Country matters
John Perry Barlow;Galbraith, John Kenneth;Ketchum, Richard M;Logsdon, Gene;et al
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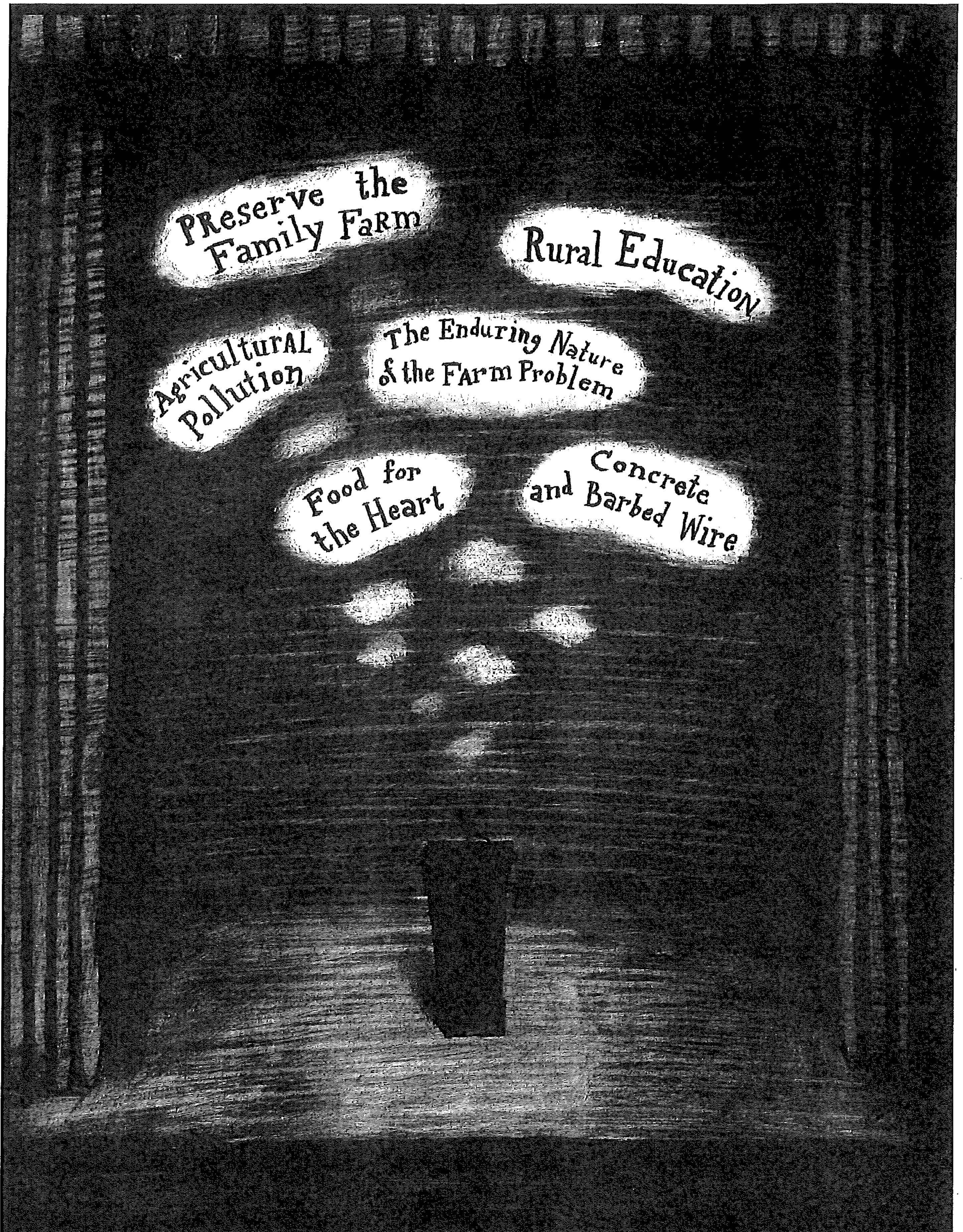

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COUNTRY MATTERS

An informal forum on the future of rural America

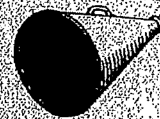
Participants: John Perry Barlow, John Kenneth Galbraith,

Richard M. Ketchum, Gene Logsdon, Bill McKibben, and Eric Schlosser

Describing the advent of the industrial age at the end of the nineteenth century, the historian Richard Hofstader wrote, "The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city." But as the twentieth century comes to a close (remember, it doesn't officially end until 2001), the United States is in many respects moving back to the country.

