

Mil writing



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Dear Mil:

I'm sure you have been wondering about the publication outcome of the RSS panel on "Rural America, Rural Women, and Public Policy." Enclosed is a copy of your presentation as well as the notes you used. I would appreciate it if you could take a few minutes and review and revise the printed text. Please feel free to add ideas or comments that you may not have stated that day since this will be read by a much wider audience.

This has taken a while because the fall and winter issues of The Rural Sociologists were completely filled and we could not get a publication date prior to this spring. TRS is distributed to all RSS members as well as a wide variety of institutions. Currently, the mailing list is composed of nearly 1500 recipients, so your statement will be available to a much larger audience than those who attended the original panel.

I want to thank you for stepping in and representing the REPP on this panel. Your statement is very powerful and strikes to the heart of the problems confronting rural economies and the challenge to rural sociologists if we want to participate in developing the policies that will affect the future of rural America. Your presentation was very well done and with Denise O'Brien of Prairefire you were articulate spokespersons for rural women and rural America. I apologize, however, for JoAnn Vogel, she was not quite what I had been led to believe (tactful, huh?). However, you and Denise erased that shaky beginning and redeemed the panel.

Once again, thank you for participating on the panel and for reviewing your statement. I will send you a copy of the article in TRS when it appears.

Cordially,

Lori Garkovich

Comments of Mil Duncan, Rural Economic Policy Program

Panelist for RSS Session: "Rural America, Rural Women, and Public Policy."

I would like to begin my comments today by describing the Rural Economic Policy Program. This is a collaborative program of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies and the Ford Foundation. It was initiated by RPR (?) at the Ford Foundation to stimulate more policy research and public awareness about the problems and opportunities confronting rural economies. Currently the program has three areas of emphasis: (1) Demographic studies related to poverty and labor markets; (2) Economics and industrial development; and (3) Public and private sector development strategies.

The staff of the Rural Economic Policy Program recommend grant proposals for funding to the Ford Foundation. But we are also involved in prodding academics to do more policy-relevant research and trying to entice some urban- and national-oriented researchers to address rural problems. To date, we have held two research competitions and we will be sponsoring a dissertation fellowship program beginning the fall of 1987. The REPP has also sponsored meetings that brought together community activities and scholars and policy-makers to discuss their common concerns. And, we will have a publications program in conjunction with the Aspen Institute. The remainder of my comments will focus on the topic of "Economic Trends and Public Policy in Rural Areas."

The rural economy is in critical shape across America -- as everyone knows. During the 1970s, we saw the simultaneous

effects of high prices for agricultural products and energy and growing rural industrialization, more specifically, the dominance of low wage, low skill manufacturing employment. Many hailed the industrialization of rural America as part of a rural renaissance. By the end of the 1970s, more than 3.5 million people had moved out of urban areas into rural communities. Some were taking advantage of new coal and other energy-related jobs, some were taking advantage of the growth in manufacturing employment, others were retiring. But, it appears that most were simply looking for a better place to live and raise their families, places that were better than the cities they left behind.

Martin county, Kentucky, is a rural county that directly felt this turnaround - mostly through return migration. When I talked to a classroom of seniors in the high school last winter, all but a handful had moved back as youngsters to their parents' home community, thanks to new coal jobs.

We saw more than job and population growth in the 1970s. We also saw real solid improvements in living conditions. Health, housing and educational attainment improved dramatically, due in part to better public programs, and to the effects of transportation and communication (highways and TVs). But also, in part I think, due to the positive effect of those low wage manufacturing industries. The jobs are awful. I took visitors from New York to see two typical plants in rural Kentucky and their debate eventually centered on which was worse. One was a computer company where women, mostly young women, sit in front of green screens all day punching in the data from your VISA and

Mastercard charges, or the Federal Express data that traces your one day service. At the other extreme, are the women who spend all day on a noisy shop floor packing plastic lids in cardboard boxes.

But, these companies and the jobs they offer are important to women in rural Kentucky. The plant managers believe their workers support families that include male household heads but not male workers. The turnover among workers is high and it looks like the difficulty of working out child care arrangements looms as a key reason. In both plants, women come and then stop for a while and then come back to work again.

The jobs -- as the New York visitors noted -- are awful jobs. But they permit household to hang on, to have income, and to stay in rural areas. Farm households depend on off farm income and these plants have provided that opportunity. But, these jobs, like the jobs in coal, timber and agriculture across rural America, are in jeopardy. We all know that the growing internationalization of the economy, and its long arm reaching into rural areas, has been hard on rural communities. Kentucky has lost over 20,000 manufacturing jobs since 1980.

Cities in the Northeast and industrial Midwest were hard hit by economic restructuring, but they recovered. The sagas of the automobile and steel industries are familiar to each of us. But these cities had more diversity in their industrial structures, more physical and social infrastructure, and more human capital than do rural communities.

