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BElIEVEN IN A BRIGHT, PROSPEROUS FUTURE FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES.”

Media Messages of Rural: Lessons from Minnesota

Prepared for the Minnesota Initiative Foundations

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www.centerforsmalltowns.org
This report examines the portrayal of rural by statewide, metropolitan media in Minnesota. This publication is the product of a commission from all of the Minnesota Initiative Foundations. Special thanks are made to these foundations for their concern for and support of rural Minnesota.

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Center for Small Towns

The mission of the Center for Small Towns is to focus the University’s attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota’s small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

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Executive Summary

There are hundreds of newspaper, radio, and television stations across Minnesota, however only a handful offer immediate distribution outside of their direct service area. KARE, KSTP, WCCO, MPR, the Pioneer Press, and the Star Tribune are all media outlets based in the metro region. These establishments provide coverage of statewide events and have statewide distribution offering a window to activities occurring throughout Minnesota. Accessible to a large audience, these sources influence an extensive group of Minnesota citizens. Thus, their portrayals of rurality are integral in defining rural Minnesota.

The term “rural” does not have an agreed-upon definition, understanding, or meaning. It says nothing and everything at the same time; it is entirely too multifaceted to consult a dictionary; can be used as a noun or an adjective; and it can describe mannerisms or explain behaviors. The term changes over time, in different locations, and among certain individuals. Here in the United States, and Minnesota particularly, there are general frameworks that encompass the historical means in which the term has been applied.

The purpose of this study is to examine the manner in which the metropolitan-area media covers and reports events occurring in rural areas to Minnesota residents. To obtain a sense of how urban Minnesota media portrays the events and priorities of rural Minnesota, the research team identified and selected two metropolitan print sources with statewide coverage. The St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune both have a rich history of serving the state of Minnesota and were readily available. Each article was examined to locate core evidence for the study. The geographical setting of the reported community, the topic of the story, the environment of the rural area portrayed, and the historical context of the definition were primary pieces of evidence gathered from each article.

The following four themes were identified in the study:

**Theme 1: There is not a conscious pattern of stereotypical rural portrayals.**

While some articles do use similar language, there was no consistent portrayal of rural as a whole throughout the pool of articles. The authors did not appear to be working from the same script. Articles did contain clichés and stereotypes either written by individual writers or selected as quotations. The absence of blatant generalizations may be due to Minnesota’s historical connections to agriculture and the 10,000 lakes that provide cultural ties to rural areas. One the whole, Minnesota residents have more experience with and tend to feel more connected to rural settings. Also, the urbanization of the state took place a full thirty years after the national average which prevented the collective memory from forgetting its rural historical ties.

**Theme 2: A clear definition of rural was not evident – there is an absence of clarity outside of context.**

In general situations, it is nearly impossible to arrive at an agreement of a specific definition. There is no common view because rural is an amorphous, ambiguous, and multi-faceted concept. However, as a particular topic is discussed, the meanings of rural become more
clear and people can arrive at some consensus. As the context is further defined a clear definition of rural can emerge. A definition is relative and dependent upon one’s history and contact with rural places.

**Theme 3: Rural areas are portrayed as in need of help.**

The fact that this was a relevant theme may be partially explained by the difficult budget choices that had to be made in 2003. These were tough times for everyone. While this may have increased the portrayal of needs in rural places, it is not believed that these references would disappear had the budget situation been more positive. The consistent findings discussed below reinforced this theme.

There were examples of individual success stories in rural places. For instance, a unique business idea that employed twenty new people was seen as a rare, extraordinary event. However, it seemed the idea that small towns may be self-sufficient or even thriving was an alien concept.

**Theme 4: In light of the negative portrayals, there is evidence of consistently positive idyllic imagery.**

Although we cannot gauge the impact of the positive imagery on the readers themselves, we cannot disregard their symbolic presence. A few topics provided a positive portrayal of rural areas including lifestyle, the environment, and recreation. While it appears that the structures of rural areas (economy and roads) may be deteriorating, the people are living vibrant, meaningful lives.
Introduction

There are hundreds of newspaper, radio, and television stations across Minnesota, however only a handful offer immediate distribution outside of their direct service area. KARE, KSTP, WCCO, MPR, the Pioneer Press, and the Star Tribune are all media outlets based in the metro region. These establishments provide coverage of statewide events and have statewide distribution offering a window to activities occurring throughout Minnesota. Accessible to a large audience, these sources influence an extensive group of Minnesota citizens. Thus, their portrayals of rurality are integral in defining rural Minnesota.

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This study does not dissect the process of writing news stories or examine the methods through which media outlets gauge reader interest. We do however, analyze the results of these activities and use them to represent the choices made by the author to provide coverage. The story topics, descriptions of rural environments, and selected quotations provided evidence for investigation. Although we dissected author choice throughout the research process, we were cognizant of our choices as well. Similar to how an author chooses to frame a story, our subjectivity was present while extracting certain articles and quotations to illuminate findings.

Purpose

In the spring of 2004, the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations commissioned the Center for Small Towns—based at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM)—to examine how statewide media portrays the events, priorities, and themes of rural areas in Minnesota. Benjamin Winchester, Coordinator of Data Analysis and Research, along with three UMM students—Abby Von Arx, Neil Linscheid, and Tara Schmidt—composed the research team to analyze the implications of this question.

The purpose of this study is to examine the manner in which the metropolitan-area media covers and reports events occurring in rural areas to Minnesota residents. The print media has continued to report the dramatic changes that have occurred during the past one hundred years. The research methodology consisted of reviews of print media over a one year period to identify dominant themes that guide representations and, consequently, perceptions of rural. A base of literature exists on this subject and was utilized to classify findings.

To obtain a sense of how urban Minnesota media portrays the events and priorities of rural Minnesota, the research team identified and selected two metropolitan print sources with statewide coverage. The St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Minneapolis Star Tribune both have a rich history of serving the state of Minnesota and were readily available. In addition, the research team was easily able to customize searches and access data electronically. Metropolitan television and radio stations, such as KARE and Minnesota Public Radio, were
also considered as possible options; however, due to time and resource constraints along with limited access to news archives, the research team excluded them.

After establishing the sources, a list of keywords was generated to direct our searches. The initial list of over twenty keywords was reduced to four: rural, small town, outstate, and greater Minnesota. These terms provided the greatest breadth of results. Furthermore, keyword search dates were restricted from January 1, 2003 to December 31, 2003. Then customized searches were conducted through the electronic databases Newsbank and Lexis-Nexis.

While reading and analyzing found articles we realized that some were simply not relevant to our project. Thus, a list of exclusions was determined. The criterion for exclusions was as follows:

- Obituaries.
- Articles about or taking place in another country.
- Articles about or taking place in other states.
- Articles about national politics or national legislation not relevant to or applied specifically to Minnesota.
- General entertainment news (book, movie, music, play reviews, etc.)
- Minimal usage of search terms, for example proper names of groups or titles.

