

New Peoples and New Orders: The Metamorphosis of Contemporary Rural Minnesota

A report from southwest Minnesota
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Southwestern Minnesota, a rural area that functions for these purposes as a microcosm of national rural life, defines a small pathway in the worldwide migration of contemporary peoples. The recent immigrants to this area during the past decade have arrived in a region undergoing a transformation unprecedented in intensity of change since the settlement period after the Civil War. This contemporary change wears many faces and it is pervasive and profound. Associated with demographic decline, economic development, and technological revolution, change reconfigures farm and town, landscape and population. Underway, according to the argument sketched out here, is a metamorphosis of rural life in southwestern Minnesota.¹

¹ This piece is part of an ongoing reflection on the transformation of southwestern Minnesota I and my colleagues at the Southwest State University's Rural and Regional Studies Center have carried during the last several years. It is principally based on three recent books: Joseph Amato and John Meyer, *The Decline of Rural Minnesota* (Marshall, Minn.: Crossings Press, 1993), Joseph Amato, with John Meyer, John Radzilowski, Donata DeBruyckere, and Anthony Amato, *To Call It Home: The New Immigrants of Southwestern Minnesota* (Marshall, Minn.: Crossings Press, 1996), and Joseph Amato and John Radzilowski, with John Meyer furnishing graphs and charts, *Community of Strangers: Change, Turnover, Turbulence and the Transformation of a Midwestern Country Town*: (Marshall, Minn.: Crossings Press, (October, 1999). These books are the sources of graphs and tables utilized here and their bibliographies indicate sources explicitly and implicitly utilized here. Of additional use are John Radzilowski's *Prairie Town: A History of Marshall, Minnesota, 1872-1997* (Marshall, Lyon County Historical Society, 1997) are, Hal Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural society in nineteenth-century New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and Richard Davies, *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-town America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999). Also, see publications in the Rural Essay and the Regional Essay series published by our Society for the Study of Local and Regional History (Marshall, Minn.).

At the decade's beginning, the immigrants who arrived to work in the region's new and expanding meat processing industry represented the most visible face of change. However, the most momentous change comes at the end of this decade with an emerging farm crisis—the second farm crisis in two decades. This crisis portends—perhaps even makes manifest—that the singular and defining ways of American rural life, traditionally identified with the family farm and the small town, are vanishing forever. This crisis—integral to the great transformation underway—occurs at the same time that Southwest Minnesota's towns and regional centers are increasingly characterized by accelerating rates of turnover in their businesses and work force as well as pervasive consolidation and mergers in both private and public sectors.

Southwest Minnesota is becoming the home place of strangers. Setting the stage is a decline of population caused by death, an aging population, and emigration, especially the loss of the region's youth. Newcomers employed by the meat industry are also part of a true metamorphosis of the region and its way of life. At the heart of the change lie the indisputable dominance and ascendancy of state and market over locality; the consequent loss of independence, autonomy, and initiative imperils local leadership, community, and traditions. The collective memory is weakened by turnover in population, imagination is diminished by loss of power, and communities experience decline and turbulence. The collective experience is dominated by outside institutions, commands, and wishes. As a result of these conditions, the countryside increasingly becomes a place of collective resignation and individual choice. The keen of wit can't help but ask what happens to a region where place and locality no longer matter. Their question reverberates with

meaning for a nation and a world that have, for two centuries, sacrificed village and peasant, farmer and town, to city and progress.

The Decline of Rural Minnesota

Southwestern Minnesota is composed of eighteen counties. It occupies **approximately 12,000 square** miles. South Dakota borders it on the west and Iowa on the south. The Minnesota River, in its southeasterly course from Ortonville on the Dakota border to south -centrally located Mankato, forms a hypotenuse that delineates geographically the northern and eastern borders of southwestern Minnesota. **[ADD REGIONAL MAP NEAR HERE]** Identified alternatively with the Midwest, the Corn Belt, the tall grass prairie, and yet, more precisely the Prairie Lake region, southwestern Minnesota's fate, since settlement, has been cast with agriculture. Due to increasing farm size and smaller farm families this has meant decline during the last five decades despite dramatically increased farm production.

In the last half-century, agriculture has become increasingly industrialized. Its fortunes now turn on fickle world markets. Farms have become more specialized in function and ever more dependent on capital rather than labor. Farm families are older. The roads of national emigration that have led across the century from farm to town, city, and then metropolis have formed deeper and deeper ruts across southwestern Minnesota, especially since the 1950s. Lured by higher education, better jobs, and distant opportunities, the best and brightest, with some exceptions, have left the countryside to find their fortunes under the glow of city lights.

