



THE BERRY CENTER



Wendell Berry leading team down a hill near Port Royal, Kentucky. Circa 1970. Photograph by James Baker Hall

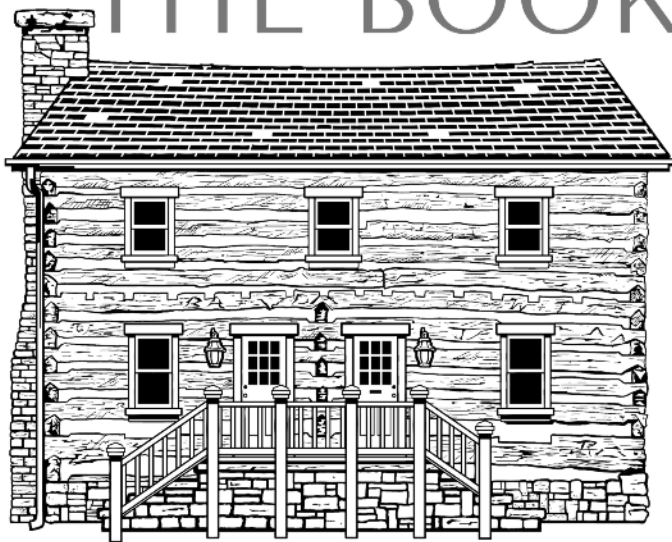
The Berry Center Journal

VOLUME SEVEN ~ 2024

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How Will We Get the People Back?

by MARY BERRY



We have fewer farmers in this country than we have had since 1850, when we had 31 states and 4 territories. The kind of farming and land use that we must have will take people who know how to use land well.

IN THE MID-1990'S it was clear that tobacco, the economic backstop for most of Kentucky's farms, was seriously threatened. To save the approximately 85,000 small farms and the rural communities that they supported became the immediate concern of many people across the commonwealth. What could replace tobacco? I think the more important question should have been, what would replace The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op? My grandfather John Berry, Sr. was a lawyer and a farmer and the principal author of the legislation that made the protection of small tobacco farms

federal law. He thought that the principles of the tobacco program could work for anything farmers could produce.

It has been 20 years since the federal program for burley tobacco ended. Since 2004 we have lost approximately 15,000 farms and generations of farmers. To use my own county of Henry as an example, every small town is dead or dying. (According to the 2022 census, we have 69,425 farms left in Kentucky.) This in spite of many well-intentioned efforts by well-meaning people and a lot of money spent.

We see now the absurdity of the replacement of small acreages of tobacco on diversified farms with the toxic, erosive monocultures of corn and soybeans—a kind of farming that doesn't belong anywhere and certainly not on the rolling landscape of central Kentucky.

We can see the damage, and we can read the data.



What we have lost is the agricultural diversity that an agrarian culture and economy supported. The Henry County that I grew up in and came home to live and farm in after college was a farming county. People lived from farming. Sheep and cattle were raised for market and for their own use. There were gardens and orchards on most of the farms I knew well. Farm culture and farmland passed fairly seamlessly from generation to generation. Families could move from farm tenancy to farm ownership, which means new farmers were moving into the community and into the middle class. Almost every farm in Kentucky had a tobacco quota that belonged to the farm and stayed with the farm if it sold. That meant that the program was fair. The quota couldn't be withheld because of any kind of prejudice. And most importantly, the program, the quota system, protected farmers and farmland from overproduction in order to pay farmers a parity price.

How will we get a population of good farmers back? This idea that we must have good land users, good farmers, to make the healthy changes needed is simply not in the conversation. Certainly, the scientific work to measure soil health, the sequestration of carbon, the nutritional benefits of food, etc. is important. However, if the data doesn't improve farmers' ability to make a living, what good is it? Without people on the land to make use of the data, what good is it? Wes Jackson speaks of the need for the appropriate "eyes to acres ratio" for good land use. We need farmers to receive the data and put it to use for the health of their land.

It is ironic that health was used to defeat the tobacco economy in Kentucky. Wendell and John Berry worked hard during the 1990's to get the health groups who were against tobacco to see that the loss of Kentucky's small tobacco farmers would not improve the health of our people or our land.

They got a good deal of traction with this argument and some assistance with the campaign to help farmers move to food production. We see now the absurdity of the replacement of small acreages of tobacco on diversified farms with the toxic, erosive monocultures of corn and soybeans—a kind of farming that doesn't belong anywhere and certainly not on the rolling landscape of central Kentucky. We can see the damage, and we can read the data: 15,000 farms lost, thousands of farmers lost, record loss of topsoil, the loss of healthy rural cultures, and the loss of the knowledge it takes to take care of the land while living from it. I am not making an argument for tobacco. I am making an argument for the agrarian principles that were inherent in the tobacco program.

The tobacco program provides a model of the kind of thinking that we must use again. How can farmers afford to farm well, and how do we become a culture that will support good farming?

The local food movement, in place for decades, has not changed the culture of industrial agriculture. We have offered farmers two choices: they can be large and industrial or small and entrepreneurial. There is almost nothing in the middle.

Good work begins with an inventory of what one has to work with and learn from. Our 30-year history of trying to save farmers and farmland in Kentucky is part of that inventory. It helps us answer the necessary questions that should guide our work. Here are the questions that I used to start the work of The Berry Center: What has happened here? What do we have to work with? What should be here that isn't here? Where do we start?

It is important to think about the long list of efforts that have been tried since the mid-1990's to keep farmers farming in Kentucky and try to

understand why they have had so little impact. We haven't used the past to inform the future. Each one of the efforts I name has been treated as a one-off.

✍ In 1993 John Berry, Jr. and Wendell Berry pushed the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op to use an existing but dormant part of the co-op called Commodity Growers to form corporate and neighborhood buying clubs and to market to restaurants. (The term Community Supported Agriculture—CSA—was not used then.) The co-op gave office space and funding to start Kentucky Organic Growers (KOG). This was a huge effort requiring meetings held around the state to convince worried tobacco-dependent farmers that there was money to be made raising organic vegetables. A Trimble County farmer named Steve Smith (my husband) started the first CSA in 1990. His accounting books were used at meetings to convince skeptical farmers that more money could be made per acre from crops other than tobacco. The meetings I was a part of were crowded with farmers. It was a good effort but ahead of its time and tried to solve too many problems at once. There were few examples, maybe none at that time, of successful efforts to make something like KOG work. It was undercapitalized from the start. And maybe most importantly, it was trying to change the culture of farming in Kentucky quickly. Kentucky Organic Growers lasted five years.