Each article was examined to locate core evidence for the study. The geographical setting of the reported community, the topic of the story, the environment of the rural area portrayed, and the historical context of the definition were primary pieces of evidence gathered from each article. The three epochs described below were used to create a typology for each story portrayal:

1. Dichotomy—a focus on agriculture, farm life, and the description of rural as a residual of urban.
2. Continuum—a focus on economic growth and development.
3. Symbolic—idyllic descriptions and individual perceptions.

Also, reviewed literature was placed within specific topic categories for further analysis:

- Agriculture
- Crime
- Economic
- Education
- Environment/Natural Resources
- Government
- Health
- Land Use
- Lifestyle
- Political
- Public Interest
- Public Safety

Our chosen methodology did contain flaws. The stories not including the selected search terms were disregarded. It was quite plausible that authors wrote articles about small towns or rural areas without incorporating the keywords. Thus, we quite likely missed a large
section of rural portrayals. Additionally, and more importantly, the sample of two print
ewspapers contained a small portion of information and was only one of the potential media
media, such as television and radio, serving the state. We hope that our findings acquired
through this study are an appropriate answer to the timely question: What is rural? We
expect our project’s contributions to be a vital source of information for both rural and urban
residents.

Existing Knowledge
The magnitude of this study required us to draw from an expansive existing background of
knowledge. We examined the plethora of academic literature in the rural sociological field.
This provided a framework for defining rural upon which we built our findings. Two distinct
areas emerged as relevant in our discussion of rurality. The first area consisted of
academically based sociological definitions while the second area took a sociological
approach to examining the portrayals of rural by media.

Definition of Rural
After extensive reading, the meaning of the term emerged within three distinct epochs.
These epochs were further established as a dichotomy (pre-1930), a continuum (1930-1970),
and a symbolic representation (1970-present).

Traditional Definition – Either/Or (pre-1930)
The frontier areas of the U.S. were colonized using policies that encouraged rail development
and land acquisition. Small towns were established along rail lines approximately every 5 to
10 miles. These towns were created as a means to bring agricultural products to system-wide
distribution centers via the railway. The rise of large metropolitan areas provided an
empirical separation between the densely-populated cities and outlying areas. Places outside
of metropolitan cities in the United States during the twentieth century have included both
open country and small towns. Agriculture, forestry, mining, and fishing were dominant
features of these areas and provided avenues for farm product distribution and a central place
to purchase supplies.

These developments laid the foundation for the initial understandings of a dichotomous rural
definition. A place was either rural or urban. This representation is an either/or approach.
Rural becomes defined not by what it is, but by what it is not. If a place is not urban, then it
is rural. The traits of urbanity help construct the definition of rural—there is nothing inherent
in the meaning of rural that allows it to define itself. This traditional model closely
associates rural with agriculture and nothing more. The dichotomous view was dominant
before the 1930s and it is still utilized by many today, including the U.S. Census Bureau. For
the early Census counts, people living in incorporated settlements of over 2,500 were
considered urban—the remainders were rural.

![Figure 1: Rural-Urban Dichotomy](image-url)
The growth of rural areas slowed significantly during this time period. In 1920, the national urban population surpassed that of rural areas. The political support of rural legislators provided a stable basis for city growth enabling them to expand to surrounding counties. In 1914 the Smith-Lever Act created a national Extension Service that allowed for the diffusion of agricultural practices that were being researched through private experiments and institutions of higher education.

In the early 1900’s, there were specific attempts to define just what rural was. The Commission on Country Life was formed in 1910 by President Theodore Roosevelt and published a report that defined rural primarily through an agricultural perspective. Although these definitions attempted to collect characteristics of rural places outside of farming, an understanding of rural was intrinsically tied to agriculture. Additionally, Charles Josiah Galpin, an extension educator in Wisconsin, wrote *Rural Life* in 1920. This piece provided a rich description of rural people and places, which included many non-agricultural aspects. So, the question became, why did the definition of rural not extend beyond agriculture? The answer can be found in the popular view of urbanity at the time.

In 1938, Louis Wirth pioneered the description of *Urbanism as a Way of Life*. This proclamation insisted that the patterns of behavior in the urban population were significantly different than those previously witnessed. Urbanism was unstable, dynamic, and impersonal. Interactions with others were dependent upon one’s situation of work, home, or leisure. Now that these unique urban characteristics were identified, rural could be understood as the residual of urban, or as having traits opposite those of urban areas. The idealization of urban areas was beginning.

Even today, scholarly writings contain elements of the previous dichotomy. For example, following the 2000 presidential election the *Atlantic Monthly* published “One Nation, Slightly Divisible.” David Brooks stated that in “Red America they have QVC, the Pro Bowlers Tour, and hunting. In Blue America we have NPR, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and socially conscious investing.” The rural Red folks vote Republican and the urban Blue residents vote Democratic. These characterizations imply a simplicity in the ability to tell rural and urban individuals apart and described the exclusiveness of the two groups.

**Modern Definition – Growth as an Ideal (1930-1970)**

The second epoch is defined by the belief that rural and urban areas are not mutually exclusive, but are on opposite ends of a spectrum. This rural-urban *continuum* suggests that rurality or urbanity can be measured. Rural areas can now become urban ones! The Figure below provides a visual representation of this scale.
The extent to which a place is considered either rural or urban is determined by locating where it sits on the spectrum. For instance, a measurement of one signifies the most rural where as a measurement of ten indicates the most urban. In this approach, a rural small town can be “somewhat urban” with a score of three, or a large city can be “a little bit country” with a score of seven. The inherent assumption of positive growth was prevalent from the 1930s through the 1970s and is a primary characteristic of the continuum epoch. The “graduation” of a county from rural to urban status was something to be celebrated.

This model involved a number of converging factors. Automobiles changed modes of transportation and the connections of locations; industrialization and depression led to mass out-migration from rural regions; and educational programs established a basis for rural development in the form we now know it today.

In 1905, only 77,988 automobiles were registered in the United States. By 1925, this number swelled to over 17,000,000. Road systems were constructed across the country that produced changes in distribution and connections between places previously disconnected. Due to this progression, people living in the rural areas no longer committed days to traveling to the nearest hospital, but mere hours. The era of Little House on the Prairie was officially over.

The Great Depression drove people from the country to the city in search of employment. Urban clusters, as we know them today, began to take shape during this period. The Twin Cities area began to expand well beyond the core metropolitan counties of Hennepin and Ramsey. In addition, the counties containing Fargo-Moorhead, Rochester, Duluth, Mankato, and St. Cloud witnessed great growth and appeared to have attained the urban ideal (the urban ideal is defined as the propensity for both individuals and institutions to associate small town success with the attainment of urban status—both in terms of economy and individual relationships). For the first time ever, rural areas in Minnesota experienced a net population decline.

The GI Bill of 1944 provided college educations to many people that did not previously have the opportunity. This legislation created an influx of college graduates attempting to make their mark in professional activities. At the same time, numerous programs were installed between 1932 and 1950 to encourage growth in rural areas. The Rural Electrification Act and Tennessee Valley Authority were new programs targeted specifically at the economic development of rural regions. College graduates from small towns and farming communities who benefited from the GI Bill returned home to fill these newly created positions in the rural development field. The goal of community developers was to move small towns from the ‘low’, or rural, end of the continuum to the ‘high’, or urban, end. This continuum provided stages of progression with which rural towns could attain urban status. According to the continuum model, the urban ideal, which began in the 1920’s and 1930’s, was now attainable for even the most rural of communities.