To repeat what has become an old and depressing tale, the hamlets, villages, and towns that once prospered by serving the farm are now languishing and in decline. They are smaller in population, dramatically reduced in function, and comparatively stripped of all amenities. These small places no longer spur active associations and support only minimal and impoverished forms of community.

This countryside, whose towns at settlement were ambitiously titled Ghent, New Prague, and New Ulm, has fallen by the side of the tracks. With few exceptions, the region lacks good jobs, high wages, diverse opportunities, and diminished amenities in light of the residents' rising demands and expectations. Like the countryside elsewhere, southwestern Minnesota finds itself with a declining population and insufficient skills in an increasingly specialized world. Indeed, a certain frenetic pace most often characterizes rural regional centers as they try to keep up with the metropolis. With less people and money, they are forced to keep pace with a world filled with multiplying mandates, expanding rights, and proliferating wishes.

The multi-headed monster of decline surfaced in the 1980s amidst the prolonged farm crisis. Following a period of inflated values and high interest rates, the crisis was characterized by low commodity prices, depreciated land values and farm assets. The crisis cleared the region of half its farmers and nearly all its animals. Operating farms themselves were dramatically doubled or more in size, going, it is estimated, from an average of 350 to more than 700 acres. The farms that survived the crisis did so primarily on inherited capital, merged resources, off-farm income, working wives, and the skill of learning to plow with the sharpest pencils.

After a brief interlude of relative prosperity in the middle 1990s, crisis has again loomed. This time it focuses around depressed worldwide prices for corn, soybeans, and hogs. The crisis of the late 1990s appears to be shaping up to equal its predecessor in severity. However, on several counts the present crisis fails to match that of preceding decade: Fewer farmers are affected; there has not been a precipitous fall in asset value; moreover, rural banks and creditors, harshly educated by the previous crisis, are less implicated in the present crisis.

On other counts it can be argued that the present crisis is worse. This new crisis is driven and shaped by the perspective of long-term depressed prices and therefore jeopardizes the best farm operators. They are cashing in the farm and giving up the land quietly, without a fuss. Subtler, but perhaps even more telling, is the fact that even the best ethnic farmers—our Belgians, Germans, Dutch, Czechs, amongst others—have, with near unanimity, started counseling their sons off the land. Collectively, farmers have not made the mild, puny, and symbolic protest of the 1980s. In crisis, they have now evolved to become the automatic clients of their accountants, lawyers, and political representatives.

Of course, decline did not go unobserved in the 1980s. The bright posters announcing auctions of farms and closed farm implement dealers were displayed at the entrance to every coffee shop. Diminished church rosters and a plethora of school mergers further echoed the countryside's crisis.

[ADD TABLES 1 AND 2 NEAR HERE]

The 1990 census showed that rural counties experienced rates of population decline in the middle and high teens. The 1995 census demonstrated that a dozen southern

and western counties from 1990 to 1995 actually entered a state of natural decline: more residents were dying than were born. Death had accumulated a large backlog. Even chambers of commerce, notorious as being the boosters of boosters, grudgingly conceded decline. **[ADD TABLE 3 NEAR HERE]**

Change, however, took forms other than those of decline. In the region's two lead cities, Marshall and Willmar, populations grew, accounting for respectable, if not significant growth, in their counties. In other county seats and towns of five thousand, change came with consolidation and the appearance of franchises. A horde of regional and national chains appeared. Doctors, lawyers, dentists, and accountants consolidated their resources and formed firms. The whole spectrum of rural institutions—from banks, hospitals and coops, to schools and churches—chose cooperation, affiliation, merger, and consolidation as their modus operandi. The enlarged centralized state paraded into county courthouse with whole columns of public officials and servants marching under banners of fresh legislative mandates and administrative laws.

Change came most manifestly with newcomers from across the nation, Mexico, and the world. With the exception of medical and computing professionals from Poland, India, and elsewhere who sprinkled themselves throughout the countryside, the majority of newcomers followed more familiar paths. They came to find work in the region's new and expanding meatpacking industry. They took up residence in proximal towns and villages, wherever cheap housing was available. The countryside had not witnessed such an influx of population since the last decades of the previous century, when immigrants from

northern and central Europe came here either directly or via Midwestern industrial centers to establish the farms and fill the villages of the region.

