



Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests

Richard E. Wood

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On the high plains of Kansas, the future of rural America is at stake.

Small farming communities are the heart and soul of America, but it's no secret that they're under siege. Family farms are disappearing and manufacturing is outsourced. Schools close, jobs vanish, and local stores can't survive. Some communities resort to giving away land just to get people to move there.

Richard Wood knows that rural communities need more than jobs or money to survive: they need to become valued again as desirable places to live. He takes a closer look at what has happened in several Kansas farming towns and shows that there is much more depth and diversity to rural life than meets the eye.

Wood traveled the back roads to gather stories of people in some of the most vulnerable communities that are trying to stave off depopulation. These are not just accounts of people scrambling to survive in incipient ghost towns like Ada, but gritty success stories like Plainville, where an upscale design business ignited a revival, or Atwood, which shifted from industrial recruitment to home-grown entrepreneurship.

Unlike Thomas Frank, whose *What's the Matter with Kansas?* used the state as a political yardstick, Wood sees it reflecting major economic and population trends throughout the world. Looking at projects as small as community medical clinics or plans for vast buffalo grassland parks, he also sees a robust future for small-town pioneers, folks who are betting their—and rural America's—future on such things as alternative energy (think "ethanol"), sustainable natural agriculture, tourism, and the enduring appeal of rural life to outsiders.

With dozens of photos that bring rural America to life, Wood provides an inside look at what really makes this country tick—and at some of the developments that may turn the tide against what seemed an inevitable decline. Although the odds are stacked against rural recovery, the small victories that Wood shows us hold the promise that transformation and revival may yet stave off the final bitter harvest.

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