Academics in the realm of Rural Sociology attempted to create measures to determine a town’s location along this continuum. Redfield (1941), Frankenberg (1966), and Duncan and Reiss (1976) all completed studies that dealt with various points on the continuum. One specific approach by Bealer, Willits, and Kurlesky in 1965 created a composite definition of three primary characteristics of rural places:

1. Ecological—the distribution of people in space
2. Occupational—people engaged in agricultural production

After the definition was introduced, a number of researchers attempted to evaluate the utility of this model. Indicators such as population density, distance to a metropolis, proportion of farmers, and traditionalism were utilized to characterize a specific town’s continuum location. These indicators were further supplemented by including participation in community organizations, church attendance, number of books read per year, and number of television programs watched. The modified research attempts were “shown to be low in power, inconsistent in breadth, and confusing in meaningfulness.” (Willits and Bealer, 165) Although the continuum model is still used by some people today, it has never been fully developed because of the difficulties in defining indicators that effectively characterize a town’s rurality or urbanity.

After thirty-plus years as a Rural Sociologist, Dr. Charles Cleland in 1994 used 11 measures to create an index from 0 (least rural) to 20 (most rural). The indicators used by Cleland were: access to metropolitan areas via interstate highway, population density, educational level, percent employed in retail service, percent employed in professional services, percent employed in public service, median family income, the persistence of poverty, number of local newspapers, population change, and attractiveness to retired people. According to Cleland’s model, Minnesota is less rural than the other Great Plains states. This model has continued promise and still presently attracts academic attention.

One measure regularly used today is the “Rural-Urban Continuum Code” system, created by Calvin Beale at the Economic Research Service of the USDA. Also known as a Beale Code, it is “a classification scheme that distinguishes metropolitan counties by size and non-metropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and proximity to metro areas.” The scales are elucidated in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metro Counties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-metro Counties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: USDA/ERS Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

Currently, these codes are in regular use in the United States and Canada. They continue to be updated following each decennial census. Between 1990 and 2000, two previously non-metropolitan counties – Carlton and Wabasha – “graduated” to metropolitan status. While this was heralded as a great success, the removal of the counties further lowers the per capita income and removes jobs from the statistics of rural counties. Blue Earth county is now poised to attain an urban status in the coming years. A similar index published by
USDA/ERS called the *Urban Influence Code*, assigns values to counties based on metropolitan status and the level of adjacency to these urban areas.

***(Post) Modern Definition – Rural as an Idyll (1970-present)***

There are a number of groups that view rural with varying definitions. Environmental organizations, recreational groups, and the agricultural industry choose to emphasize the predominant features of their definition that are most closely associated with their cause or situation. The previous understandings failed “to distinguish between the rural as a distinctive type of locality and the rural as a social representation” and constrained the ability of people to view rurality through another’s eyes. (Halfacree 1993, 34)

The modern approach defines rural by the prominent symbols that people assign to the term. It does not have to be grounded in an experiential component because popular literature, television, and movies weave a rich tapestry of rural portrayals that envelop the mind throughout life. In many cases, these representations are *idyllically* composed of nostalgic notions that include traditional American values, a slower pace of life, and other positive references that characterize country settings. The portrait of rural simplicity paints a pastoral image that resonates positively within the population. Today these types of Victorian ideas “embod[y] a naturalist, romantic aesthetic” which suggests a “rejuvenation of the rural idyll.” (McLaughlin, 82) A significant effect of the “rejuvenation of the rural idyll” was the rejection of the urban ideal as described during the second epoch.

People can tell when they are in a rural place but sometimes have trouble expressing just what allows them to say so. There is an old cliché, “I know it when I see it,” and the ambiguity of rural is similar to this. Some people think of going fishing while others view rural as skiing, barn building, hunting, or the traditional farm experience. Some think rural people are harder working, slow to change, and have tightly-knit social relationships. Only recently has this interpretation of rural been introduced to the United States. Appendix A lists traits that are heavily associated with rural people and places.

The W.K. Kellogg foundation commissioned the study and publication of four reports on the American perception of rural. In general, people “perceive rural America as being based on an almost completely agricultural economy”, as revolving “around families committed to religious values,” as serene and beautiful with livestock, animals, trees and family farms. “Rural America is friendlier and more relaxed,” it is a safe place to raise kids (Kellogg, 1).

The Kellogg studies further classified the symbolic images and emotions associated with rural living as either positive or negative: “perceptions of rural America are centered on a series of dichotomies – rural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times; rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling; rural life is friendly, but intolerant of outsiders and difference; and rural life is richer in *community* life, but epitomized by individuals struggling to make ends meet. Rural America offers a particular quality of life including serenity and aesthetic surroundings, and yet it is plagued by lack of opportunities, including access to cultural activities” (Kellogg, 1).

The symbolic rural definition is somewhat new in the United States even though the United Kingdom academic system has been contributing to this base of literature for just over 15 years. Brian McLaughlin examined the United Kingdom’s polices of the 1980s. He identified and challenged the popular images of rurality. McLaughlin found that the
positively-portrayed idyllic imagery associated with rural settings was detrimental to the poor and deprived residents of those areas. ‘Real world’ issues, such as poverty, were being masked by the constructed images of ‘moral affluence in the countryside’ (McLaughlin, 81). Policies failed to promote small businesses and “th[e] growing idolatry of the god Tourism as the economic and environmental savior of the country,” did not provide a sustainable economic base (McLaughlin, 86). In reality, tourism activities place pressure on rental and seasonal homes, which leads to higher rental costs for visitors and residents, and attracts low-wage service sector growth. People who recreate in rural areas tend to support the regulatory protection of natural resources and land conservation policies, before supporting legislation that benefits the actual inhabitants. Essentially, amenities are afforded solid protection while social and developmental issues may be disregarded.

The Netherlands is another country examining the implications of rural living. There it was found that as people associated positively with these idyllic notions, they choose to move away from the city to rural areas. These migration patterns placed demand on rural environments with small supplies of housing stock. The problem was further compounded by a Dutch policy of state controlled growth and development of the housing market (van Dam, et. al, 473). As more people moved into an area, per-capita income levels rose thus increasing the standard of living. If the trends continued, the rural poor would not be able to afford living in their own homes.

Even though, only recently, there has been an acceptance of the symbolic framework in understanding rural academically, Minnesota residents have been attracted to this symbol and this preference has been reflected in migration patterns. Minnesota has many positive images to associate with rural, such as lakes, forests, rivers, and prairie land along with their seasonal variations. In the 1970s and the 1990s there was a pendulum shift in migration back to rural locations, this reversed the losses of the 1950s and 1960s. We are witnessing a rebound in rural population growth. The presence of recreational opportunities and the purchase of retirement homes were the largest factors influencing growth. More and more people are choosing rural. In fact, true urban status no longer appears to be the ideal. The Minneapolis/St. Paul area experienced a “doughnut” effect of population growth, whereby the growth of areas surrounding, but not including, the core witnessed population explosions. The maps of population growth in Appendix B provide a graphical interpretation of this trend.