Newcomers

These newcomers of southwestern Minnesota can be counted. They can be located on the following tables.

[ADD TABLES 5 & 6, 9 & 10 FROM *TO CALL IT HOME*]

The newcomers came from across the globe, arriving from southeast Asia (especially Vietnam and Laos), northeast Africa (particularly Somalia and Kenya), Central and South America (mainly central and northern Mexico) the southwestern United States (in greatest majority from the Rio Grande valley in Texas). These immigrants offer an amazing spectrum of ethnicity, class, religion and culture, whose diversity merits the attention and study of teams of field anthropologists who have yet to materialize, despite the expressed good will of liberal and philanthropic groups. By their diversity, they elude the meaningless term “people of color ” every bit as much as they exceed such older catch-all pejorative as “strangers,” “foreigners,” or this author’s own euphemistic “newcomers.”

Conceptual sleights of hand fail as they do not adequately describe the immigrants and their immigrant chains. They lapse in detailing the concatenation of events overseas that brought these immigrants to the United States, nor do they elucidate agencies, forces, and circumstances within American society that have joined them and their fates, at least temporarily, to southwestern Minnesota.

The immigrants constitute an impressive amalgam of peoples, classes, and cultures. Their diversity can be measured concretely by comparison. It is the differences that exist between literate Lao military officers and their families who lived in a trailer court in Jackson, Minnesota, and the pre-literate mountain Hmong villagers who inhabit Tracy and Marshall. It is measured by the distance that exists between these Asian political refugees from the Vietnam War and those from internecine conflicts in Ethiopia and Somalia. Found principally in Worthington and Marshall are tribal and Muslim northeastern Africans. They are divided by marriage practices (monogamy or polygamy), tribal, religious, class, educational, urban and rural backgrounds.

Amongst the dominant group of regional newcomers, the so-called Latinos or Hispanics, one encounters a stunning array of cultures and backgrounds. They are composed of new immigrants directly from central Mexico and non-Spanish speaking Indians of southern Mexico and Guatemala as well as Mexicans and long-time Mexican Americans from *la frontera*, the Rio Grande River valley. A handful of middle-class Cubans and Puerto-Ricans and other Latin Americans also add to the diversity.

Mexicans and Mexican Americans first arrived, as is common with immigrants, in groups of single young males. It was reported that in some instances, they were brought by busloads directly from the valley of the Rio Grande on the promise that another bus would return them if they wished at the end of the week. In other instances, they trickled into the region car by car, pickup truck by pickup truck. They often followed trails long familiar to relatives and fellow villagers seeking work as seasonal migrant field hands who had worked picking rock or hoeing beans for at least a generation. Other groups, like the

Hmong and Lao, arrived under the sponsorship of private philanthropic associations like Lutheran Social Services (an organization that had brought the now-vanished Vietnamese newcomers a decade earlier). Some groups were even solicited by the meat processing companies, while others, like the Somalians who came to Marshall as a direct result of a processing plant's closure in nearby Sioux Falls.

The vast majority of newcomers appeared only to vanish rapidly, staying for periods of only a few months or less.. They were, for all practical purposes, nearly invisible. They temporarily lived with friends, family, and compatriots. Such dramatic influx and turnover (which often exceeded two hundred percent in the first year of a company's existence), posed unexpected and even dramatic tests for social services, schools, law enforcement, and the court system. Social services faced the onslaught of numbers of new peoples, all with different cultures and myriad needs. Educational systems confronted non-English speaking children who, especially in the case of the Latinos, had unprecedented absentee and drop-out rates, whereas law enforcement encountered the presence of gangs, increased drug trafficking, and elevated (seemingly astronomically) felony rates. Assault, kidnapping and murder headed the list.

Only a handful from all immigrant groups took root and formed communities. A small number of Lao families formed a community in Mountain Lake. A significant number, but a very small percentage, of Latinos (with ratios estimated as low as one or two in a hundred) has stayed on in Willmar. Some who knew English (an important condition of mobility for immigrants), spread out in the work force, bought homes, and began to form viable communities.

The vast majority of newcomers came to work in the region's new and expanding hog and turkey processing plants of southwestern Minnesota located at Madelia, St. James, Worthington, Luverne, Marshall, Willmar, Montevideo, and elsewhere. The nature of the meat processing industry shapes many of the dimensions of these immigrants' world and their experiences.