✍ By 2002 farmers knew that the tobacco program would end. Lois Mateus, of Brown-Forman, arranged a meeting of then-Mayor Jerry Abramson, Owsley Brown, and Wendell Berry to talk about bridging the urban-rural divide between Louisville and the countryside around it. Wendell started the meeting with a question to the mayor: "If we have a disaster like 9/11 in Louisville and supply lines are cut, where will people get their food? It won't be enough to tell them that we haven't really thought about it." That meeting was the beginning of Louisville Farm-to-Table. That led to the hiring of a public interest broker, who worked from the mayor's office, to build a demand for local food in Louisville and to match the demand to farmers in the countryside. It was a huge job, and there were

some successes. Louisville Farm-to-Table asked county judges from counties contiguous to Jefferson to be an advisory board for the program. This meant that there was actual intelligence coming from farm counties about what was happening on farms. Louisville Farm-to-Table was never institutionalized, meaning it relied on tobacco settlement money and grants, so never felt secure. All the gains made with institutions generally relied on one administrator or staff person to whom getting local food into their business or school meant something. When that person left or changed jobs, the effort had to start all over. Louisville Farm-to-Table was undercapitalized and understaffed, too focused on the urban market (even with the direction of the judges), and never established a good rapport with farmers, seeming to prefer to work with new vegetable farmers rather than existing tobacco farmers, who had the capacity to produce good food but who had little or no knowledge of what an urban market might want. The program, after years of support from a lot of people, has disappeared.


✍ Louisville began to have a reputation as having really good farm-to-table restaurants in the 90's and early 2000's. Kathy Cary led the way when she opened Lilly's in 1988 and began sourcing from farmers. I was raising pastured poultry and organic vegetables then. We supplied Lilly's, Ed Garber at 610 Magnolia, Anoosh Shariat at Shariat's, and many others. The demand seemed to be on the rise. What needed to happen was infrastructure to coordinate what restaurants would need with what farmers could grow, set prices, aggregate product, and distribute. Because it remained difficult for chefs to get product and for farmers to know what chefs wanted, the farm-to-table restaurant scene in Louisville has faded. (There are bright spots: Barn8, Proof on Main, Red Hog, The Haymarket, and others who are buying meat from Our Home Place Meat and supporting local farmers. The same is true in Lexington with Favor and Ouita Michael's restaurants, and with Limewater in Frankfort.) There is still something there that can and is being built on.

✍ Grasshoppers was an attempt to make the market work for farmers. Grasshoppers Distribution


I believe that what is most needed in all our efforts to restore health to our countryside—and therefore to us all—is a deep understanding of what has happened to working landscapes and working people in this country.




LLC was a food hub established in Kentucky in 2006 by four Kentucky farmers. Its mission was to connect regional farmers to local markets. But as with Kentucky Organic Growers, there were few examples of successful food hubs from which to learn. (I'm not sure how many there are today.) Grasshoppers didn't start with a good business plan and had no real knowledge of supply and demand. In spite of substantial amounts of public money from federal, state, and national sources, supplemented by private investors, it was always struggling financially. Grasshoppers consistently made decisions based on its mission rather than good management. A farmer quoted in a postmortem the University of Kentucky did after Grasshoppers closed said, "I was trying to convince them, Y'all are paying me too much for tomatoes. Buy them for 60 cents instead of \$1. We will still bring them to you all day long." This is a telling statement. The farmer was saying that he was glad to exchange the right to gamble for a fair (parity) price. Grasshoppers entered the marketplace at a key time for Kentucky agriculture. Farmers were attempting to transition from a crop that had been raised in Kentucky for centuries, to either growing vegetable crops for the first time or scaling up production of specialty crops. Grasshoppers was trying to educate the supply side and the demand side of the market. The people who tried so hard to make Grasshoppers work are to be commended. There is much to learn from their experience.

 The FoodPort was an effort to have food-related businesses as well as cultural and educational resources in one place. It was going to be an extremely expensive project and was slated to bring needed jobs to West Louisville. I attended several meetings in West Louisville to hear more about what was being proposed. I was worried about the emphasis on urban farming and the assumption that there would be plenty of product coming to

the FoodPort from farms in our region. I knew the developers of the project were working hard in West Louisville to gain trust, and I remember saying at a meeting that they would need to do the same in the countryside. They knew that they had to have "anchor tenants" to make the FoodPort work, even saying at one point that this wasn't an "if we build it, they will come" proposition. But in my conversation with them it was clear they believed there was a good supply of vegetables in farm country that they could tap into when needed—in other words, if they built it, the food would come. I include this venture that never got off the ground simply to say that we will have to build a population of good farmers by starting with the few we have left.

 The Bardstown Road Farmers' Market, now called The Original Bardstown Road Farmers' Market, Inc. opened in 1991. It was the first "modern era" market in Louisville, and since then farmers' markets have proliferated across the city. I, and many other farmers that I know, have benefitted from the markets in Louisville. However, over the years the markets have changed from mainly vegetable markets to prepared food markets. I have toured markets all over the country in my years as director of The Berry Center. I've noticed how far outnumbered the vegetable farmers are by the "value-added" vendors. I've made it my business to ask farmers if they are selling out of their perishable food. "No," is often the answer. Many of them had flowers for sale as well as vegetables. The flowers, the farmers told me, made it worth a day spent at the market. Markets have taken on a kind of festival atmosphere, which is wonderful for neighborhoods and for some vendors, but not always for vegetable farmers.

 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), once called subscription farming or buying clubs, has become a commonly understood way for a con-



Teamster Ally Dick leads Jed in groundwork exercises near Lacie, Kentucky. Photo by Ben Aguilar

sumer to connect with a farmer. This model is good for farmers. It gives them a way to plan an economic year, and because buyers pay upfront, they are taking an economic risk along with the farmer. The deal is done and, unlike a farmers' market, chance is taken out of the relationship. However, over the years, traditional vegetable CSAs have lost favor with consumers. The model once meant that the buyer's share was understood to be whatever was available seasonally, with little choice. CSAs that give the consumer choice have become more popular. When Steve Smith started the first CSA in Kentucky in 1990 he had, on average, a 100-person waiting list for the 15 years he ran his program. Now farmers in Henry County are having trouble selling enough shares to make it economically feasible. They are in competition with other CSAs in their region, farm markets, and "industrial" organic and "local" produce in chain stores.