The urban population had a distinct view of rurality that varied by the types of knowledge and contact they had with rural places. Urban residents were the predominant holders of the idyllic view and felt these areas and lifestyles should be preserved. To keep such settings vital, people gave priority to extractive industries—agriculture, farming, forestry, and mining—while providing “little support for other types of business or industrial development” (Willits and Luloff, 454). In Minnesota, however, counties that relied on agriculture as an economic base were more likely to experience population decline. This “rural mystique” featured positive images of ruralism, antiurbanism, agrarianism, and wilderness. Negative images were overwhelmingly rejected. (Willits, et. al. 1990)

Urban residents that were active recreationally in rural areas were most supportive of preservation activities, which short-circuited developmental activities. Positive images of rurality were tied to the belief that rural areas possess monetary wealth, security, and well-being, however, disadvantages such as high unemployment and low income were rarely
acknowledged. Again, the focus was on the preservation of landscapes, not on “improving the life situations of rural people” (Willits and Luloff, 464).

To further explore the urban perceptions of rural life, a group of researchers in Pennsylvania conducted studies to collect symbolic images held by urban individuals of the state. In one study, respondents were given a blank map of the state and asked to “outline where you expect to find … rural areas in Pennsylvania.” Some people drew the rural areas as the predominant feature (e.g. here is where the rural areas are found) while others drew circles at the cities (e.g. cities take priority, the rural areas are only residual). Additionally, some provided words or images, such as streams, wildlife, mountains, or caves. Overall, the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions urbanites held toward rural areas were likely to influence both their behavior and support for public and private policies that enhanced rural well-being (Jacob and Luloff, 264-67).

The dichotomy and continuum views of rural are not absent today. They are still valid in our present symbolic environment; nevertheless they are rivaled by the varying, somewhat narrowly defined idealistic views. For example, a farmer in overalls is an attractive symbol to represent a rural community—it fulfills the traditional dichotomous definition of rural. A community that is viewed positively in the second epoch, with an emphasis on growth, may be viewed negatively in the third epoch, where the growth is cutting into natural amenities. Again, the dichotomous and continuum perspectives provide powerful symbols to attach to rural understandings.

**Portrayal of Rural by Media**

Russell Frank studied the reporting of violent crime stories in four small towns by metropolitan newspapers between 1994 and 1999. Four characterizations associated with these rural areas were found in his research:

- small towns are “close-knit”; everyone knows everyone else
- small towns are safe, people leave their front doors unlocked and their keys in the ignition of their cars
- small towns are “sleepy,” they frequently “nestle” into the landscape
- terrible things are not supposed to happen in small towns (Frank, 209).

The pastoral images described above are popular ways to picture rural areas. In the context of these stories, it became apparent that either the small towns were entirely too similar or the reporters were working from a script that directed the choices made in the environmental description and selection of quotations. Frank proposed that “the presence of clichés…signals lazy writing, just as the presence of stereotypes signals lazy reporting” (Frank, 212).

In a study of British television programs that portray rural areas, evidence of the ‘rural idyll’ identified by Keith Halfacree and Brian McLaughlin was apparent. The imagery depicted by these programs provided only a glimpse into the rural reality that was found in open, non-built-up, sparse surroundings with the presence of agriculture. While producers believe that setting was an important consideration, they implied that there was no “plot” in rural areas. The authors also found that “social imageries that enact particular set of class identities,” particularly those of the middle-class, were consumed heavily by television viewers (Phillips,
et. al., 24). While issues of class were not topics of this study, they provided insight into the British media production methods.

One of the W. K. Kellogg studies examined how the national news media portrays rural. This study became a model upon which this research project was conducted. The Kellogg report reviewed stories from a six-month period in 2002 of major newspapers, news magazines, and television newscasts. In another study of the series, interviews identified four themes that were common:

1. rural America is primarily agricultural
2. rural America symbolizes American values
3. rural areas are peaceful and serene
4. rural areas are friendlier and safer than the rest of America.

The differences in economy, values, environment, and atmosphere were highlighted discrepancies between rural and urban areas. The media reports identified that “the term ‘rural’ is often used in the media to describe areas that are becoming urbanized and are trying to preserve their rural past or atmosphere” (Kellogg, 30).

**Findings**

The following sections will detail the findings of the keyword searches, topical, historical definition, location of stories, and the writings/quotations from articles. Our purpose in this research was not to place judgments on specific media sources or authors, but to begin a quest to enhance the urban understanding of both the history and the current diversity found in rural areas. To prevent a prejudice of one newspaper over another, the findings will not identify whether the *Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune* provided individual writings or quotations.

To begin with, inherent within the terms “outstate” and “greater Minnesota” is a dichotomous description of rural. Both imply and are used commonly to refer to places in Minnesota that are not within the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Figures 3 through 6 show the number of stories that contained each of the four keywords. The graphs represent the number of stories analyzed by the research team, thus the exclusions were applied.
Figure 3: Number of Stories Referencing "rural" in 2003

Figure 4: Number of Stories Referencing "small town" in 2003
The “rural” term is popular and used commonly by both newspapers. Interestingly, there appears to be similar patterns in the usage of “rural” with a high variability from one month to the next of “outstate” or “greater Minnesota.” For the “greater Minnesota” term, they almost appear to be mirror images of one another.
Figure 7: Location of Rural Media Stories, 2003

The following tables will explore how the terms are related to one another by determining which stories contained two of the terms in a single story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Small Town</th>
<th>Outstate</th>
<th>Greater MN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Town</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>595</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outstate</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>339</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater MN</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Matrix of Keyword Matches (before exclusion)

Table 2 The term “rural” is most closely associated with “small town” and some cases, with “outstate” as well. “Small Town” appears to be related to “rural”, but quite unrelated to “outstate” or “greater Minnesota.”
Table 3: Number of valid articles matched for keyword "rural"

Table 4 shows the number of articles that matched the keyword “rural” and were considered valid; these are represented in the first number in each column. The number of rural stories declined as the year went on.

Table 4: Number of valid articles matched for keyword "small town"

Table 5 shows the number of articles that matched the keyword “small town” and were considered valid; these are represented in the first number in each column.
Table 5: Number of valid articles matched for keyword "outstate"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows the number of articles that matched the keyword “outstate” and were considered valid; these are represented in the first number in each column.

