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Book review

Author sensitive to rural life

By George Madden

The Social Cost of Space in the Yonland by Carl F. Kraenzel. Big Sky Books, Montana State University Press, Bozeman, Montana. (137 pp., \$5.75)

The people who speak most glowingly about the virtues of rural life are mostly those who don't live there. They live in urban areas or, at best, are recent transplants from the city to the country. But modern man likes to romanticize the pleasures and advantages of the pastoral life even as he creates the conditions that destroy it. He is rarely willing to take an honest look at the situation much less sacrifice any part of his own personal interests in an effort to preserve that way of life about which he is so nostalgic.

Not so with Carl Kraenzel whose book **The Social Cost of Space in the Yonland** has been published recently. Kraenzel was (he died just a few months ago) a modern man in the sense that he was a social scientist (rural sociology) and a scholar but he retained his love for the rural life he had known as a North Dakota farmboy. He was aware that one pays a penalty for living in sparsely populated areas, but he was convinced the penalty was neither fair nor absolutely necessary. He therefore set out to describe these penalties (social cost) in some detail, explain the causes of them, and propose ways of ameliorating them.

His language sometimes reflects sadness and a touch of bitterness. For example, the book is dedicated to the residents of the Yonland especially farm and ranch people, "whose expertise, efficient use of capital, and abundant production have brought them low income, declining communities, inadequate social services, and a loss of a way of life. Urban Americans need not wait to see what happens when automation and technology get the upper hand."

The Yonland (a term he invented) is composed of the non-urban parts of the 10 states which have the Great Plains as a common bond between them (North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana) plus four intermountain states (Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Arizona). This area contains just over one-half (50.6 percent) of the area of the 48 adjacent states, but has only 13 percent of the population. The more urban areas within the Yonland (e.g. Denver, Salt Lake City, Billings, etc.) are referred to as the Sutland. The Sutland naturally receives scant attention in the book because social cost is not as much of a factor there as in the Yonland.

Social costs are that collection of disadvantages associated with rural life including: lower income, reduced career opportunities, higher prices for goods, social services that are both fewer in number and generally lower in quality, etc. Some social costs are quite direct and can be calculated with some precision, e.g. one can make direct comparison of prices for manufacturer goods in urban and rural areas. As a general rule such prices will be higher in rural areas and this provides a direct measure of social costs in that instance. Other social costs are more subtle and therefore difficult if not impossible to calculate. A good example of these more subtle social costs is provided by the author's account of a visit he paid to a remote ranch in eastern Montana where a former student lived with his parents. Kraenzel discovered that the mother was suffering with terminal cancer "perhaps the result of late detection." If the late detection actually occurred (we can't be sure from the account) and if the cause of late detection was the fact that quality medical care was not readily available (the nearest town was 100 miles away and had a population of only 300) then late detection was a social cost to the mother and the family but not a cost one would be willing to assign a dollar value to.

In a chapter on education the author makes the point that small rural schools are penalized for their smallness because state formulas for the funding of such schools do not make up for the increased per student cost of education in small schools as compared to large urban schools. The argument is familiar but a somewhat new twist is provided in a section on the effect of pro-urban funding formulas on school organization. Using Montana as an example he shows that the 8-4 pattern of school organization is common in rural areas while the 6-3-3 pattern is more typical of urban schools. He points out that (at the time of his writing) the state formula allocated \$144 per student more for 7th and 8th grade students in a 6-3-3 (junior high) pattern than for those in an 8-4 pattern, thus rewarding urban schools and penalizing rural ones. It is perhaps unfortunate that after making this valid point on the inequality of school funding, the author spent the balance of the chapter on bilingual education thus failing to touch on any of the many other problems of rural education. One can be forgiving on this point, however, since the author was a rural sociologist, not a professional educator.

Especially interesting is his analysis of why social costs exist. The causes are not simply geography and demography but additionally and more importantly the operation of the "central place theory" and the rapaciousness of the "agents of capitalism." Central place theory is itself an aspect of our economic system which requires that for the maximizing of profits the

majority of consumers must be located near sources of production i.e. in urban and suburban areas. The people who live in these more densely populated areas (both in the Sutland and elsewhere in the country) thus derive maximum economic benefits in income, career opportunities, social services, etc. Conversely those who live in sparsely populated areas must pay the penalty of lower income, reduced opportunities, and fewer and poorer social services, in other words a lower standard of living. Kraenzel argues that this is injustice. Rural dwellers render valuable services to the total of national life and should not be punished with a lower standard of living!

But the social costs are not purely the results of the blind forces of the economic system but also the greed and avarice of those who operate the system. While he does not produce data on this side of the argument he does employ some of his sharpest comments, e.g. "The capitalist agents _____ have certainly raped the Yonland" or several references to "the exploitation of the Yonland, its residents and its resources, by the non-Yonland capitalist agents and their satraps _____."

Solutions to the problem of the social cost of space are somewhat less clear than the analysis of the causes. Professor Kraenzel seems to feel (and properly so) that there should be equality in the standards of living between urban and rural areas. How this equality is to be achieved is a bit vague—it seems to involve some limits on the activities of the "capitalist agents" although these are not spelled out, some positive programs of federal assistance (we do pour federal money into urban areas don't we?) and, most importantly, cooperative efforts among the

dwellers in Yonland themselves. This last point is one of the most vital in the book. He points out that the rural dwellers are besieged by the greedy forces of outsiders or as he puts it, "The Yonland residents, and their state governments, are at bay with their backs to the wall and fighting off the exploiters." Those of us who live and work in energy rich states can identify especially well with this quote. The people of Montana, for example, have imposed a 30 percent tax on coal extracted from our state as a means of accumulating the resources to offset the social cost of the extraction of our resources. But already the exploiters have mounted a concerted campaign to forbid by federal legislation this wise and humane practice. Clearly the residents of the Yonland had better learn quickly to cooperate together to resist this new wave of activity by the "capitalist and their satraps" because this new wave of exploitation is more serious than ever supported as it is not just by greed but by an admittedly serious national and world energy problem. Kraenzel argues that only through regional cooperatives can we resist. He cites a number of examples, among them the Basin Electric Power Cooperative, the Great Plains Agricultural Council, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and others as models of the eventual salvation of rural life in the area. He closes his provocative book with this sentence, "Only by being 'Blue-eyed Arabs' can the Yonlanders fight for regionalism for a time."

Let us hope time does not run out before rural America can unite to preserve its precious way of life!