After decades of population decline, rural counties in the first half of the 1990's grew by 5.9 percent, or some three million people. That's the fastest rate in two decades—and all signs suggest that the rate is only accelerating. Some 20 percent of Americans now live in rural and small-town America, but, unlike in the past, much of that population is not involved with farming. Technological advances have allowed increasing numbers of businesspeople to do their jobs remotely, via cell phones and e-mail and faxes; economic prosperity has led to the rapid growth of exurban housing developments; baby boomers are now beginning to retire in significant numbers and are leaving big cities (if not their urban ways) behind; and young people born and raised in the country are opting to stay in regions they would have gladly fled only a decade ago.

This is not to say that all is well in the country. In many places it most decidedly is not. Small-scale farming as a way of life is seriously endangered. Some rural areas seem to have been passed over entirely by the new economy. Whole counties, especially in the Midwest, are emptying out, others are being gobbled up by suburban sprawl. But whether what's happening to rural America is good or bad, there's no doubt that big changes are instore. Cultures will clash. Landscapes will look different.



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Illustrations by John Dykes II

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Traditional occupations will wither, and new ones will emerge; economic resentments will arise and linger. And, if current trends continue, the nation's political center of gravity will move away from urban centers toward the country. As the demographics of the nation change, in due time so will its political concerns and representatives, in favor of the new country dwellers—that is, if the terms "urban" and "rural" even retain their current significance.

This election year, then, seems a particularly fitting time to pause and wonder what the future of the American countryside might, or should, be. What are the most important issues facing rural America today? What do we want from the country? What do we want *for* the country? We asked a variety of writers and public figures to ponder these open-ended questions and then to tell us, briefly and idiosyncratically, what matters most to them. This is by no means a comprehensive forum (there is no mention, for example, of urban sprawl, the social isolation of women in the country, genetically modified crops, forest fragmentation, rural Internet hookups, or wildfire management, to name but a few of the important issues not addressed), but our hope is that as you contemplate what is and is not said here, you'll be moved to analyze your own thoughts and feelings about the future of rural America—and your own role in that future.

RURAL EDUCATION
By Bill McKibben

RURAL AMERICA is so vast and diverse—does your area specialize in food, fiber, or vacations?—that it's sometimes hard to conceive of it as a whole. But by definition rural areas aren't thickly settled, and that means that in most places education can be an enormous challenge. With few people per square mile, the economic urge to consolidate schools is usually overwhelming—but that can kill off small communities, and it means all too often that our kids are being educated to pass tests and leave home rather than to stay and build. I know plenty of children in my town, which is 70 percent designated wilderness, who graduate from high school never having spent a night outdoors in their life; that is an educational failure so enormous it's hard to even conceive. Without competition of any kind, these isolated consolidated schools have little incentive to succeed. Though we often look to the inner cities for examples of educational poverty, in some ways urban areas have it easier: where there are enough children to fill them, magnet schools, charter schools, private schools can offer parents some real diversity. Rural areas need to start figuring ways to use different systems, be they vouchers or charters or home-schooling networks or a return to one-room schoolhouses, to take back the process of educating their children. As that happens, we'll be laying the foundation for a real rural renaissance.

Bill McKibben is the author of The End of Nature *(1989) and other books about the environment. He lives in the Adirondack mountains, in upstate New York.*

PRESERVE THE FAMILY FARM
By Richard M. Ketchum

IF I WERE GRANTED one wish for America's countryside, it would be that each of you would do everything in your power to preserve what remains of our family farms. It is easy to be a sentimentalist about this, but the loss of these farms means much more than the vanishing of a treasured memory. For more than three centuries, the self-sufficient family farm was the bedrock of American life. Among its many contributions was permanence—the passing of land from one generation to the next, land that was nurtured by people who knew that land requires love and care and, given these, will return its bounties to the caregiver many times over.

So few Americans now have a direct tie to the soil that is the nation's lifeblood.