🦋 Appharvest is the latest big idea to fail and is an outlier on this list. I include it only to say that it never had any intention of working with farmers. It intended to bypass farmers with technology. AppHarvest raised \$800 million in seed and venture

capital money, along with loans from banks and national organizations like the USDA. This is the perfect example of the fantasy that we can bypass the land, the people, and nature.

* * *

This isn't an exhaustive list. I could add more, but I believe I've covered what needs to be covered. It has been interesting to look back at these efforts and to see what they have had in common. It is easy to see that undercapitalization and understaffing have affected them all, and that good business planning and good management are always necessary. But I believe what is most needed in our efforts to restore health to our countryside (and therefore to us all) is a deep understanding of what has happened to working landscapes and working people in this country. The most astonishing lack of understanding is evidenced in the continued assumption that there is an abundance of delicious, well-raised food in the countryside—or could be, quickly, if the right economic tweaks are brought to bear. This doesn't take into account the real problem, nor does it point us to the real work.

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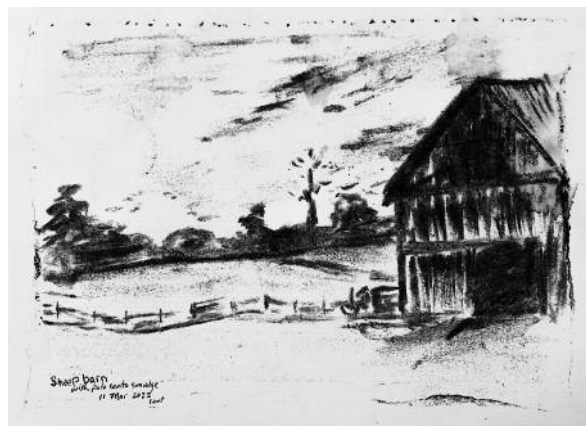
What is clear to me, and the thinking that has guided me, is that we have to start from the ground up. We must understand what we are dealing with now. The sadness I feel in recounting these efforts is how much we have lost by not thinking first of the land and the people it will take to begin to live in health and harmony in our given world.

Our Home Place Meat, a program of The Berry Center, in its small way gives me hope that we can build a population of good land users. It will take time, and any plan that talks about healthy food needs to acknowledge this first. Our Home Place Meat is working with 11 small beef producers to supply well-raised beef for the Louisville, Lexington, and Cincinnati markets. The program, started in 2017, has used the principles of the burley tobacco program to set a parity price, to protect farmers from overproduction in order to maintain that price, to take care of distribution, to contract with farmers yearly so they can plan their economic year, and to encourage cooperation instead of competition. We are building from what we have to work with. We started with young farmers who were already raising cattle in Henry County. The program is growing and provides a model that works from the ground up, using the culture of good farming that we still have in Kentucky. Our Home Place Meat is young, too young to claim absolute success, but it is working, and the principles that guide the program are sound. It is keeping good existing farmers farming. It makes good farming pay fairly. If farmers can make a living keeping marginal land covered in perennial pasture, they will. Wendell Berry says that we are supporting a kind of farming that suits our farms. Our Home Place Meat is bridging the divide between Louisville and the countryside that surrounds it.

The only sustainable city—and this is to me the indispensable ideal and goal—is a city in balance with its countryside: a city, that is, which would live off the net ecological income of its supporting region, paying as it goes all its ecological and human debts. The cities we now have are living off ecological principal and by unrestrained economic assumptions that will make them unlivable. They do not have their own supporting regions. They are out of balance with their supports, wherever on the globe their supports are.

The divide between urban and rural people has been ruinous for both. The destruction of rural America has not been inevitable. It has been destruction by design: cheap food, cheap fuel, cheap building material, taken at the lowest possible price, leaving destruction behind. What has happened in the coal fields is a perfect example. Some of the richest counties in our state have had the poorest people. This has happened everywhere.

Learning from some of the laudable efforts that have been tried but failed is necessary. And it makes those efforts useful to our efforts now. ■



Sheep Barn by Shannon Boyd.

Wheeler Catlett Goes to Washington

by WENDELL BERRY



— ONE —

WHEELER CATLETT REMEMBERED all the events of the sale of his family's 1906 tobacco crop, from his parents' cautious hope for the sufficient payment of money to his father's return home at nightfall with nothing but a big appetite for his supper. Wheeler remembered as a child remembers, a series of pictures, exactly detailed, accompanied by feelings deeply impressed in his heart, to which the worded story would come as he grew in understanding. He told it to himself surely many times, and to others who needed to hear it. He told it to his children, who told it to their children. And so the story so far has survived in living memory.

Wheeler kept it in his thoughts and in his heart until the time came when he knew something that could be done to help people like his parents and the two or three farming generations following theirs. He and others who remembered made, with limited help from the federal government, an organization of farmers that for the six decades of its political life gave them an asking price for their tobacco. This organization, The Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association, employed the principles of fair pricing balanced and protected by limiting production to the quantity expectably needed by the manufacturers. Every farm that grew the crop, which about all of them did, was assigned an allotment in keeping with its production in previous years. Its allotment, measured first in acres and later in pounds, would then be marketed at prices set by the program. To the end of his life, Wheeler believed, rightly, that those principles would

work for any farm product. All that was needed would be the public will to give farmers and farming a secure place in the nation's economy. That possibility was fading from public consciousness in Wheeler's final years. It will not come again in any future now foreseeable.

Andy Catlett, Wheeler's son, has grown now into the old age of a grandson, son, father, and grandfather. He feels still living in himself the passion by which his grandfather survived the story of his defeat by the Duke monopoly, and the passion with which his father remembered it, and so the passion with which he himself has remembered it and handed it on, so that in his own final years he sees it living still as memory and motive in his children and grandchildren.

The story and the love borne in it, passing down, has held them together like a living root of the same tree, and like a tuned string, across a hundred and eighteen years and five generations. But from the year of our Lord 2024, looking back, Andy sees how breakable, how threatened, how perilously stretched across departures and returns that vital strand has always been.

* * *

The story of a family at home is like a puzzle put together. Put together, the separate parts cohere in a kind of sense, not otherwise ever to be made: the story of the family at one for a time with the story of its place. The Catlett family cohered in this way until Wheeler went away to college at the age of eighteen.