Table 6: Number of valid articles matched for keyword "greater Minnesota" (% of all valid and invalid matches)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 shows the number of articles that matched the keyword “greater Minnesota” and were considered valid; these are represented in the first number in each column. The numbers in the parentheses represent the percentage of all valid articles and the total number of all matches. The keyword ‘greater Minnesota’ yielded the highest percentages of valid articles for 2003 when compared to the total for all other keywords. Although these percentages are higher the total number of articles that were considered valid are the smallest of all of the keywords. This shows that ‘greater Minnesota’ is used less, but it is the most potent word used to in conjunction with rural areas.
Topical Areas
In Table 8 and Figure 8 below, it is apparent that the economic and political issues were discussed at high levels during 2003. The legislative JOBZ and the Local Government Aid programs were hot topics. As one peers into each topical area, it appears that the definition changes to suit the story topic and the intended audience. The following inquiries into specific topical examples provide evidence of a variable definition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topical Area</th>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment / Natural Resources</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Use</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Interest</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Safety</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Number of Stories by Topic

![Figure 8: Percentage of Stories by Topic](image)
Out-takes

It is not efficient to include every article in this report. There may also be copyright issues that would prevent that publication. Either way, an attempt is made to minimize the amount of information while retaining anonymity. The subsequent quotations were selected from pertinent articles found in the *Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune*. The selections were categorized by topic and illuminate the general threads apparent in most stories germane to the subject matter. However, keep in mind that the chosen quotations are not completely representative of all articles viewed.

Crime

- “The tiny central Minnesota community of Pillager was left shaken Friday after three people were found dead at a rural home Thursday. As investigators pored over a mobile home and an adjoining wooded plot of land for clues to what they believe is a triple homicide, residents called their neighbors to seek information and remind them to lock their doors.”
- “‘Cold Spring, Minnesota is a very close-knit community,’ ‘when something like this happens, it shakes the foundation of everyone who lives here. It’s just very, very hard to understand.”
- *This is one story encompassing the killing of a mother and her two children in Long Prairie last year. Not necessarily a typical example of other crime stories. “It’s the type of crime that makes a small town shiver. … ‘To be frank with you it just scares the heck out of everybody’ … It just shakes up the whole community. … Statistics say it’s slow and safe in rural America. But when grisly crimes occur, statistics are of little comfort. … In the days since residents who didn’t lock their doors have locked them. Those who have already secured doors and windows have double- and triple-checked them. … ‘Our community feels violated. How can something like this happen to a quaint little community like Long Prairie? We are not the little community anymore.’ … ‘it affects everyone. It just really shakes them up.’ … ‘In one sense the real world is coming to Todd County and the real world is coming to the rest of rural Minnesota.’ … When a homicide occurs…small towns are more traumatized because they ‘don’t experience it on a regular basis much like the inner city or the fringe of a big city experiences it.’ … ‘More people are locking their doors…It’s too bad we have to. But we need to. … the killings were allegedly were committed by outsiders. ‘I think we’re more angry that someone dared come in and do this to us.’ … ‘Getting those guys in jail is good, but I don’t feel any more safe. … If strangers can do this here, what other bad things can happen?”*

Economic

- “Minnesota’s growing season started strong, but the hot, dry weather in July and August cut sharply into expected yields in soybeans and corn, two of the state's big money crops, and potentially could hurt the state's rural economy.”
- “‘The LGA cuts sparked debate on the House floor and letters of concern from some city leaders, who contend the bill imposes a disproportionate burden on low property wealth communities while sheltering high-wealth suburban communities. ‘Who looked at rural Minnesota and decided we are living too high on the hog?’ asked a State Representative. ‘Rural Minnesota is in tough economic times right now and local government aid is the way to survive in these tough times.’”
• “Job-starved rural cities and development authorities had applied for designation of 38,000 acres under the program … Pawlenty's JOBZ program was a key element of his 2002 campaign, especially when he courted rural voters. And he wasn't too timid about touting its potential in reviving a rural economy that by most accounts is continuing a decades-long decline and falling further behind the Twin Cities.”

• “‘Ethanol is an economic development success story, and I don't understand why they would want to damage an industry which has been one of the bright spots in the rural economic picture.’”

• “It's rural areas that gain the most from the technology because denser populated areas tend to have fewer problems finding people in trouble.”

• “Minnesota Technology, a group created in 1991 to promote the interests of high-tech companies in outstate Minnesota, said companies were right to be worried about Chinese rivals, especially in industries such as computers and electronic products, machinery, fabricated metals and electrical equipment and appliances. However, Minnesota Technology officials said some of the perceptions of outstate companies struggling to compete with the Chinese are off the mark.”

• ”'Every year that we extend the plant, every [nuclear waste-storage] cask we give Xcel, means dozens fewer wind turbines in rural Minnesota that could be creating development and bringing dollars to our rural communities,’ she said. ‘We’re at the point that we can either leap ahead in wind development like other states or drag our feet and stay with the status quo.'”

• As the state considers Gov. Tim Pawlenty's initiative for developing businesses in a single industry _ biotechnology _ venture capital investing with a geographic focus is happening throughout the state.” "Northeast was involved in five of the 13 venture capital deals in Minnesota. Minnesota Investment Network Corp. (MIN-Corp), a nonprofit venture capital fund that focuses on companies in rural Minnesota, handled one other deal during the quarter." "Both Sinex and Miller say they know their company's [rural] location could have been a liability with some venture capitalists, who often insist that the business move closer to where they operate as a condition for getting funds. President Steven Mercil said MIN-Corp focuses on tech and manufacturing firms in rural areas and invests in everything from start-ups to well-established businesses.

• In comparison, projections for outstate Minnesota call for the greatest numbers of new jobs to be in health-care services, business services and other occupations that, on average, pay less than information technology, management and professional jobs. Manufacturing employment is projected to show small growth outside the Twin Cities, with the exception of a decline in the northwest. Greater Minnesota will see the largest percentage gains in jobs in computer and math-related fields because the current number of such jobs and as a result of the need for computer and technical workers in an ever-wider array of industries, state jobs forecasters said.

• For the first time in more than 80 years, a city in rural Minnesota is starting a municipal telephone company. The City Council in Windom, population 4,500, in southwestern Minnesota voted earlier this month to go into the telecommunications business and give the city's current service provider, Qwest, some much-needed competition. Windom's decision is one community's up-by-its-own-bootstraps refusal to let Qwest's foot dragging keep it in the digital dark ages. Slow dial-up Internet service is crimping Windom's efforts to attract new businesses and jobs. To date, Windom's decision to establish a full-service municipal telecommunications company
sets it apart among Minnesota cities. But throughout rural America, communities are developing creative ways to get the affordable broadband telecommunications service that they have lacked. That in turn should result in rural communities being able to hold their own in the competition for business investment that is bound to quicken as the economy recovers. Those in Windom and other rural communities that refuse to let a giant telephone monopoly deny them the benefits of that recovery are leaders indeed.

- As state leaders met in Mankato this month to discuss the state of agriculture and rural communities, the Upper Midwest reached an important milestone. We installed our 1,000th megawatt of wind power. The two events are more connected than it might appear. "But let's not overlook some other impressive facts about Minnesota wind power. For example, it will produce about 3,100 jobs, $4 million annually in royalty payments to farmers, and $3.6 million in tax payments to local governments to help fund roads, schools, and health care in rural areas. One thousand megawatts is also an investment milestone: $1 billion worth of equipment and services invested in the rural Midwest. Farmers: Farmers and rural communities are already sold on the benefits of wind power. Wind power in the Midwest can be a vital piece of our state's rural development agenda. We have the right blend of good winds, resourceful rural communities, and a skilled manufacturing base to seize this fleeting opportunity.

