

...West of 98

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 Rural author and advocate Wendell Berry writes of the troubling landscape of rural Kentucky, where a host of once-thriving small towns are now all either dead or dying. The same phenomenon has played out all over America.

I'm an optimist about the potential of rural America, but I'm not a Pollyanna who spreads sunshine and lollipops regardless of facts and reality. Sincere optimism requires honesty. It requires you to tackle the difficult topics and problems head-on, rather than pretend they don't exist. The ostrich may put its head in the sand, but reality doesn't cease to exist while he's hiding out. Several years back, the great Americana songwriter James McMurtry (son of famed author Larry McMurtry) wrote a sobering, powerful song called "We Can't Make It Here," which outlined the plight of American workers and small towns across the country. The song is full of vividly depressing imagery, but there's a particular verse that always sits with me:

Or a cotton gin out on the great high plains

That's done closed down, along with the school

And the hospital, and the swimming pool.

I'll link the song in the version of this essay that appears on my Substack. Too many rural communities identify with parts or maybe even all of that lyric.

I'm not here to dwell on it. I'm here to acknowledge it and generate ideas to fix it. McMurtry sings of a phenomenon that has played out simultaneously with other postwar changes to the American economy that we have discussed. Business has consolidated, from utility and energy companies to manufacturing and retail. This is partly cyclical. It is partly inevitable. Not all of it is bad, but I do think it is vital to acknowledge these economic changes and their effects on our communities and small business across America. Policymakers and economic trends have similarly impacted rural America through agriculture producers. Earl Butz served as United States Secretary of Agriculture from 1971 to 1976. During his tenure, in a phrase that has haunted the last half-century of American agriculture, he exhorted and practically ordered American farmers to "get big or get out!" Butz and his cohorts charted a course in agricultural that required just that. Many farmers got out of the business. Those who remained were either forced to get bigger or find ways to survive.

As a result of these trends, all of us have become more dependent on larger companies and longer supply chains for both the necessities and luxuries of life. In the name of efficiency



Sweet Tweet! Robert Lee Elementary announced the following students as their recent Sweet Tweet winners: Aferdite Berisha, Milo Rackley, Jaxson South, Jewel Pitcock, Jada Cruz, Kynlee McCown, Juliana Holguin, Jayla Hernandez, and Gabriel Castillo.

and "convenience," we're all part of and reliant on a logistical labyrinth. We take for granted that every item we want or need is always readily available. If you have Amazon Prime, even the most specific needs can be satisfied with free two-day shipping!

And yet, 2021. A pandemic disrupted worldwide manufacturing in 2020. The immediate impacts were felt in some ways, particularly with perishable goods. Shortages of non-perishable goods did not

appear until inventories of those goods or their component parts were depleted. If you're trying to buy construction materials, a new vehicle, a child's Christmas present, or just about anything else, you are all too familiar with this ongoing supply chain disaster.

It was easy to take for granted the wonders of an efficiency-driven supply chain. We assumed that every item would be available in perpetuity. In the last two years, we have learned that it is a double-edged sword. There are

perils to a focus on efficiency and specialization that leads to dependence on others. Rural America cannot fix all these problems on our own. But to restore our local ecosystems, we must find ways to improve our local sufficiency and independence.

James Decker is the Mayor of Stamford, Texas and the creator of the West of 98 website and podcast. Contact James and subscribe to these essays at westof98.substack.com and subscribe to West of 98 wherever podcasts are found.



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Shelli Ogburn, Administrator