As he grew from boyhood into the strength of a young man, Wheeler learned at his father's side the place, the farm, the round of its yearly work, and he liked it. The family puzzle put together in its place, kept in place long enough, offers to a person's love the possibility of translating itself into work. Wheeler grew into the love of farming. He loved the days he worked to the end of, and from there looked back at the differences he had made.

At college Wheeler excelled and gained somewhat the independent use of his mind, but he did not forget where he had come from. Because he had a good mind and liked the use of it, Wheeler was at first bright and then, in college, a brilliant student. Confidence came to him, and a certain courage, and something in the way of poise. In his senior year he was president of the student body. He was conducting a meeting of the students, gathered into the chapel, when the president of the college stood up to interfere. Wheeler, who knew the rules of order, ruled him out of order. The president, who knew the rules of order, sat down.

Wheeler might have gone from college on out into the world and a good city job or a profession, as many of his generation were doing. But he came home—back, you might say, into the living and ongoing story of his family's endurance in their place. For he had come through his four years of study, his student friendships, even love, as he had thought it, for an attractive girl, with farming and his home farm on his mind. He had come home to farm.

He came home also against the current of the time and against the current that had as often set against farmers. A decade before the trouble that would be remembered as "The Depression," the farm economy was already depressed. The farm and their work barely provided two livelihoods, one for Wheeler, one for his parents. Wheeler knew he was cramped, and he knew nothing to do about it.

* * *

The history and the presence of hard times for farmers, the continuing vulnerability of the market

for tobacco, sporadic agitation among the growers, help from a wealthy newspaper publisher in Louisville, instruction and advice from people experienced in farmer organizations—the convergence of so many causes had started the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association, "the Program" as it was called. When he was out of college and again living at home, Wheeler began to take part in gathering support for this organization. He got into it, as he said, "with both feet." He had known the reasons for it before he could put them into words, and now he spoke the reasons in conversations with his neighbors and in speeches given to meetings in schoolhouses and at picnics. He took part in pageants on the history of tobacco. He farmed and he thought. He talked at every opportunity. He spoke as one thoroughly committed and prepared, and with the passion that had grown in him from the night he had realized his parents' helplessness against the American Tobacco Company of James Buchanan Duke.

And then a great change came to him that he could not have expected, for it came from far outside the light and consciousness of any day he had ever lived.

— TWO —

AN AMBITIOUS LAWYER and friend of the Program, Thomas Franklin, was a candidate in that district for the United States House of Representatives. He came one summer night to Port William and delivered his campaign speech from the porch of the hotel. Wheeler, who had worked a long day, did not get to town in time to hear Mr. Franklin. He got there just at the end of Mr. Franklin's speech, while the crowd was still gathered. Many of the crowd knew Wheeler, knew of his efforts for the Program, and were proud of his graduation from college, a rare thing in the Port William neighborhood in those days. An old man's voice called out to him: "You talk to us, Wheeler boy!" Another voice cried, "Yeah!" A few hands clapped, and then more, and then all. Wheeler stepped up and stood alone on the hotel porch. The crowd faced him and grew quiet.

Wheeler might have gone from college on out into the world and a good city job or a profession, as many of his generation were doing. But he came home—back, you might say, into the living and ongoing story of his family’s endurance in their place.



Wheeler had several advantages that night: He was speaking to his neighbors who had asked him to speak, he knew what he needed to say, and, because he was at home with his hearers, he knew how to say it. He spoke of the Program. He said how he welcomed it. To show the need for it, he told the story of his family’s loss and trouble in 1906, a story that belonged to them all and that many of them had lived and remembered. It was the old story, he said, as old as the Bible, of people with too much wealth, too much power, and too little conscience. He quoted old Crawford Horne, a political hero of that region in a time a little earlier: “If you let the corporations rule, the poor man won’t have cat guts for fiddle strings nor wood ashes for lye soap.” Wheeler’s speech was a living strand between him and his hearers. He spoke well. Though he had not heard Mr. Franklin’s speech, Mr. Franklin, who had lingered in the crowd, heard Wheeler’s.

On that night of their convergence in Port William, the two of them did not meet. But after a few days a letter came to Wheeler from Mr. Franklin: “It looks like I am going to win my race. If I go to Washington, I will need a secretary. Will you go with me?” This question came to Wheeler as a sudden enlargement, as of the sky above his head or his allotment of breath. He became just as suddenly more careful than before in his thoughts about himself and his prospects.

He knew that he had been at a dead end. As things stood, and with the means then available to him, he could not expect to prosper as a farmer. He thought, and the years that followed proved him right, that the outlook was not soon going to improve. But now he had been surprised by an opportunity to look elsewhere. And he looked with all the intelligence he had. If there had been times at school with his friends when he could be frivolous or giddy, all

that was behind him now. By the time of Mr. Franklin’s letter, he knew himself and his abilities as well, probably, as he could have done at his age. If now he could look beyond his present circumstances at the possibility of living in Washington as a secretary to a congressman, no doubt he felt obliged to look beyond that as well. He could not have regarded employment by Mr. Franklin as a vocation or a life’s work, as he once had regarded farming. Marce Catlett was something of a trader, and so was Wheeler. He wrote back to Mr. Franklin: “I am fully aware of the honor you have given me by asking me to assist you in Washington. I would be further honored to do so if you will allow me at the same time to attend law school at night.”

It is easy to imagine that Tom Franklin looked upon Wheeler’s terms with some amusement: “The boy is biting off more than he can chew. But let him try.” Wheeler received Mr. Franklin’s consent by return mail: “All right. As soon as you need to hear from me again, you will.”

Mr. Franklin won his race. When the time came, Wheeler packed his clothes, not many, and took the train to Washington.

At this point in his father’s story, old Andy feels his thoughts turn home. He feels how much of what actually was to be the future his father had put at stake and at risk by going away. The once put-together puzzle of three parts in place was now missing its necessary third part, now far away and with no assured return.

* * *

If Mr. Franklin had in fact supposed that Wheeler could not chew as much as he had bitten off, he was wrong. By day Wheeler served as Mr. Franklin’s secretary—as what now would be a congressman’s staff—keeping him caught up in his work in the

Wheeler had several advantages that night: He was speaking to his neighbors who had asked him to speak, he knew what he needed to say, and, because he was at home with his hearers, he knew how to say it.



capitol, keeping him in touch with his constituents at home, answering the telephone, answering the mail, fending off distractions, and making necessarily his own acquaintance with the offices and some of the officers of the government. At night he attended classes, and he studied.