The permanence of these farms had a great deal to do with a family's values and sense of responsibility, and they brought stability to the communities of which they were a part. Farms had a complex, vibrant support system—seed and grain merchants, machinery and equipment dealers, insurance agents, bankers, legislators—every part of which was concerned with the productivity and well-being of local farms and the families that tended them.

One of the saddest effects of the family farm's decline is that so few Americans now have a direct tie to the soil that is the nation's lifeblood. What do most young people know about the source of their food, beyond the packages they see on supermarket shelves? The priceless

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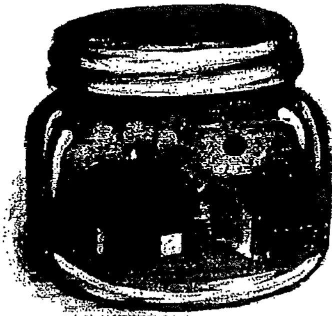
capital that nature provides—what former Senator Gaylord Nelson, who initiated Earth Day, calls our "resource base"—is squandered with the paving over of each family farm, and with it goes the source of our fresh food and the relationship of our society to the natural world.



Regrettably, the prime agricultural land that farmers have depended on and worked so painstakingly is a developer's dream—flat or gently sloping, with no trees to cut, no rocks to move. All you have to do is bring in the backhoe and—*Presto!*—it's gone, smothered with concrete and the hideous sprawl of convenience stores, gas stations, and tract houses.

But developers don't deserve all the blame. Much belongs to the nation's cheap-food policy, which has meant, for instance, that the dairy farmer receives the same amount today for milk that he was paid in 1978. How many other suppliers have been forced to sell their product for the same price for the past twenty-two years? Small wonder that no incentive exists for sons and grandsons to take over the farm—and that one of these days the milk you drink and the food you eat will come from Mexico or New Zealand or China.

Much of the blame for what has happened goes to Americans generally, who—from the beginning—have regarded land as a commodity to be bought cheap and sold dear. The result is a fatal flaw in the system: we lack the planning and the foresight that would have clustered homes, stores, offices, and services in urban neighborhoods and would have preserved outlying farmland, in perpetuity, for future generations.

What's to be done? Think about it. You can help if you will.

Richard M. Ketchum founded Country Journal *in 1974, with William Blair. He lives in Vermont.*

AGRICULTURAL POLLUTION
By Gene Logsdon

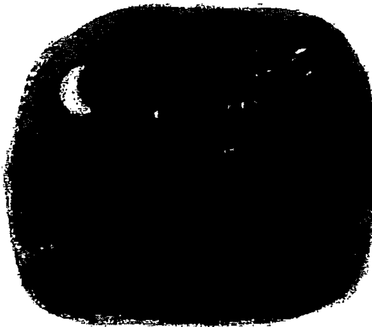
EVER SINCE Richard Nixon admitted that he did not know what a soybean looked like, I've realized that rural America was in trouble. Society as a whole is agriculturally illiterate. I wonder if Mr. Bush or Mr. Gore knows what a soybean looks like.

My point is not to belittle any presidential candidate. We are all ignorant on most subjects. But because of their lack of knowledge about rural life, politicians rely on "farm experts" for advice, and too often these experts are not representative of rural people but of the agribusiness oligarchy, for whom the countryside is just an opportunity to make money. When the oligarchy tells a governor or a president that confinement animal factories are good for the economy, for example, and that farmers support them, the politicians take that opinion to be the voice of the country people.

It's not true. If there's anything I know for sure, it's that most country people who have had to deal with animal factories, including at least half of all commercial farmers, do not support them—and are, in fact, adamantly opposed to them. These factories do great environmental harm, fill the air during low-pressure weather systems with unimaginably foul odors, and lower property values for miles around. And because of subsidies and legal loopholes, they compete unfairly with family farmers.

I woke up one night during a warm spell this past February because a fly was trying to crawl in my mouth. When I switched on the light, I could see that my house was full of flies. Neither we, nor any of our neighbors, had ever seen flies like this, not even in August. Scientific investigation eventually verified what we all knew intuitively: that these flies were coming from Buckeye Egg, one of the largest egg factories in the world, five miles away, in Marseilles, Ohio.

The output of manure from Buckeye's millions and millions of hens is equal to or greater than that of all the people in the entire Cleveland metropolitan area—but Buckeye does not have to install the kind of sanitary sewer systems that even villages must do. Nor does Buckeye have to follow the same pollution laws that other industries do. It is not subject to Ohio air pollution regulations at all. Why? Because it can legally claim that its operation is a "farm."