Starting wages between \$6.00 and \$7.00 per hour netted many families an annual income well below the poverty level. The newcomers responded (as immigrants had in the past) by sharing housing and (as the rural working class does) by having wives join the full-time work force. Working conditions included high accident rates and frequent layoffs, and workers responded by quitting at astronomical rates. In the first six months of work, new employee turnover (the vast majority in the groups of newcomers) averaged—I estimate—two hundred percent and higher.

There were also other employers of these newcomers, varying community by community. Offering far fewer jobs total than the meat industry, these employers paid approximately the same, but offered better working conditions. These employers included electronic firms (preferred by Asians in Marshall), other food processors (whose jobs were often taken by resident workers), and hospitals that required, as did so many other jobs in the retail and service industry, the all-important requirement of English language fluency.

Housing proved the next most important determinant of newcomer settlement. The availability of inexpensive housing influenced how near these newcomers lived to their work. Marshall and Willmar had comparatively little inexpensive housing while

Worthington, Madelia, St. James, Tracy and Lynd offered a great deal more. Of course, proximity to work influenced workers' transportation needs and added costs.

Other factors differentiated the immigrants' experience in a town and the various towns' experiences with the newcomers. Included were total numbers and mixtures of the newcomers, which brought, as groups and subgroups, a range of diverse cultures and behaviors that spanned the gamut of human conduct. They included manners of working and relaxing, habits of saving and spending, attitudes about sexuality and reproduction, customs of dressing, eating, courtship, and socializing, along with religious beliefs and practices. These differences could win the host community's approval, but they could also provoke resentment and anger. The Hmong's nearly unbridled love of hunting and fishing provoked criticisms as did the Mexican and Mexican-Americans with their front yard car repairs and the Somalian quick purchases of nice cars and their free style of driving.

On the other side, the individual town's economic resources, attitudes, institutions, and leadership determined its receptivity and hospitality (or lack of it) to the newcomers. Given the diverse and changing institutions, policies, and leaders that characterized each town, it is therefore not surprising that each town's reactions to the newcomers were stunningly mixed and varied. (Indeed, each town in our region merits a thorough study).

The region's three largest towns can be used to illustrate this. Willmar with a population of 20,000 is the largest town in southwestern Minnesota. Located along a well-established path of migrant field workers, that led from *la frontera* to the largest meat processing plants in the region, Willmar has been the destination of the greatest number of newcomers, thereby becoming the home to the greatest number of them. Almost

exclusively Hispanic, Willmar had a minority population in 1997 of 2079 of 18,831 total residents.

Although this Hispanic community has developed over the past decade, Willmar has been for the most part depicted as a troubled community. Up to the last two years, conflict has been considered its prevalent characteristic. The story of conflict has focused on a large trailer park, Elm Lane Mobile Home Park, where newcomers were concentrated by the hundreds and issues of housing conditions and crime were melded together.

The host community perceived the newcomers as a continuously unfolding set of problems. These newcomers challenged the police with increased levels of drug use and proliferation of gangs and crime. They confronted the schools with an entire population of non-English speaking children who, in unprecedented numbers, transferred in and out of the town's schools, were absent (especially during the Christmas season), or dropped out. Newcomers, according to their advocates, encountered police prejudice in the enforcement of the law and in the hiring and treatment of a minority city police officer, and they faced discriminatory school policies in course placement.

Nevertheless, despite such inflammatory materials as dramatic industrial turnover rates, housing shortages, ever-present prejudice, and a few incendiary conflicts, there was no conflagration of violent racism. On the contrary, suspicion, prejudice, and issues aside, calm and peace prevailed. In fact, in the course of a decade, a number of newcomers have made Willmar home. And, in significant numbers, newcomers have left the Hispanic-dominated food processing industry into retail jobs and the service industry. Some

newcomers have even started their own small businesses and a handful of the youth have found their way into programs at the town's community college.

Marshall and Worthington, the region's second- and third-largest towns, are both about half the size of Willmar. In contrast to Willmar's dominantly Hispanic minority, Marshall and Worthington have significant representations of newcomers from the American southwest, Mexico, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Africa.

Although both Marshall and Worthington are county seats and regional agricultural centers of approximately the same size, Worthington is home to a greater minority population and is more turbulent and less stable than Marshall. With a less diversified economy, generally lower wages, greater housing availability, and a larger meat processing company (Swift & Company employed approximately three times more workers than Marshall's Heartland Food Company), newcomers poured into Worthington to work and live.