Wheeler's later involvement in the economics and politics of tobacco and his work for the Program would have a public, and therefore a historical, importance. But a problem that Wheeler left behind for Andy, and other inquirers, is his evident indifference to the historical importance of the part he had played. His attention, ability, and effort were given unstintingly to dealing with the problems and difficulties that confronted him, as they confronted him. Once those were dealt with, there would be others, and he continued his work. That he worked well is sufficiently evident. He prided himself in working well, as is verified by the results, and his speeches that were published are clear, fully formed, and eloquent. Of the personal circumstances in which he worked, and of his thoughts about his work as he was doing it, he said little and wrote nothing. He filed his correspondence, of course, but he kept nothing in the way of a journal, and Andy doubts that he ever considered doing so.

As a result, Andy knows too little of his father's Washington years. He knows that, among his other duties, his father had to take care that Mr. Franklin did not embarrass himself by becoming drunk in public. Of this he heard his father speak only once, and then, in loyalty, he used a metaphor: "I would see that he had torn his pants, and I would need to get to him." From a number of things overheard or heard in passing, Andy knows that his father worked extremely hard during those years. He told Andy once that he had sometimes gone for days without sleeping. Andy guesses from what he knows of himself that his father may have dozed for brief

spells over his book or his writing paper during the long, wakeful nights, or he may have fallen into naps that seemed afterward to have been only blinkings of his eyes. It is nonetheless easy for Andy to imagine that there were stretches of several days when his father did not go to bed.

For Andy does know how well and thoroughly his father studied, and this he knows from evidence that is plentiful enough. The only relics of Wheeler's Washington years that seem to have mattered to him were a textbook, *Cases on Constitutional Law*, and a stack, as tall as wide, of pages mostly handwritten, tied with a string. The textbook has 1,404 pages, virtually all of which bear Wheeler's careful annotations in pencil. On the stack of pages he seems to have briefed or analyzed every case that he encountered in his studies. His annotations in the book and his written summaries have the character, not of notes made in preparation for tests, but rather of a relentless self-testing. He seems to have denied himself any willingness to pass through his reading without understanding thoroughly what he had read. On all those hundreds of pages his sentences are swiftly written—the crosses of the t's flying above the lines of script—but nonetheless careful, economical, and complete. The style is direct, the syntax strong. He was in search of the essential points of contested events, of arguments, precedents, and judgments. He seems to have thought—rightly, his son thinks—that what he knew was tested and secured by his ability to write it into sentences. Using only the necessary technical or legal terms, he wrote with practiced elegance in plain English, the common tongue, as if speaking to a jury of his neighbors. He had already formed his lifelong habit of speaking clearly and for clarification, as well as his settled conviction of the need to "study your lessons."

* * *

Throughout his years in Washington, Wheeler kept to the pace and the standards he had set for himself. Eventually it was recognized by Mr. Franklin, and others, that Wheeler's way of putting himself to work was characteristic, bred in the bone, and not a too-high perch that he was bound to fall from. And so, eventually, Wheeler became a young man favorably spoken of, followed by appraising looks and high expectations. A day came, by the doing of Mr. Franklin and a colleague, when Wheeler received a truly outstanding job offer from a large meat packing company in Chicago.

But Wheeler did not appear to be as enthusiastic about the offer as Mr. Franklin had allowed himself to expect. He was treating it merely as something he needed to think about. Mr. Franklin's relationship with Wheeler had so far been determined by the quality of Wheeler's work, which had been good, and they had worked comfortably together. Across the difference in their ages, they had become friends. And now Mr. Franklin was reluctant to assume the posture and demeanor of the older man. But on the fourth morning of his own silence about the letter from Chicago, he called Wheeler in and said, "Sit down." Wheeler sat down, and Mr. Franklin turned in his chair so that they were sitting face to face. And then Mr. Franklin for some moments sat and thought. As much as he had come to respect Wheeler, and partly because he respected him, he was in some doubt about him. For such a young man as Wheeler, the way between an office in the capital and an office somewhat elevated in some great corporation was a beaten track. To follow it had become conventional. It was almost a law that had to be obeyed. And yet having observed him closely for three years, Mr. Franklin knew that Wheeler did not fit the usual pattern of the ambitious young man. He clearly was worked upon by ambition of some kind, but the mold that had shaped him was to be found nowhere in Washington. He was, by the usual measures, not predictable, and Mr. Franklin was worried.

He leaned forward and planted a stiffened forefinger on Wheeler's knee. He told Wheeler more plainly than before how much he thought of him. He told him how highly he rated his abilities. He told him how highly he was ranked among his peers by the offer from Chicago. He said, "Wheeler, listen. Don't, damn it, throw this opportunity away."

"Thank you, Mr. Franklin," Wheeler said. "I understand. I'll think about it."

Long ago as that was, Andy's old heart now does surely tremble for his young father, as he imagines him leaving Mr. Franklin's office with so great a burden upon him. "Oh, stand by him," he prays. "Let him come home."

Andy never before has prayed or heard of so displacing a prayer, which sets him outside such sense as he so far has been able to make, outside even of time and into the great outside, the eternity, maybe it is, that contains time. He seems to have spoken not from his own heart only, but from the hearts also of all his family then and to come, or he is praying their prayer as they stand with him in that boundless outside.

It is a prayer also for his home country and his home history. For if Wheeler had gone away to make his life in Chicago, an incalculable difference would have descended into his absence. Many lives that have been lived and are being lived could not have been, and many yet to be lived could not be. On Wheeler's absence, the story of his family's loss and suffering in 1906, so strong a memory and motive as it has been in his mind, and in other minds following his, would not have been told again to anybody to whom it would have mattered, if he ever told it again—that story which, at home, would call him into a service that nobody else could have performed as he performed it. Andy cannot fathom the sense or the scope of his prayer. He can only pray it. "Stand by him. Send him home." ■

*Planting
Trees
in God's
Country*

by
MAURICE MANNING

From the book *Snakedoctor*
(Copper Canyon Press, 2023)

My people sot down, they say,
two hundred years before the beginning
of Time, being kicked out
of the place where they had been, never
to prosper there, only to toil.
And here, in deep woods and on hills
steep and rugged and rocky, they made
a hill farm, not to prosper,
but, in quiet hope, to survive,
to plant in the ground and feed themselves.
And that meant clearing a patch of land,
cutting the trees, breaking the dark,
original canopy in violence
to let the sunlight reach the ground.
All for a little corn and beans,
surrounded by the first beauty.
If this was done unthinkingly,
without a measure of regret,
I do not know. I have my thoughts.
We have to live with ignorance,
even, painfully, our own.
We also have to imagine the past
and believe we come from it, not
to undo it, but simply to imagine
and therefore belong, by opening
the ground. And then imagine shade
in summer coming to this place
again and birdsong in the benches
of heaven-reaching trees, living
ladders stuck in the ground to give
the future another rung of its past.
The invitation is to climb.
One thing I know about God's country—it's all
there is, and it's supposed to be alive.