Buckeye Egg is but one of many problem polluters in the animal-factory industry. Almost every region of the country has its horror stories to tell. The agribusiness oligarchy says we have to put up with these factories because this is "modern" farming. Baloney. There are practical, commercially viable alternatives. Not long ago, when Sweden legislated the end of most kinds of confinement hog and poultry operations, its farmers quickly turned to a refinement of the traditional manure-handling system, which they call the deep-bedding sys-

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tem. Instead of using water (or nothing at all) as a carrier for manure, the way the factories do, deep-bedding systems use straw, corn stalks, and other similar material to soak up and stabilize the manure. Many family farms in the United States are adapting this system and report satisfaction with it. There are negligible odors, no air or water pollution, no fly infestations, much less need for continuous antibiotic use, and the scale of operation can still be large enough for a farmer to make a living.

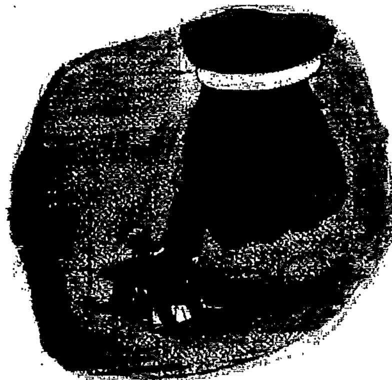
I caution everybody against thinking that this is only a problem in rural areas, where voter density is low. Country problems have a way of becoming city problems. And you don't know what an angry voter looks like until you see an urban homemaker, Democrat or Republican, with a house full of animal-factory flies.

Gene Logsdon is an active livestock farmer and gardener who has written twenty books, including The Contrary Gardener *(1994),* You Can Go Home Again *(1998), and* Good Spirits *(1999). He lives on a farm in Ohio.*

THE ENDURING NATURE OF THE FARM PROBLEM

By John Kenneth Galbraith

INDUSTRIAL CORPORATIONS and those engaged in technology, entertainment, and most else have control of their production and, in substantial measure, their prices. Those who depend on a farm for their living, however, have no control over production. There are far too many producers providing the same thing, which eliminates any possibility of control of prices. This is the enduring nature of what is called "the farm problem." It was partly solved many years ago by instituting some control over farm production and thus prices—that was the great initial step of Roosevelt and Wallace's Triple A (Agricultural Adjustment Administration). A few years ago, because of ideological motivations, such controls were abandoned. Now we have a new farm problem, especially for small or, as they are called and celebrated, family farmers. In fact, the problem is not new, and the solution—to go back to what we had before—is not either. It's as simple as that.



John Kenneth Galbraith is the Paul M. Warburg Professor of Economics Emeritus at Harvard University.

CONCRETE & BARBED WIRE

By Eric Schlosser

WHEN YOU THINK about rural America, certain images come to mind: dirt roads, old barns, white picket fences, sofas on the front porch, tractors rolling through endless rows of corn. You don't think about gun towers or "death-wire electrified fences." And yet over the past two decades the greatest prison-building boom in history has swept through the American countryside. Nearly two million Americans are now behind bars in the United States, most of them in newly constructed rural prisons and jails. From California's Central Valley to the North Country of New York, prisons have become a cornerstone of economic development for struggling farm communities. The impact of this on rural life is hard to overstate. America now has far more prisoners than full-time farmers.

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For the residents of a small town where the farm income and population have been declining for years, where shops on the main street stand empty, where young people feel they have little choice but to move away after graduation, a new prison often seems like a good thing. Prisons are labor-intensive, environmentally friendly, and recession-proof. The construction of a prison brings millions of dollars in direct investment, while its operation represents a steady stream of annual income. Unlike most workers in small towns, corrections officers usually receive good salaries, medical benefits, and a pension. For men and women with a high school education, a job in corrections can provide a solid, middle-class life. Prisons have lately become a form of rural economic development, stabilizing communities throughout the country. But this new prosperity has its costs.

