

Agriculture and Rural Life

Chapter Three: Changes in Rural Life


When the first federal census was taken in 1790, more than 90 percent of all Americans were farmers, and Pennsylvania led the nation in food production. Agriculture was far and away the state's leading industry and major employer. The overwhelming majority of Pennsylvanians lived on farms.

Revolutionary changes in the 1800s transformed the lives of the nation's farm families, as the industrial revolution shifted population, wealth, and power to the cities. In the 1850s, Horace Greeley exhorted young men to go west in search of their fortunes on the agricultural frontier, but national attention and the American dream increasingly shifted to the city.

In the late nineteenth century, a second great wave of immigrants pouring into the nation headed to cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, to the anthracite and bituminous coal fields of eastern and western Pennsylvania, and to the American West, where the Homestead Act of 1862, legislation modeled in part upon the Pennsylvania farm, attracted more than nine million farmers who staked their claims in the decades that followed the Civil War.

Before the Civil War, farming communities had enjoyed living standards, amenities, and even cultural institutions on a par with those found in cities. But rapid urbanization and decreasing economic opportunities in rural regions created a huge gap between the city and the countryside, and the celebrated yeoman farmer of the American popular imagination gave way to the country "hick." Farm publications sponsored essay contests on how to keep rural youth on the farm, but they could not stem the flood of farm-to-city migration. Young women especially left the country for the excitement and the jobs to be found in the cities. For many youths fleeing the farm, even a ten-hour-a-day factory job seemed an attractive alternative to the incessant labor of farming.



Enlarge 
Women working in the corn harvest, Berks County, PA, circa 1890.


Why did young women migrate more frequently than their brothers? Rural life reformers blamed the drudgery and isolation of farm life. Isolation was an experience more common in the West than in Pennsylvania, where women continued to cultivate a rich range of social contacts, helped along in due time by the automobile. The industrialization of dairy and poultry production, work long done by women, coupled with the opening of non-farm occupations like teaching and factory work, propelled young women cityward.

Rural women also contributed to community building through activities in the Grange, the church, and benevolent organizations. In 1914, [Flora Black](#) organized the Society of Farm Women, a group that provided them a new platform to celebrate the dignity of farming and the value farm women's contributions to the Commonwealth.


To make matters still worse, the farm families who stayed behind faced decade after decade of depressed prices, tight money, and limited opportunities. Unable to compete with the cheap corn, wheat, and livestock from the American West that flooded eastern markets, Pennsylvania farmers adjusted their production. Truck and dairy farmers close to cities provided fresh produce, milk, and eggs. And in the aftermath of the Civil War, Pennsylvania farmers organized to force private enterprises to treat them fairly and to lobby state government to provide essential public services and protect them from predatory businesses.

One prominent farm organization was the Patrons of Husbandry (also known as the [Grange](#)), a national fraternal association that gave American farm men and women a common voice. Farmers in Lycoming County organized [Eagle Grange # 1](#), the state's first local grange in 1871. Two years later, Commonwealth farmers organized the Pennsylvania State Grange. In the decades that followed the State Grange set up cooperative banks and stores that gave farmers greater equality in the marketplace, and pushed through state legislation for better schools and for the protection of consumers and farmers. Local grange halls became important social centers of rural life, and the Pennsylvania Grange's annual [Williams Grove](#) picnic drew farm families and manufacturers of farm machinery from throughout the eastern United States and the nation.



Enlarge 
Rural Free Delivery Stamp, 1996.


By the late 1800s, most Pennsylvania rural communities were connected to, or located near, a rail line. Rural families flocked to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Roads were still mostly dirt, and limited the range of travel of rural people. On a local level, Pennsylvania farm families engaged in endless visiting, and shared work among rural neighbors and relatives.

Rural people had limited access, however, to the  of information and goods found in cities and larger towns. Wanting the same advantages, Commonwealth farmers joined the national campaign for mail delivery to rural residences, which succeeded in the 1890s when United States Postmaster General John Wanamaker, the famous Philadelphia department store owner, introduced [Rural Free Delivery](#) of mails and Parcel Post.

Both of these innovations made print media and goods much cheaper to deliver and thus helped integrate rural people into the emerging national consumer culture.

Linked into the emerging national industrial system, American farmers became a dynamic and growing market for manufactured goods, farm equipment, and the magazines and journals that appealed to their interests and marketed to their needs. First published in 1882 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania by [Dietrick Lamade](#), the *Williamsport Grit* would go on to become the nation's best-selling family weekly



Enlarge 
The Bakken sod house, Milton, North Dakota, 1861.



Enlarge 
Sharples Separator Company advertisement, Program for the 1907 Pennsylvania...

magazine, bringing American farmers and rural communities the "good news."

The First World War brought great changes to the Pennsylvania countryside. Labor shortages accelerated the mechanization of agriculture, especially through the purchase of gasoline trucks and tractors. In 1917, the State Department of Agriculture staged the first [Pennsylvania Farm Show](#), a yearly celebration of Pennsylvania agriculture at which farmers could show off their crops and livestock, learn about the latest scientific breakthroughs, and look at the new models of farm machinery.

For urban Americans, the 1920s was a decade of great prosperity, technological innovation, and cultural change. Affordable automobiles were making Americans a more mobile people at the same time that electricity increased worker productivity and brought new appliances into American homes. These changes, however, only increased the gap between urban and rural Pennsylvanians, a majority of whom lived without electricity on dirt roads.

The Great Depression hit American farmers hard. But it also marked another great turning point in the improvement of life for Commonwealth farmers, the arrival of the paved road and rural electrification campaigns that they had been pushing for decades. State and New Deal funding poured billions of dollars into work relief programs nationwide, and funded the construction of courthouses and bridges, airports and post offices, schools and public parks.

On July 23, 1931, Governor Gifford Pinchot broke ground for the [First Pinchot Road](#), and inaugurated a rural road improvement program that paved 1,500 miles in its first year, and within the decade had brought thousands of farmers out of the mud. During his first term as governor in the early 1920s, Pinchot had also commissioned a visionary program to provide electricity to the state's farmers.

Held up in the 1920s by the powerful state public utilities industry, [Rural electrification](#) became a reality in May, 1937, when the Saegerstown substation sent electricity to ninety-two farm families in Crawford County. It was not until 1941, however, that the ["Battle of the Post Holes"](#) finally convinced the Pennsylvania utilities industry not to build lines without cooperative permission. Rural electrification also revolutionized the lives of farm women and men by reducing the physical demands of farm work, if not the amount.

In the second half of the twentieth century, overproduction and rising costs drove still more Pennsylvania farmers out of business. The number of state dairy farms, for example, plummeted 58 percent between 1982 and 2002. State farming was also losing acreage to accelerating suburban sprawl, which continues to bulldoze and pave over some of the richest and most productive agricultural lands in the world.

Sprawl also put suburbanites in conflict with the farmers whose communities they colonized. The newcomers complained about the smell of their fertilizer and livestock, and groused about farm machinery slowing traffic on already overcrowded roads. On the other hand, a renewed appreciation of the economic and cultural value of the family farm led to renewed efforts to preserve Pennsylvania's farms and the ways of life of their residents.

[Previous Chapter](#) | [Next Chapter](#)

[Normal](#) | [Printer-Friendly](#)