- Telemedicine that links patients with doctors in remote clinics is not a new concept. But it is a new tool in creating virtual assisted living that can help frail people avoid unnecessary hospital or nursing home stays. With a $550,000 federal matching grant, the university will set up an experiment involving about 50 people in Minneapolis and Wadena County to measure the effects of telemonitor home health care in the inner city and in rural central Minnesota. It will use them in home health agencies operated by four of its 43 Minnesota nursing homes, in St. Peter, Preston and Brainerd, as well as Windom.

- In comparison, projections for outstate Minnesota call for the greatest numbers of new jobs to be in health-care services, business services and other occupations that, on average, pay less than information technology, management and professional jobs. Greater Minnesota will see the largest percentage gains in jobs in computer and math-related fields because the current number of such jobs and as a result of the need for computer and technical workers in an ever-wider array of industries, state jobs forecasters said.

- Alec Donaldson, a retired marketing executive, hops in his boat on a hot summer day, motors to the middle of a lake near Brainerd, Minn., and lowers a white disk into the depths. Sitting in front of a computer in St. Paul, researcher Leif Olmanson looks at digital satellite pictures of Minnesota and measures light reflected off thousands of lakes. In very different ways, both men are seeking an answer to an important question about the health of Minnesota lakes: How clear is the water? Now, Olmanson and other scientists at the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus have a sweeping answer. By analyzing Landsat satellite images, they have determined the water clarity of 10,469 lakes _ more than 10 times the number tested each year under a state program that relies on volunteers such as Donaldson of rural Pequot Lakes.

- But the efforts in other states suggest that Minnesota could indeed be moving more aggressively to develop renewable power at reasonable costs _ investing simultaneously in environmental quality and rural economic development. Sadly, the
experience in this state suggests that new legislative mandates will be necessary to make that happen.

- Wind turbines in western Minnesota are making electricity at a cost far below projections. By the end of this year, the wind-powered generating capacity built or under contract in Minnesota will be nearly one-third of what Xcel now generates from nukes; by 2012, wind capacity will nearly double.
- In Sauk Centre, Minn., an organic creamery called Pride of Main Street Dairy is producing a yogurt-like beverage that's taking off nationwide. With AURI's help, those companies "enriched the well-being of rural communities throughout the state," he said.

Education
- "Rural schools are feeling the pinch as well. Oak Land Cooperative, which serves Cambridge-Isanti, Princeton and St. Francis School Districts, plans to close its summer school this year."

Environment / Natural Resources
- "The 'good life' is defined by the three W's—woods, wildlife and water. Whether they're anglers or boaters, campers or hikers, hunters or bird watchers, they consider the state’s abundant resources part of their identity, defining who they are and touching almost every aspect of their lives."

Government
- "Previously, North Oaks City Administrator Jim March had said the city ordinance dated back to the late 1980s. Council members felt neon was not in keeping with the rural character of their city, though the area has since become more commercial."

Health
- "She transformed the facility from an old-style, traditional rural hospital to a dynamic, modern, high-tech regional medical center,” it is also profitable, “which is somewhat unusual for our rural health care delivery systems and hospitals.”

Land Use
- "The dispute between the region’s chief planning agency and Lake Elmo involves Lake Elmo’s desire to remain a rural enclave, with estate-sized lots. The council wants city officials to devote at least part of the city’s land to higher-density development with public sewers.”

Lifestyle
- "In pockets around the country, baby boomers—sometimes pre-retirement—are moving to small towns or farms, seeking a less hectic, more fulfilling life. … Some are drawn by social forces—fleeing crime and traffic or seeking a sense of community. Others can afford the move because of financial gains from real estate or the stock market. And some can live in small towns because the Internet and cell phones allow them to work from virtually anywhere. … ‘in a small city, everyone is in this together. It's a real thing. If I were to give advice to anyone moving to a small town, it's this: Go out and meet everyone you can, from all walks of life and all income levels, or they will look at you kind of suspiciously. It's very important to
volunteer in the community. It's taken me to places I didn't expect.’ … Most who have tried the country life acknowledge that the move can be trying at first, especially in communities where the locals don't want growth and aren't open to outsiders. But most have also found kindred spirits.”

Political
- “It follows that when a bonding bill goes on the agenda of a session already rife with regional rivalries as the 2003 session has been a display of clenched-jaw parochialism ensues. That sentiment has been a big part of this week's delay in completing legislative business. … More than a few legislators withheld judgment on the bill in the hope that they could win a little more local pork by playing hard to get. … They've given Gov. Tim Pawlenty and legislative leaders a good taste of how difficult it is to govern a state torn by urban-suburban-rural mutual suspicion.”
- "After a battle over competing rural and suburban interests, the Republican majority in the Minnesota House on Wednesday approved a no-tax-increase tax bill that would slash aid to St. Paul, Minneapolis and many outstate cities."

Public Interest
- "Rural Minnesota, meet the beetles. The seemingly harmless, tiny bugs, which have baffled Twin Cities residents for more than a week, now seem to loom larger than Paul Bunyan in wooded and farm areas, and residents from Albert Lea to Zimmerman have quickly lost tolerance."

Public Safety
- “The debate featured the same split that has long followed this issue: Many urban lawmakers were vehemently opposed to encouraging more guns in public places, while rural lawmakers wondered what all the fuss was about.”

Representations – Positive
- “As the morning sun works its way into the summer sky, a farmstead just outside of Northfield echoes with the sounds of the county: cows mooing, a tractor rattling around in a nearby field, and bees buzzing through the purple-tinged prairie.”
- “[---] understands the mysterious force that keeps people in rural Minnesota, lures them back after they've left or calls them for the first time to the country's woods, waters and small-town rhythms … many people will decide to stay in Greater Minnesota, and many will return, or flee the city for the woods and water of places like Isle, where, out of necessity, they become entrepreneurs. ‘It's the kind of place where people create a job for themselves because they want to be there,’ she said, the way her great-grandfather did when he left Minneapolis to buy the farm where her father lives and where she loves to walk the ‘enchanted forest’ of trees her grandfather planted.”
- “Demand for space in these areas is fed by attractive demographics, an affinity for the small-town feeling and the desire of many entrepreneurs to do business in the small cities where they live. … ‘And then there’s the small-town feel. It’s a very comfortable thing to walk down the street and know everybody you see.’"
Representations – Negative

- “Economic worry gnaws like the frigid wind in the western third of Minnesota this January. The region’s traditionally dominant industry, agriculture, remains depressed, many of its practitioners dependent on government subsidies to keep farming. Manufacturing is in such decline that nearly all the job gains of the 1990s have been lost in the past two years…The region’s political clout has dwindled. Its children have drifted away.”

- “People in northern Minnesota are hungry for political attention,” they often “feel left out” so having a governor visit “really means a lot.”

What are rural places like?

- Said a State Representative, “We have entertainment centers out in rural Minnesota and they’re called bars.”