When We Awake . . . Will There Still Be a Tobacco Program?

by JOHN M. BERRY JR.



This speech was given by John M. Berry, Jr. at the 1989 Kentucky Farm Bureau Convention. John Berry was a farmer, attorney, a former Kentucky State Senator and Majority Leader, and a longtime board member and president of the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op Association.

HOW MANY OF YOU would favor cheaper farm prices? How many of you tobacco farmers would like to compete with farmers in Zimbabwe, for instance, who are paid \$20 a month? How many of you favor lowering farm commodity prices to world market levels? How many of you favor the supply management and price support program for tobacco?

In the last two years something wonderful has happened in Kentucky agriculture, due to the efforts of the leadership of the Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation and of its tobacco committee in particular. For the first time the leadership of the Burley Growers Advisory Council, of the Council for Burley Tobacco, and of the Burley Tobacco Growers Co-Operative Association have worked together in dealing with tobacco issues. As tobacco producers we are under attack from all sides. If we are to continue to profit from the production of tobacco, we must strengthen the relationship among our grower organizations. To do so we must at least attempt to resolve the issues that historically have divided us. What are our differences? Do they really exist? If so, can they be resolved?

In the 1920's this country began to recognize the need to stabilize the farm economy, to preserve family farms and family farmers, and to remove farmers from the cost/price squeeze that historically had plagued them. By the end of that decade the farm crisis had become a part of, and a significant cause of, the Great Depression.

In 1933, over the strenuous resistance of corporate America, Congress passed the parity legislation which instituted a number of significant measures:

1. It established a price for U.S. farm commodities at a level which allowed farmers to make a reasonable profit.
2. It created the Commodity Credit Corporation to make loans to farmers whose commodities fell below the loan rate.
3. It regulated farm production to keep it in line with demand, and
4. It created the national grain reserve to give the government the ability to release commodities onto the market at times when, for one reason or another, supply dropped dramatically, causing an undue increase in consumer prices.

From 1933 to 1953 this program was extremely successful; the results speak for themselves—

1. Farmers received fair prices in relation to their costs,
2. Costly surpluses were prevented,
3. Consumer prices were low and were stable,
4. Farm debt declined, and
5. The Commodity Credit Corporation, in other words the Federal government, made thirteen million dollars net profit.

In the late 1940's corporate planners began to plan for post World War II economic expansion. Indus-

*Because the parity legislation posed such an obstacle to corporate profits,
an all-out war on parity was launched during the late 40's and early 50's.*



trial and financial sectors, desiring an increase in energy-intensive and capital-intensive production methods, sought to gain greater control over agriculture and to eliminate parity. Why?

1. Parity stabilizes prices, whereas grain companies and speculators profit from a fluctuating market.
2. Parity sets prices at a level at which farmers can prosper, and prosperous farmers are less dependent than unprosperous ones on capital borrowed from banks and insurance companies.
3. Parity legislation limited production and maintained a labor-intensive agriculture, thus reducing sales of equipment, chemicals, and fertilizers by the companies that manufacture these products.
4. Parity prices and production control raised prices and reduced volume, thus diminishing the profits for all corporate interests that profit from large volumes of cheap commodities.

Because the parity legislation posed such an obstacle to corporate profits, an all-out war on parity was launched during the late 40's and early 50's. By 1954 corporate America had won. "Think tanks" funded by large corporations produced volumes of paper to support their position. One such group was the Committee for Economic Development (CED). Mark Ritchie and Kevin Ristau of the League of Rural Voters have detailed how the CED greatly influenced national farm policy. According to Ritchie and Ristau, the CED's report, "An Adaptive Program for Agriculture," presents the issue as defined by business interests during the 1954 farm bill debates: "the choices before us," they said, were: (1) "leakproof control of farm production or (2) a program such as we are recommending here to induce excess resources (primarily people) to move rapidly out of agriculture." The first option, production control, was quickly rejected as being contrary to the free market. The second alternative,

to move people rapidly out of agriculture, was implemented.

The CED recommended that "the price supports for wheat, cotton, rice, feed grains and related crops now under price support be reduced immediately." This reduction in price supports, they said, would have two results: "the program would involve moving off the farm about two million of the present farm labor force, plus a number equal to a large part of the new entrants who would otherwise join the farm labor force in the next five years....[and] the lower prices would induce some increased sales of these products both at home and abroad."

The new policy worked. Prices were cut and between 1950 and 1960 the farm population dropped by 30%. Between 1960 and 1970 it dropped another 26%. In the 1970's the farm population stabilized, but only somewhat, as a result of target prices. But the target prices were far under parity, and as a result farmers were caught in the same cost/price squeeze they were in before the parity legislation in 1933. With the need to increase production to offset the narrow profit margin and with government and lenders encouraging them to "get big or get out," farmers proceeded to borrow larger and larger amounts against the inflated paper value of their land. Farm debt rose from \$20 billion in the early 70's to over \$225 billion in the early 80's. By 1987 another 20% of our farm population was gone.

In 1985, with farmers and farm communities in the throes of depression, we witnessed a debate much like the one in 1954. On one side were the proponents of supply management and fair prices; on the other side the proponents of the so-called "market clearing position" which would further reduce farm prices, give farmers a slight subsidy increase, and gradually phase out all farm programs that in any way limit production or support prices. Again, as in 1954, corporate America won.



Freshly harvested tobacco on a wagon ready to be loaded into an aging barn near Lacie, Kentucky. Photograph by James Baker Hall

Commodity prices were slashed, total farm debt continued to rise, and farm subsidies went to \$26 billion while farmers continued to go belly-up by the hundreds of thousands.

