

Why People Choose the Rural Life

By Kathy Greenlee

People may choose to be rural for an opportunity to start over, but remain rural because it is home.

Is there a place where you feel centered? A place that evokes within you a central calmness, a sense of purpose and peace, a place where life seems most treasured? That special place, for each of us, represents an outward reflection of our inner selves.

I am a fifth generation Kansan. I grew up in a small town near a bigger city. Clearwater, Kansas—my hometown—is an easy drive from Wichita. My maternal grandparents were farmers and ranchers. (Those are different things. Farmers grow crops. Ranchers raise cattle. My grandparents did both.) From Clearwater, I moved to a college town, then to a suburb of our nation's capital, and now I live in a major metropolitan midwestern city.

Growing up rural does not necessarily mean that you will choose to remain rural for life. Because of where and how I was raised, I feel bicultural. I enjoy the full sensory engagement of a big city. I love the variety of activities, the restaurants, the shopping, the arts. But a big city does not evoke in me a sense of centeredness. Perhaps it does for others. In many ways, urban culture is my second language. I am simply not that far removed from the farm.

Ritual, Space, and Contour in Rural Life

In grade school, my sister, cousins, and I participated in an odd ritual we did not understand.

After dinner at my grandparents' house, we would go outside and sit on the steps of the porch and wait for the yard light to come on. That was it. That was the after-dinner entertainment on the farm. We rolled our eyes and made fun of this ritual for many years. When I gave the eulogy at my grandmother's funeral, I finally understood. By then, I was age 44.

After dinner at my grandparents' house, we would go outside, sit on the porch, and wait for the yard light to come on.

It was quiet on the porch and we had to sit still. Sometimes you could hear men—yes, mostly men—still working in the fields. As the sky grew dark, gathering near the barn you could see and hear the Black Angus cattle. The fireflies came out, then the yard light came on. And, finally, you could see the stars. The purpose of the ritual was the time-out. It was a pause at the end of the day for silence, for listening, for being together, and for appreciating what we had, being outside on the farm.

The reason my family chose to live rural is found in the texts of our history books and reflects the westward expansion and settle-

→**ABSTRACT** Former Assistant Secretary for Aging Kathy Greenlee reflects on the draw of rural life, its challenges—especially for older adults—and her emotional connection to her rural roots. | **key words:** rural America, rural life, aging, healthcare access

ment of our nation. My family, like so many others, came to Kansas for opportunity and land. My ancestors fought in the Revolutionary War, moved west to Ohio, fought again in the Civil War, and in the 1880s migrated to Kansas. The land that remained in my family for generations was the traditional land of the Osage Indians.

Life in rural America is different. It is quiet. The pace is slower. Personal space is abundant. Ease of movement is an afterthought. You can physically and emotionally spread out. The air is cleaner. You can smell grass, trees, freshly cut wheat. You can see the stars and the Milky Way. In the vast middle portion of America, you can see the entire sky, from one horizon to the other. People who live in cities or in rural areas with mountains and trees do not live with the sky the same way we do on the Great Plains. The sky brings rain, violent weather, lightning strikes that spark prairie fires, migrating birds, and spectacular sunsets. In the middle of the United States, we obsess about the weather. It is friend and foe.

Curved mountain roads, flat, broad main streets, and small hill towns illustrate the wide variety of rural communities and regional topography. The look of rural communities tells the story of shifting economic fortunes. Small towns from coast to coast often reflect long-abandoned dreams, witnessed by crumbling barns and shuttered mine shafts. People live rural because it was always an opportunity to start over, to build a fortune, to live off the land. The reasons varied, but people chose the rural life because of what it offered. People remain rural because it is home.

In the contours of rural America, you will find all that is good about our country, all that is challenging, and living reminders of the most troubling aspects of our past.

Realities and Challenges of Living and Aging in Rural America

One in five people in the United States live in an area considered rural. And, as Steven Hirsch points out in his article on page 9, “Non-metro

[rural] counties tend to have much older populations than do metro [urban] counties.” Thus, there is a growing divide between urban and rural America, from both an economic and an age perspective.