- “In towns with populations of less than 2,000, the people you have business meetings with in the morning will be in the booth next to you at the coffee shop for lunch. So be nice!”

- “This is the time of year when the rural folks sneak in for a couple ball games before school resumes. They follow the Twins much more faithfully in the hinterlands than do the big city folks.”

What are rural people like?

- “And in a third study released Wednesday, the trade department found that employers in greater Minnesota consider their employee generally to be reliable and hard-working.”

- “Cold Spring, population 3,000, is the sort of town where people stop their cars right on Main Street to talk with neighbors standing on a curb. Cooperation always was needed by area farmers who had to rely on one another when crops or weather turned bad. ‘If you have trouble with a machine or something, people will come over to help’ … ‘Especially if you have medical problems. Everyone is there.’ … A small town where people like to say they all know one another, even if they don’t. Cold Spring will have to fall back on its faith again, residents say.”

- “The desire to live in a private, quite life just had to happen,” said a 48-year-old woman, “who traded her city lifestyle community, prestige and career that revolved around issues and ideas to live in the boonies and work with her hands. … She rises early with the chickens she tends in a shed out back. She reads, bakes bread and watches the finches and grosbeaks flit about her 10-acre plot in rural Harris … Later, she’ll head downstairs to her tidy workshop, where she takes old clocks apart and makes them run like new.”
Conclusions

In defining rural, four themes emerged in the examination of metropolitan area media coverage.

**Theme 1: There is not a conscious pattern of stereotypical rural portrayals.**

While some articles do use similar language, there was no consistent portrayal of rural as a whole throughout the pool of articles. The authors did not appear to be working from the same script. Articles did contain clichés and stereotypes either written by individual writers or selected as quotations. The absence of blatant generalizations may be due to Minnesota’s historical connections to agriculture and the 10,000 lakes that provide cultural ties to rural areas. One the whole, Minnesota residents have more experience with and tend to feel more connected to rural settings. Also, the urbanization of the state took place a full thirty years after the national average which prevented the collective memory from forgetting its rural historical ties.

When stereotypes and clichés appeared, there were obvious similarities. While the authors did not follow a prescribed script when writing about rural Minnesota, they did use an abundance of symbolism. Both positive and negative portrayals were identified in the stories. Items listed below are excerpts from articles. Those in quotations were quotations in the articles.

**Positive**
- “The small town ways of life”
- A “sense of community”
- Tightly knit small town
- Sounds of the country: cows mooing, a tractor rattling around in a nearby field and bees buzzing through the purple-tinged prairie

**Negative**
- “People in northern Minnesota are hungry for political attention,” he said. They often ‘feel left out,’ so having a governor visit ‘really means a lot.”
- more feed caps in the rotunda than at a Brooks and Dunn concert [farmer rally]
- Fear of change
- Deep in debt. Steep overhead costs. Spending other people’s money.

A common stereotype associated with rural areas was the tradition of farming and agriculture, however there were few stories about agriculture. This was surprising since agriculture is a consistent commonality in an understanding of the rural definition.

**Theme 2: A clear definition of rural was not evident – there is an absence of clarity outside of context.**

In general situations, it is nearly impossible to arrive at an agreement of a specific definition. There is no common view because rural is an amorphous, ambiguous, and multi-faceted concept. However, as a particular topic is discussed, the meanings of rural become more...
clear and people can arrive at some consensus. As the context is further defined a clear
definition of rural can emerge. A definition is relative and dependent upon one’s history and
contact with rural places.

Any city outside of Minneapolis and St. Paul was fair game for a rural label. For example,
Rochester, Marshall, Lake Elmo, Wayzata, and White Bear Lake were mentioned at least
once when referring to rural or small town areas. In some cases, metro and rural are used to
describe the same location. The size of a place does not appear to be a determining factor. If
you are from Minneapolis and go to St. Cloud you may think that you are in a rural place. If
you are from St. Cloud and you go to Morris, you may think that is a rural place. The same
is true for a person going from Morris to Alberta. Those in Alberta will say only those that
live in the open country are living in rural places. This same logic can be applied to the
concept of “small town” as well.

In most articles, issues of environment and natural resource coverage, which included
recreation, were primarily about conflict. Hunting, fishing, and gun control were closely
associated with the rural term – whether they were in a remote forest or in Washington
county.

The ethanol industry is closely tied to rural. In some cases, it was implied to be integral to
the future success of the entire rural economy. The subsidy cuts that spawned protests during
the spring legislative session were portrayed as consolidated efforts between farmers (rural
county) and business owners (rural city). It was clear that the subsidies were yet another
form of welfare for rural America, which already “benefits” from agricultural government
transfer payments.

Theme 3: Rural areas are portrayed as in need of help.

The fact that this was a relevant theme may be partially explained by the difficult budget
choices that had to be made in 2003. These were tough times for everyone. While this may
have increased the portrayal of needs in rural places, it is not believed that these references
would disappear had the budget situation been more positive. The consistent findings
discussed below reinforced this theme.

The Local Government Aid (LGA) topic was popular, as looming cuts made for interesting
speculation. Rural areas allied with the inner-city to battle the suburban interests. While
references were made to this alliance, the stories tended to emphasize the rural experience of
the cuts, which were greater in potential impact. For example, losing ten police officers in a
large metro police force may not be as detrimental as a small town losing a comparable
number which could be all of their officers.

Just as LGA was a hot topic, so was Gov. Pawlenty’s proposed JOBZ program. The purpose
of the legislation was to stimulate struggling rural economies. The focus of many JOBZ
articles stressed how the tax-free zones would help the lagging rural economy.

The following list of excerpts were taken from articles to provide a review of the vocabulary
used by the authors to describe the economy, education, and instances of natural disasters
found in rural places. They are representative of the idea that rural places are in need of help
and are unable to help themselves.
Economy
- “downward spin”
- distressed Minnesota community
- “hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs in Minnesota”
- lost population
- beleaguered
- pledge to help rural economies
- ailing rural economy
- distressed rural communities
- “threatened”
- agriculture, mining and timber industries are hurting
- geographic isolation
- economically precarious
- flight of workers
- struggling to compete
- “job market isn’t as open as the Twin Cities”
- bolster the ethanol industry and rural economies
- fragile rural economy
- desperately needs help
- a migration out of rural areas

Education
- declining school enrollment
- fear of school shutdowns
- saving rural schools
- tends to be tougher for small schools and those outside of the Twin Cities
- But in economically precarious rural Minnesota a town’s survival depends on the quality of the education it gives the kids who don’t move away after commencement.

Natural Disasters
- While some in Buffalo Lake were hoping for federal help with repairs...Federal Emergency Management Agency officials are concerned the small town might not meet federal disaster-aid criteria. But it was Buffalo Lake, a town of about 700 in eastern Renville County, that took the brunt of the storm. Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who toured the area Wednesday, called it ‘massive damage.’ ‘I hope everyone rebuilds, because the town isn't that big the way it is.’
- drought has wilted any hope of turning a profit this year
- Minnesota's growing season started strong, but the hot, dry weather in July and August cut sharply into expected yields in soybeans and corn, two of the state's big money crops, and potentially could hurt the state's rural economy. ‘Most corn growers don't have a very wide margin of profit,’ he said, so a bad year means farmers ‘won't have money to buy equipment, clothes, combines and other goods in rural Minnesota. Rural communities are dying, and this is just another stake in their hearts.’