Worthington's 1995 census registered the sharp influx of newcomers. The minority population accounted for 634 of the town's residents in 1990 and almost 2,000 in 1995—and it was predicted to reach 2,250 or more by the year 2000, with a correlative decline in the resident population. Comparatively, Marshall's minority population went from approximately 300 in 1990, to 1,000 in 1995—it was forecast to be only 800 in 2000, constituting only 6 percent of Marshall's predicted population of **13,000** in contrast to 2,255, approximately 23% percent, of Worthington's forecasted 10,000. A marvelous and complex ethnic diversity—similar to Marshall's—characterizes Worthington's new minorities. Its Hispanics come primarily from the Texas-Mexican border and central

Mexico, but they also come from Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Its Asians include principally Lao and Hmong. Its African peoples are from Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia.

Swift & Company (which until 1995 was Monfort, a subsidiary of ConAgra Inc.), alone accounts for Worthington's rich diversity and great turbulence. In five years, it more than doubled its work force, growing from approximately 750 to 1,500 workers.

Critics of Worthington are frequently tempted to compare Swift & Company with Campbells, formerly the town's second largest employer until the local food processor closed its doors in 1998. As if one were writing a morality play, Campbells had the reputation for being fair and seeking to accommodate its workers. With a work force of approximately 600, it had an annual turnover rate of 4 to 5 percent. On the basis of comparing turnover rates alone, it could be argued that Campbells—which paid approximately the same wage as Swift & Company—was sixteen times more attractive to workers. Swift & Company's turnover drove the city's exceptional turbulence. Robert DeMuth, Worthington's mayor, observed that there were less than five minority workers in any other company or institution in town. Police Chief Don Linssen conjectured that Swift & Company could account for the annual movement of from 1,600 to 2,400 newcomers into Worthington.

The comings and goings of the company's workers affected the city's schools. One grade school principal reported that without minority enrollment he would have to lay off 25 percent of his teachers. Despite the rising numbers of minority newcomers, with predictably higher birth rates, the school system, unexpectedly, predicts a long-term

overall decline in future numbers, due to diminishing numbers of the host population. The view from one Worthington grade school confirms this demographic view of the school population. Caucasians make up 74 percent of the enrollment, Hispanics 14 percent, Asians and others 12 percent. Almost one-third of the 86 Hispanic students enrolled at the beginning of the 1995–1996 academic year left before the end of the school year, while 54 (63 percent of all Hispanic children) were fresh arrivals in the district this year.

Schools can compound prejudices. Differences observed are not always differences appreciated. At one Worthington grade school, 94 percent of Hispanic children received free or reduced-cost lunches; among Laotian children, 65 percent received this assistance; among Caucasian children 25 percent got free or reduced lunches. Approximately 85 percent of all minority students come from non-English speaking households, and they require ESL training. Testifying to open aversion to the newcomers, many Caucasian students transferred out of Worthington to nearby communities under Minnesota’s Open Enrollment law.

Rising crime rates fuel fear, anger, and prejudice. In contrast to Marshall, Worthington’s crimes had not leveled off by 1994. (Between 1989 and 1994, according to Worthington’s police chief, complaints increased almost 60 percent, juvenile crime 48 percent, and adult crime a staggering 195 percent.) Arrests for assault have doubled since 1989. With increased gang and drug activity, the city experienced an increase in drive-by shootings.

Quoted in a 1995 *Wall Street Journal* article (Oct. 31, 1995), Jerry Viola—leader of Worthington’s Cultural Diversity Commission—spoke for many when he said, “The

town that people who have lived here all their lives remember is gone. It no longer exists.” Viola, in another context, declared, “The newcomers didn’t just stumble into Worthington. They were lured here by ConAgra Inc., which in 1989 decided to expand its pork-processing plant and hire an additional 400 workers.” Confronted by nearly 100 percent employment rates, on the one hand, and “local people unwilling to cut and debone hogs for \$7.50 an hour, ConAgra attracted workers from Mexico as well as immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, and Africa.”

Worthington, nevertheless, claims successes. For the very short term it has staved off population decline. A handful of stores—an Asian food store, a Mexican and a Thai restaurant, a Vietnamese billiards parlor, and a Spanish-language video shop—add, at least for the moment, to the town’s diversity. Some minorities, especially those who know English, have moved out of the meat processing industry into the general work force. Home owning, especially among Asians, is on the rise. The mayor estimated that fifty to sixty minority families were homeowners by 1997.