People confront problems when aging regardless of where they live. Functional limitations, cognitive impairment, caregiving, and transportation are challenges common to all

‘The look of rural communities tells the story of shifting economic fortunes.’

older people. Old is old, wherever you are. It is equally true that rural people encounter difficulties regardless of age. Difficulties in accessing healthcare, absence of public transportation, insufficient housing, lack of broadband Internet, and limited employment opportunities are challenges common to rural communities everywhere. Rural is rural, whatever your age.

Old people in rural communities epitomize aging in place. But a person cannot successfully age in a rural area without the basic resources needed for people of any age. The closure of a rural hospital has a devastating impact on a rural community and surrounding region. The loss of every physician, psychologist, and pharmacist strikes a blow that falls particularly hard on older people. But the loss of basic access to healthcare is a setback for everyone, not only the old.

Greensburg, Kansas, is rural by any definition. It is located 110 miles west of Wichita, and forty-five miles from Dodge City (yes, that Dodge City). Greensburg is also the county seat of Kiowa County, population 2,553. A county seat, should you be unfamiliar with the term, is the home of local county government and, typically, the rural community with the most resources.

At 9:00 p.m. on May 4, 2007, the town of Greensburg was hit by an EF5 tornado, decimating 95 percent of the community. In tornado parlance, EF5 tornados are the most severe and

most deadly, as was the one occurring that evening. At the time, Greensburg had a population of 1,544, eleven of whom were killed and sixty injured from this catastrophic storm. The tornado laid a path of destruction for twenty-two miles and reached a width of 1.7 miles. It was horror come real.

In the aftermath of the destruction, members of the community decided to rebuild. A total of 961 homes and businesses had been destroyed. Of these, one particular business became the focus of attention by the community, media, local Chamber of Commerce members, and

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Governor Kathleen Sebelius. Can you guess which local business became the centerpiece of concern? The grocery store.

For rural communities to thrive, certain assets are essential. I look forward to reading the article by Jean Lloyd in this issue (page 24) about farms and food deserts. What should be an oxymoron—a food desert in farm country—is not.


Rural Mainstays: People, Community, Faith—and the Stars

Each rural community is unique. The opportunities and challenges they face often reflect the presence or absence of people with a specific skill. In my partner’s rural Missouri hometown, for example, the sheriff is also the preacher. Rural people have to adapt. They take care of each other. Rural communities figure it out. They protect each other. When I was a child, it was a big deal to be downtown when the fire alarm sounded. It was the call to assembly of the volunteer fire department. Men raced on foot and by pickup truck to the downtown gas station in which the fire truck and ambulance were housed. If you share this experience, you are rural.

The old people living in small towns and rural areas are not strangers in their communities. They are known by name by the mayor, the banker, the barber, and the preacher. Social isolation is a menace gaining increasing attention, which is all for the better. Older rural people are at risk for social isolation. But what they have going for them may be a lifetime of community involvement. Our best advice for rural communities may be as simple as asking rural leaders to check up on older residents and ask about their needs.

I continue to believe faith communities are an untapped resource, especially in small towns. In my town, church and school were the social hubs of community.

I know where I am from. I have a physical sense of my roots. I was raised rural because my people were rural. My hometown is also my family history. I remain friends with people I have always known. I have no concept of how it feels to be a stranger in grade school or high school. My immediate family, my grandparents, aunts, and uncles graduated from the same high school. Our individual pictures hang in a collection on the wall.

People are raised rural and stay. People are raised rural and leave, often for educational or economic opportunities. Some urbanites move to the country. I live in Kansas City, but will eventually return to be buried with many generations of my family. For now, you can hear the rural girl inside of me each time I complain because I cannot see the stars. 

Hon. Kathy Greenlee, J.D., is president and CEO of Greenlee Global LLC. From 2009 to 2016, she served as the Assistant Secretary for Aging, at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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