



## An America without Farmers?

By Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, Prairie Writers Circle

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*Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.* -- Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia"

In 1801, when Jefferson became president, 95 percent of Americans essentially made their full-time living from agriculture. By the turn of the 20th century, it was 45 percent, and by the turn of the 21st less than 2 percent.

In 1993, the Census Bureau stopped counting the number of Americans who live on farms.

"Farm residence," it reported, "is no longer a reliable indication of whether or not someone is involved in farming. ... The cost of collecting and publishing statistics on farm residents and farmers in separate reports could no longer be justified."

Over the past two centuries, the nation became urban, then suburban, and now increasingly exurban. Farmers, especially those who are small-scale, full-time and living on their farms, have become politically and culturally distant to most Americans. We still have agriculture, but it is mostly large-scale agribusiness. There is little Jeffersonian farming, almost no "labor in the earth."

The desertion of the small family farm constitutes the largest population movement in American history. The small-farmer diaspora, here and abroad, partly or wholly underlies other storied American population shifts: the development of cities and suburbs, the settlement of the West, the late 19th and early 20th century European immigrations to the United States, the post-1965 Latin American and Asian ones, the black migration from the rural South to the Northern ghetto, the rise of the Sunbelt, and even the growth of military bases around the country.

The family farm is one of the last homes of old-school American ethnicity and beliefs. In 1993 the Census Bureau found, for example, that farm residents were almost all white, half lived in the Midwest, and their households were 25 percent less likely than nonfarm ones to be headed by a single woman. These differences from the rest of the nation have intensified over the past decade.

Many family farmers encourage their offspring to leave that life, and these perhaps unusually deferential children listen. Why they should move on is obvious. The United States is a nation whose metropolitan areas, despite all their evident problems, can offer better pay and more opportunity than most of its countryside. This imbalance has existed for the nation's entire life. But it was nowhere near as large or visible in, say, 1960; much less 1880 or earlier pioneer periods.

American small farmers are victims of the same impersonal national and international economics that wipe out small banks, railroads, airlines, newspapers and stores here and elsewhere. Farmers, like the others, have responded to continued pressures for large-scale, homogenized production -- in farming's case, high per-acre output. Having only this aim, their success brings about the demise of most of them and their communities. American small farmers now appear to be at the far end of a vast economic shift that gives every promise of eliminating them.

A momentous transition looms. Although the United States and other First World nations have been heading toward it since at least the late 18th century, no nation of even modest size has ever explicitly chosen to navigate it. No one knows the full implications of a farmerless America -- or a farmerless France or Japan.

Are there really the links Jefferson suggests between farming and virtue? Does a domestic population working the soil ensure a nation's social and physical health? What are the international and security consequences of the near-total disappearance of the farmer? What happens when the world's most powerful country no longer has those who work their own land?

These are at least nation-scale questions, ones whose answers turn the hinges of history. They obsess many farmers, their political representatives and their intellectual interpreters in this country and abroad. The suburban-exurban America hardly notices. In its Information Age world, the farmer has mostly been gone for generations.

*Deborah and Frank Popper are authors of 'The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust' and 'The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method.' Deborah Popper teaches at the College of Staten Island-City University of New York. Frank Popper teaches at Rutgers University. Both are members of the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle, Salina, Kan.*

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