Rural jobs are more sensitive to international trade -- an advantage in the 1970s when exports were up -- but devastating in

the 1980s. And, most analysts see the jobs lost in agriculture, mining, timber, and rural manufacturing as permanently lost. In other words, this is not a bust in a boom/bust cycle. Kentucky has lost 15,000 coal mining jobs since 1982, and coal company managers are quick to tell you those jobs are gone forever. They can produce a lot more coal with a lot fewer miners, and their productivity gains will continue -- perhaps less dramatically -- into the future.

Between 1979 and 1985 metropolitan employment grew three times as fast as rural employment. The unemployment and poverty rates are still higher in rural than urban areas. And the prognosis is not good for future job growth in rural areas. Fully 86 percent of all new jobs created over the next 15 years are expected to be in cities.

So what are rural households to do? And what can social scientists do to help formulate public policies and programs that can manage to fly in this political climate? I don't have answers, but I can tell you something about the kinds of questions that are being asked by legislators on the Hill, staff in the White House, and people in government offices. And, I can tell you something about what some community groups are trying to accomplish.

First, a lot of people are leaving rural areas. Last year, over 900,000 people left rural areas nationwide, the largest out-migration since World War II. I mentioned Martin county earlier, and it is a good example of this phenomenon. The high school seniors I mentioned are planning on leaving the coal fields -- going back to Columbus after college, or moving to

Lexington where there are more opportunities. The county's only licensed electrician came into the local bank for a loan to finance his family's move to Florida. He didn't have a job waiting there, but he was sure opportunities would have to be better. Two women who work as tellers in this same bank recently gave notice because their husbands' couldn't find work. One is going back to Columbus, the other to Florida. Families I interviewed in Harlan county, Kentucky, are going to Atlanta, Georgia, and Knoxville, Tennessee; while in Letcher County they are going to Michigan and to Florida.

The results of my interviews correspond with studies by MDC (?) and the Southern Regional Growth Policies Board -- people are moving to where employment is growing and that's in Southern cities. As the MDC points out, this out-migration from rural areas is creating two Souths. A more prosperous urban South and a declining rural South where poor Appalachian mountaineers and poor Black tenant farmers remain because they don't have the education and skills to work in cities nor the resources to move there.

But this out-migration represents an absence of rural policy, and contributes to deeper problems down the road, both for those who leave rural areas and those who stay behind. For years, Ken Deavers at the Economic Research Service (USDA) has been arguing that we need two different kinds of rural policy. We need development policies that open doors to opportunities in places that have an economic niche or an advantageous location. In eastern Kentucky, the London/Corbin area represents a classical growth center on a major north-south highway that reaches a huge

segment of the American market.

On the other hand, as boring and unglamorous as it may appear, we need welfare reform. And, more critically, we need basic education and vocational training programs that can improve the human capital of those in the rural places that have neither an economic niche nor an advantageous location. It is hard to imagine just how far behind in basic education are rural Southerners. For example, while 69 percent of all Americans are high school graduates, Liz Morrissey found that only 43 percent of rural Southerners have completed high school. This is in an era when jobs depend on ever greater levels of educational attainment.

Federal legislators are looking for information about what works, and William Pizzano, chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission, has indicated that this is also what the White House Rural Development Task Force continues to seek. The Aspen Institute is supporting evaluations of various programs and encouraging development practitioners to reflect on their experiences with Community Development Block Grants, UDAG (?), and the Farm and Home Administration. We are also supporting analyses of how current welfare reform proposals will affect the rural poor.

State leaders are very concerned about depressed rural regions and many, at least in speeches, are realizing that the recruitment of new industrial firms will not solve rural employment problems. The Toyota plants want the benefits that come from close proximity to the services that cities offer but they also want and need well educated workers. In this context,

industrial recruitment does not expand the employment opportunities available to rural workers.

Many states are looking at ways to enhance indigenous "entrepreneurial" development. One study supported by the Rural Economic Policy Program concluded that states could do much more to release the local energy that sustains entrepreneurial efforts. In Iowa, during the recession years from 1980 to 1986, 20,000 new businesses were started, many by women, and over 100,000 new jobs created. But these small business people received no government assistance and most that were interviewed during this research indicated they would have welcomed technical assistance.

The most promising development we see at the state level is a growing awareness that education and vocational/technical training are crucial for future growth. Communities that for years, have suffered from the bad schools that inevitably develop from the political manipulation of the school systems, are organizing to improve schools and widen their childrens' horizons. Community groups such as the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, the Coal Employment Project, the Center for Rural Affairs, the Center for Self-Help and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) are developing new strategies to meet the challenge of the changing rural economy.

But these community groups and policy-makers at all levels need solid research and evaluation on what works. Rural community leaders also need the involvement of researchers to help inform their action strategies, to help them manage change,

and to help ensure that we don't have another People Left Behind. Your role is critical in this last task, to help move the general public and policy-makers to act now before it is too late for rural America.

The Rural Economic Policy Program was started to help rural sociologists and others in the research and economic development community to contribute to the development of more effective rural economic policies.