Although the farm depression has taken its toll in Kentucky, we have been spared the devastation it brought to many other states. The reason: we have a supply management and price support program for our tobacco. Although our price was cut in 1986 to a level at which we couldn't make a decent profit, it was high enough to keep most of our farmers from going broke.

For all commodities other than tobacco and peanuts, the 1985 farm bill provides for the phasing out of all supply management and price support programs and for the phasing in of the free market. There is no place in the free market for the tobacco program, and anyone who believes that the tobacco program would somehow survive in the free market is simply dreaming. Furthermore, the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute did a study in 1985 in which it concluded that tobacco would suffer a 35% price reduction in the free market. If that occurred our price for tobacco today would be \$1.09 per pound.

I don't believe that anyone would argue with the assertion that in the 1980's farmers have suffered the cruelest and most brutal economic depression in our nation's history. In real dollars, the prices of our farm land and farm commodities are lower today than they were in the 1930's. But need I tell you what happened in the 1980's to Phillip Morris, RJR, Cargill, Chevron, Monsanto, Kellogg, H.J. Hines, and all of the other U.S. corporations that have historically profited from large volumes of cheap farm commodities?

Food processors realized a 14.3% return on stock—holder equity and retail food chains profits averaged 13.2%. During those same years Kellogg's return on equity averaged 33.4%. RJR-Nabisco averaged 22.8% and H.J. Hines received a return of 21.2%. Cargill, the nation's largest agribusiness company, reported a 66% increase in earnings in the first year following passage of the 1985 farm bill. These outlandish profits were being realized by corporate America during the same years that net income to Kentucky farmers fell by more than 39%.

Who financed the Committee for Economic Development that recommended that commodity prices be reduced to drive millions of farmers off the land?

In 1985, with farmers and farm communities in the throes of depression, we witnessed a debate much like the one in 1954. On one side were the proponents of supply management and fair prices; on the other side the proponents of the so-called “market clearing position” which would further reduce farm prices, give farmers a slight subsidy increase, and gradually phase out all farm programs that in any way limit production or support prices. Again, as in 1954, corporate America won.



Who continued the earlier arguments that supply management and price support programs should be abolished because they were contrary to the free market? Who were the advisors to the Secretary of Agriculture on farm policy in the early 70's? Who were the advisors to the Secretary of Agriculture in the development of the 1985 farm bill? For the sake of brevity let me tell you the answer: they were the same corporate interests that have profited historically at the expense of farmers. But to emphasize the point let me tell you the makeup of the so-called “kitchen cabinet” that has advised a succession of Secretaries of Agriculture on the formulation of farm policy. It consisted of officials of or lobbyists for Archer-Daniels Midland, Cargill, Continental Grain, Kellogg, RJR Nabisco, and the American Farm Bureau Federation. In effect, the kitchen cabinet consisted of those interests who had bought the rights to influence farm policy with campaign contributions. The only farmer organization that participated was the American Farm Bureau Federation. In other words, by your acquiescence in American Farm Bureau policy, you are in bed with your enemy.

What are the specific objectives of the current farm policy?

1. “A market-oriented agriculture with supply and demand, rather than government action, ultimately determining production and price.”
2. “Encourage production decisions based on market demand.”
3. “Provide income support at a level that would not interfere with opportunity for income from the market.”
4. “Strongly oppose...any type of mandatory production, acreage control or marketing quotas.”

5. “Government economic policies should be designed to encourage economic stability, increased productivity, *a greater competitive ability in the international market* and a high level of economic prosperity.” (Italics mine.)

A “market-oriented agriculture” based purely on supply and demand means the elimination of the tobacco program and all others that limit production or support prices.

“Production decisions based on market demand” means eliminating quotas, including those for tobacco.

A level of income for farmers that does not “interfere with opportunity for income in the market” means reducing the price of farm commodities to world market levels.

Opposition to “any type of production control” or “marketing quotas” means opposition to any program like the supply management and price support program for tobacco.

Increasing productivity and “greater competitive ability in the international market” means larger volumes of cheaper commodities; that is, eliminate quotas and consequently eliminate or reduce support prices like those for tobacco.

I have just given you five policy statements that necessarily require the elimination of the tobacco program as well as all other programs that involve either production control or price support. You will find that I have quoted verbatim from pages 12, 13 & 29 of the American Farm Bureau Policy Booklet for 1989. In that same booklet on page 18 you will find the statement, “We support a tobacco program which provides that growers shall keep supply in

line with demand in return for price support loans.” In 91 pages these three lines constitute the only reference to tobacco. It is hardly necessary to point out that this lone statement is contradicted by everything else that this document advocates. No one can believe that there is a place in the so-called free market for the tobacco program.

The American Farm Bureau Federation has pushed for a free market for decades, and the Kentucky Farm Bureau Federation has acquiesced. The Kentucky Farm Bureau leadership has gone on record, time and again, in opposition to supply management and price supports and in support of a “free market.” In other words, for years the Farm Bureau has advocated a farm policy that has as its ultimate objective the elimination of the same tobacco program that the members of the Kentucky Farm Bureau depend upon, and that the Burley Co-op has successfully administered.

Why have we differed over the years?

1. The burley program provides for quotas. Farm Bureau policy calls for the elimination of quotas.
2. The burley program provides for price supports. Farm Bureau policy calls for the reduction of price supports to world market levels, and ultimately for their elimination.
3. The burley program is designed to preserve the farm population. Farm Bureau policy has as its objective the removal of millions of farm families from the farm economy.
4. The burley program has successfully administered a policy of supply management and price supports for fifty years. Farm Bureau policy calls for our demise.

I do not believe that you as individuals favor increased production and cheaper commodity prices. I do not believe that you as individuals favor the elimination of the tobacco program. I do not believe that you as individuals favor the removal of millions of farmers from the farm economy. The question then is, who is writing your policies and why?

The devastation suffered by rural America is not an accident; it is not the result of changing times or technological development; it is not the result of uncontrollable economic circumstances. *It is a crisis by design.*

John Kenneth Galbraith is one of the most renowned and capable economists of this century and was the first research director of the American Farm Bureau Federation. On several occasions he has been asked if the free market was not more efficient and better than government interference. Here was his answer: “Those who affirm the beneficence of the free market for agriculture are, as regards the industrially developed countries, speaking of something that does not exist . . . It does not exist because left to market forces, agriculture has a relentless, wholly normal tendency to overproduce . . . This has been the source of a persistent pressure of supply on price. But that is not all. Uniquely, or nearly so in the modern economy, the individual farmer has no influence or control over the supply and price of what he produces. The individual farmer is one among thousands and tens of thousands responding to a market price and situation on which not even the production decisions of the largest individual operator have any appreciable effect.”