The difference between a rural economy based on agriculture and one based on prisons could hardly be more stark. The vast majority of America's inmates are impoverished, non-violent offenders with a history of substance abuse. Most are African-American or Latino. Most of America's corrections officers are white. Today, the rural poor are being paid to stand guard over the urban poor. No other nation relies

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mainly on its prisons to deal with the issues of poverty and drug abuse; America's racial and social conflicts are now being displaced to the countryside and resolved through brute force. A landscape that long symbolized freedom and self-reliance has been turned into a setting for punishment, domination, and control. It is safe to say that Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, apostles of a democracy that springs from the soil, would be appalled.

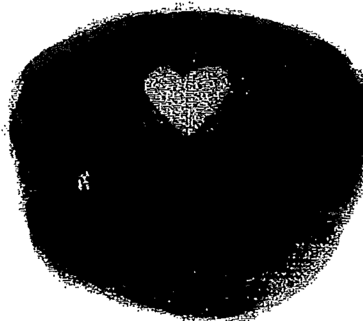
Eric Schlosser is a correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly. *He is working on a book called* The Prison-Industrial Complex.

FOOD FOR THE HEART
By John Perry Barlow

WE ALWAYS LIVED on the land, my family. One can search both my lines back to the genealogical horizon (which, thanks to Mormon genealogy, extends to the Norman Invasion) and find nothing but soldiers of the soil. Farmers, stockgrowers, orchard men. Country folks. Hicks. Occasional lords, many peasants.

My great great uncle came into Wyoming in the 1870s and stuck around to settle the area. In 1905 his nephew-in-law, my grandfather, bought a place near the headwaters of the New Fork River which grew into the Bar Cross Ranch.

I grew up on the Bar Cross surrounded by the odd assortment of social misfits and romantics that staffed such enterprises back then. It was a big ranch and labor-intensive, so at any time there were ten or fifteen people in the little village that raised me.



I little appreciated the bounties of my circumstance. I took for granted the beauty of the land and the often heroic efforts of my elders to wrench a living from this wild place. I had only the dimmest sense of how marvelous these people were, how gifted I was to hear their stories or absorb into myself their codes of interdependence, plain honesty, and their general, though nearly invisible, kind of love.

I never had any interest in growing up to be a rancher myself. As soon as I could wrench free, I did. It was only by accident that I later became a rancher. I was headed to California to become a songwriter, in 1971, when I passed through the ranch and found things in a mess. My father had been lamed by a stroke. My mother was trying to run the place from the office. It wasn't right, and I agreed to stick around long enough to put things in order and get the place sold. I figured it would take me six months. I stayed there seventeen years.

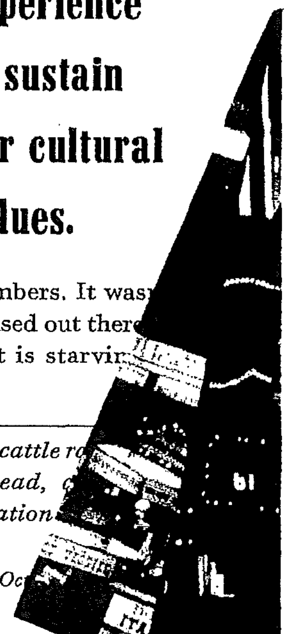
I loved providing a sanctuary for the kind of folks who had brought me up. But I particularly loved hiring green Generican kids and giving them their first, and generally only, opportunity to work in the physical world. I loved introducing them to the values that were embedded in agriculture and to a culture that was profoundly connected to the land and the weather.

Of course, it couldn't last. With the greatest reluctance, I recognized that only selling off my birthright would spare it the indignity of eventually being seized by some remorseless tentacle of the Farm Credit System and being hawked on the courthouse steps. So, in June of 1988, after eighty-three years in the New Fork Valley and at least nine hundred years in agriculture, my family left the land.

However large this moment seemed to me, there was nothing unusual about it. Indeed, in America, we were among the last to leave. Millions were exiled before me. Family agriculture, from which most of humanity has drawn its cultural values since the dawn of memory, is no longer a common enough experience to sustain us.

Family agriculture is no longer a common enough experience to sustain our cultural values.

I dearly wish there were still places like the Bar Cross where a suburban kid could spend his summers getting his hands on something real. Because I think that in country values and in community there are some essential nutrients to the human spirit that we have never tried to live without in such numbers. It was food for the body alone that was being raised out ther was food for the heart. And the heart is starvi America.



John Perry Barlow is a retired Wyoming cattle r former songwriter for the Grateful Dead, founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation

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