There were examples of individual success stories in rural places. For instance, a unique business idea that employed twenty new people was seen as a rare, extraordinary event.
However, it seemed the idea that small towns may be self-sufficient or even thriving was an alien concept.

**Theme 4: In light of the negative portrayals, there is evidence of consistently positive idyllic imagery.**

Although we cannot gauge the impact of the positive imagery on the readers themselves, we cannot disregard their symbolic presence. A few topics provided a positive portrayal of rural areas including lifestyle, the environment, and recreation. While it appears that the structures of rural areas (economy and roads) may be deteriorating, the people are living vibrant, meaningful lives.

The quality of life in rural areas is high if your standards for quality are not derived from urban value systems. People in rural places rate their quality of life just as high, if not higher, than people living in urban places. In one story series, “the poll suggests that rural and small-town people tend to have a higher opinion of Minnesota life than their urban and suburban counterparts. In fact, nearly twice as many folks from Greater Minnesota—24 percent—said the state is ‘the best’ for quality of life, compared to 13 percent of people living in or near the Twin Cities.” A typical response generated from this survey was “‘I’ve been East and West and South, but I wouldn’t like to live anywhere but here.’” “Minnesota Nice” is found in small towns. Rural areas are safe and one can attain a sense of familiarity that cannot be achieved in an urban environment. Consistent with this sense of informality, residents of small towns are referred to, and refer to one another, as “folks.”

The studies cited earlier have shown that these idyllic images are powerful and resonate positively within the population. Thus, readers may choose to look past the negatives and select the positives in their symbolic understanding of rural areas.

**Summary and Footnotes**

This has been an illuminating project as it has brought about an awareness of the varied stories that are put forward by our media.

There is a general belief that small towns and rural areas are dying. While this may be true for some places, it is not a statement that one can use as a blanket to cover all of rural Minnesota. Over 85% of cities in Minnesota are under 5,000, and those with retirement and recreational activities are witnessing explosions of growth. There are diverse, vibrant small towns in our state and the continued associations between rural and urban places do not provide a valid basis for comparison.

We exist in a state with multiple rural realities. Rural does have a definition when a specific context is established. Are we talking about farming or about tourism? People have different backgrounds and connections with rural places, which have an impact on how they perceive rural. A realization and understanding of these perceptions will move Minnesotan’s toward minimizing the limiting effects of the rural-urban differences.
Bibliography & Recommended Reading


APPENDIX A: Attributes of Rural People and Places

Kellogg (general)
- A strong sense of family (had to have it because rural places are geographically separated from everyone else and family is all you had.) (7)
- Hard working (7)
- Commitment to community (7)
- Strong religious beliefs (7)
- Self-sufficient/self-reliance (7)
- Loyal to their country (7)
- Tightly knit (5)
- Everyone knows each other (5)
- Rural Americans personify the Puritan work ethic (5)
- Rural America represents the American Frontier—individuals work independently on their farm to provide for themselves and their families, but they also provide food for the county. (5)
- “self-sufficient” (5)
- lack of money/poverty (10)
- over-developed/sprawl (10)
- individualism (1)
- The nation’s backbone and supplier of food (1)
- The last open space in an environment with a rapidly developing suburban landscape. (1)
- Rural America is...plagued by persistent poverty, rooted in low wages and dismal job opportunities. (1)
- Dominated by agriculture (3)

Bealer, Willits and Kuvlesky (1965)
- Low population density (256)
- Small absolute size (256)
- Relative isolation (256)
- Agricultural production as a way of life (256)
- Homogenous and differentiated from other sectors of society (256)
- Shared ideals of behavior (264)
- Traditional (264)
- Slow to change (264)
- Provincial (264)
- Fatalistic (264)
- Little specialization of labor (264)
- Primarily face to face relationships (264)

Willits, Bealer and Timbers (1990)
- Simpler lifestyles (561)
- Pastoral images imbued with Biblical interpretations (561)
- Links rural with Nation’s heritage and American character (561)
• Primeval wilderness (561)
• Honesty (561)
• Religiosity (561)
• Strong sense of individualism (561)
• Moral (561)
• Virtuous (561)
• Less quality of life (562)
• Less opportunities (562)
• Less services (562)
• Left behind from mainstream American culture and affluence (562)
• “hicks” (562)
• “hayseeds” (562)
• “country bumpkins” (562)
• poverty (562)
• Rural life brings out the best in people (569)
• Rural families are more close-knit and enduring than other families (569)
• Because rural life is closer to nature, it is more wholesome (569)
• Rural communities are the most satisfying of all places to live, work and play (569)
• Rural people are more likely than other people to accept you as you are (569)
• Neighborliness and friendliness are more characteristic of rural communities than other areas (569)
• Life in rural communities is less stressful than life elsewhere (569)
• There is less crime and violence in rural areas than in other areas (569)
• Rural areas have more peace and quiet than do other areas (569)
(Non-rural people were less likely to agree with negative images of rural life)
• Rural life is monotonous and boring (570)
• Rural communities provide few opportunities for new experiences (570)
• Rural communities provide few opportunities for people to get ahead in life (570)
• Living in rural areas means doing without the good things in modern society (570)
• Rural people are crude and uncalkulated in their talk, actions and dress (570)
• Rural people are suspicious and prejudiced toward anyone not like themselves (570)
• Agricultural life is the natural and good life for people (572)
• The family farm is the backbone of a democratic society (572)
• A farm is an ideal place to raise a family (572)
• Farming is the basic occupation upon which the rest of the economy depends (572)
• Farmers embody the virtues of independence and self-sufficiency (572)
• Farms and farming provide the moral core of our society (572)
• People need to experience the serenity of the countryside to balance the hectic pace of the city (573)
• Being close to nature makes people better (573)
• The solitude that is possible in the open country and woodlands brings peace to people who go there (573)
• Open country and wilderness areas are an important part of our nation’s heritage (573)
• Open country and wilderness areas are beautiful and inviting places to be (573)
Willits and Luloff (1995)
• Because rural lifestyles are desirable, they should be preserved (458)
• Operating farms in suburban areas should be maintained (458)
• Open space should be maintained (458)
• Rural values are an important part of our national heritage (458)
• Traditional patterns of life should change as society changes (458)
• Farming activities offensive to local activities should be restricted (458)
• Life in rural areas is less stressful than life elsewhere (458)
• There is less crime and violence in rural areas than in other areas (458)
• Rural areas have more peace and quiet than do other areas (458)
• Neighborliness and friendliness is more characteristic of rural communities (458)
• The most satisfying aspects of life are more likely to be found in rural areas (458)
APPENDIX B: Minnesota Population Change, 1900 – 2000

Legend
- >10% Loss
- <10% Loss
- <10% Gain
- <10% Gain
- >10% Gain