <http://www.city-data.com/zips/81040.html>

⁵ Richard E Wood, *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests*. 2008. University Press of Kansas, page 3

⁶ Henry A Wallace Center for Agricultural & Environmental Policy. *Making Changes: Turning Local Visions Into National Solutions*. May 2001. Arlington, Virginia, page 43

⁷ Michael Pollan, *The Food Issue: Farmer in Chief*. NY Times Magazine, October 9, 2008, page 6: available at www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/magazine/12policy-t.html, accessed on April 22, 2009.

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