A fragmented civic leadership is not yet confident about what they, and more importantly, the times have wrought. Neither they, nor anyone else, have found a way to measure the costs of social welfare, law enforcement, and school programs against increased school revenues and added economic activity. At the same time, Worthington’s leaders lack a means to weigh the loss of values like security, order, and familiarity against the promise of possible new communities and cultures. Realizing that their fate does not lie in their own hands, they can only proceed issue by issue in the experiment in progress. They can only be sure that the town’s present transformation, which involves national and

international economic and immigration patterns, results from the needs and practices of a single company.

Immigrants have and make their own roads and ways. Mexicans and Mexican Americans may continuously be drawn back home to the Rio Grande valley, which is only a two- or three-day car trip away. While Hmong (unable to return home) may reside in the countryside only temporarily before being drawn to the Twin Cities where their numbers are greater, community is stronger, and a sense of familiarity and home is more powerful. Indeed, over time they may all but disappear from southwestern Minnesota as the Vietnamese, once widely dispersed across the countryside, did in the 1980s.

Newcomers and their migrations elude simple generalizations, as do the countryside and towns to which they come. Truth in these matters demands detailed knowledge, without which sentiment and policy are flawed. However, even without such knowledge, certain things are apparent: Turnover and turbulence are real. The region has entered a period of transformation, Newcomers, whether they stay or leave, more represent than account for the regional metamorphosis underway.

Turnover, Turbulence and Transformation

The newcomers' movement stems from the annual turnover rate of the meat industry. This means that in great majority they form invisible columns moving in and out of the region. Although there is considerable variation among groups and subgroups of immigrants (on such matters as community formation, home owning, savings, migration patterns), newcomers with near unanimity defy hopes and expectations that they will stay. Rarely do

they transform themselves into the residents, homeowners, and citizens southwestern Minnesota communities desperately need. On this count, they are not dissimilar from earlier American immigrants who often did not make their point of arrival their new home, and whose migrations were complex and diverse.

Yet turnover and turbulence do not characterize only these newcomers and the communities where they live and work. On the contrary, turnover and turbulence (technically defined as population that moves in and out of a county every five years) defines the countryside of the 1990s, especially its lead cities where all forms of rural change converge. As noted earlier, decline empties the countryside of farm, village, and its most ambitious sons and daughters. At the same time, regional centers churn with change, inviting in new forces and accelerating the movements of peoples throughout society.

**[ADD GRAPHS “INDEX OF DEMOGRAPHIC TURBULENCE” AND
“DEMOGRAPHIC TURBULENCE COMPARISON OF GOVERNMENTAL
UNITS”]**

The whole process of mergers and consolidations accelerates the immigration and emigration of white collar and professional workers into and out of the region. The stark truth of the countryside becomes “what does not grow dies”. This is true not just of farms and retail businesses, but also banks, medical clinics, and coops. As state and federal agencies and corporations open local offices intent on serving and profiting from the countryside, there is a corresponding growth of wants and need. The quest for amenities marks all sectors of contemporary rural life, with medicine, education and recreation

leading the way. Expanding consumerism and spreading individualism characterize the countryside as much as the city.

Lead cities, like a Willmar, Marshall, or Worthington, stand at the center of the transformation of the countryside. They are simultaneously driven by decline in the surrounding countryside and turnover in the city itself. As our just published study of Marshall, *Community of Strangers*, shows these regional centers are characterized by unprecedented levels of turbulence far in excess of the state average and even that of the metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The turbulence raises questions about continuity of inheritance, culture, community, politics, and leadership. To a degree, it problematically makes—we are emboldened to say—“communities of strangers.”

The countryside is in a state of metamorphosis. Farm, village, and town are disappearing from the heartland. These working laboratories of American democracy, freedom, and independence are vanishing from our midst. Soon the metropolis will look into the mirror of the countryside and only see itself. In the not too distant future, historians will have to tally what has been lost and gained.

The comings and goings of new peoples of the 1990s (as important as they are) will only appear as a small chapter in the book of the countryside’s immense transformation. The keenest queries will be “What is a nation without places and localities?” and “What is a society in which every place is like every other place?” The moral matter (one asked of Rome) will be, “Did this nation sacrifice its republic for the sake of empire?” No doubt, it will be difficult to distinguish the story of rural areas like southwestern Minnesota from the familiar and dreary tale (repeated throughout the world)

of how the countryside ends at the hands of the ever-expanding and always appealing industrial revolution.