In the 1980’s, while rural America failed, corporate America thrived. The price we will pay for this, as a nation, will be measured socially, culturally, environmentally, politically, and economically. Ultimately, America will rue the day that it drove its farmers from the land.

We in Kentucky know how a decent farm policy can work because we have experience with a successful program. We should be leaders in the development of a good national farm program, not the blind followers of a bad one. And so I leave you with this question: Will you join the ranks of those advocating a policy to preserve the tobacco program and family farming, or will you be content to join the ranks of those who have been driven from the land? This is the most critical issue facing tobacco farmers today! ■

VIII, 5

A Small Porch in the Woods

by WENDELL BERRY

What was here that you wanted to change?
You changed at first your absence by your presence,
having arrived by a hard way over
the mountains or along the rivers. Once here,
your presence still was a sort of absence,
for you learned slowly and late where
you were. In ignorance, you destroyed
much that was here that you undervalued,
much of value that you never knew was here.

In ignorance, you have returned again
to absence from this place, this neighborhood
of the living and the dead where for a while
you almost were at home, its names and ways
that for a while were almost on your mind.

What that was here have you given up
for your departure and your absence?

Or if you have stayed, going away
to work, what have you lost, forgetting
where you lay you down to sleep?

Or if you have stayed, driving over the fields
the great machines that have replaced
your neighbors and their work, their laughter
that gave to the work an ancient lightness,
a timeless grace, what have you lost?

Lost in old boundaries now merely
owned or rented at too great a price,
or lost in the dry maps of distances
away, set free of the once-new land
so much desired, so little known,
or tolled away by the old wish
to be as gods, or exiled by decree
of a powerful few against a weak “too many,”*
the people drift in scatters, homeless
as their garbage, on the currents
of a violent economy, their care and work
from their dismemoried country, beyond
every dreamed beginning, lost.

**Soon after World War II the official forces of academic agriculture and corporate industry determined and declared that there were “too many farmers.” This became government intent, allowing “free market” to discount and destroy the small farmers and rural communities. Too many country people concurred in their own disvaluation.*

From *Another Day: Sabbath Poems, 2013-2023*
(Counterpoint, 2024)



A farmer uses disc tillage to prepare a large field for planting.

American Farms: Bigger and Grayer

by ALAN GUEBERT



LIKE MUCH OF THE NEWS ANYMORE, the initial numbers from the 2022 Census of Agriculture were accurately reported, quickly downplayed—or even worse, ignored—by most Big Ag groups, and then just pushed aside by the rush of the next day’s news.

That’s a mistake, because the numbers, released February 13, 2024 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), show the rapid maturity and coming old age of U.S. agriculture.

But these numbers, unlike old soldiers, won’t just fade away. They’re real and consequential.

For example, according to NASS, the number of U.S. farms plunged by 142,000, or 7 percent, in the five years between 2017 and 2022. It’s the largest drop in farm numbers over the last four ag census periods and the lowest total number of

American farms since 1850, when the U.S. was a nation of just 31 states and four territories.

Equally shocking is the confounding fact that this slide happened at the same time Congress and the USDA were shoveling billions into farm programs to support farmers and ranchers.

According to a February 20 report titled “Unsustainable: the State of the Farm Safety Net,” published by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the federal government “distributed” \$142 billion “through farm safety net programs” from 2017 to 2022. The biggest bite over those five years was “ad hoc spending,” money not budgeted in any Farm Bill; it totaled \$67 billion. Next came federal crop insurance, the principal revenue-supporting device in U.S. ag policy; it cost \$46 billion. And pulling into third was “commodity programs” at \$29 billion.

The idea that human workers can and should be replaced by machines, which has been the ruling dogma of the industrial revolution until now, is radically reductive and deterministic—I would say nihilistic. —WENDELL BERRY



*Elkton, Rockingham County, Virginia—October 2020.
Haybales in the field of a farm for sale in the Shenandoah Valley.*

How do you send \$142 billion in taxpayer dollars to farmers in five years and still end up with the fewest number of American farms in 172 years? The Census offers clues.

According to it, the only farm size category that increased in numbers was farms “operating 5,000 acres” or more. These biggies controlled 42 percent of all farmland in 2022. Additionally, 6 percent of farms with \$1 million-plus in annual sales owned 32 percent of U.S. farmland and generated 75 percent of all ag sales nationwide.

That ever-bigger bigness was matched by an ever-graying grayness. According to the Census, the average age of U.S. farmers jumped from 57.5 in 2017 to 58.1 in 2022. More to the point, in 2017 one out of four U.S. farmers was 65 years old or older; in 2022, it was one out of three, or an

increase of 12 percent in the ratio. In the meantime, the number of farmers aged 35 to 65 dropped 9 percent.

In fairness, the number of farmers with less than 10 years’ experience—a group the USDA calls “beginning farmers”—grew 11 percent, a pleasant surprise except for the rude fact that these “beginners” averaged 47.1 years old.

After reviewing the hard numbers, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack suggested that they prove the Biden Administration is on the right track in its call for a “different model” of agriculture that lends a big hand to small- and medium-sized farmers while continuing to support big farmers, too.

But there’s nothing different in that “different model.” In fact, the proposed—and still not done—2023 Farm Bill contains no plan to cap program payments to the biggest of the bigs and offers no favoritism to the “farms in the middle,” the smaller-sized farms that survive mostly through substantial off-farm income.

The facts are that our relentless drive to wring profit out of our nation’s soil, water, and rural communities has built a highly productive, very fragile, top-down food structure that leans heavily on federal subsidies, environmental degradation, and the slow liquidation of rural America.

That system isn’t sustainable—and neither are we—without change. ■

Alan Guebert publishes the Farm and Food File weekly throughout the U.S. and Canada. See his work at farmand-foodfile.com. © 2024 ag comm

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"The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't."—BURLEY COULTER, from *"The Wild Birds: Six Stories of the Port William Membership,"* by Wendell Berry. (North Point Press, 1968.)



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