Status and Change in the Rural Midwest — a Retrospect

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There is no substitute to my mind for knowing some part of the world well, by intimate and repeated observation. Obviously this cannot be a great part and probably it will be by comparison of rather small parts. Perhaps what I am saying is that geography is and has been regional and experiential, which is not the same as saying that regional geography is the objective of all geography. I do enjoy a good Landeskunde as I enjoy browsing through a well-drawn atlas to visit places I know and others that I shall never see. This is the immemorial curiosity of mankind to know something significant and interesting of places that are different from one's own place.

To unlettered folk geographic lore may be little more than the small world of their own territory. Within those limits the natives have competent identification of the differences in terrain, vegetation, productivity, habitation, amenities, hazards. They have given the names that we have adopted in large measure into our vocabulary. The descriptive names proper to all geography are in part unique and locational, place names, and in part qualitative and comparative, characterizing features as belonging to a class.

Geography is the attempt to identify and understand the differences in terrestrial space and this is as true of the university seminar as of the aborigine. Whatever the academic discipline that uses it, and they are numerous, the geographic method is understood as the inspection of the areal distribution and difference of whatever is being studied. It is to gain insight into the multiform Earth and its life that we pursue our inquiries, knowing that we who may be thus called as to profession are only a modest part of the representatives of such interest.

In the early years of academic geography in the United States I was sent (1910) to make a study of the Upper Illinois Valley for the state geological survey. The purpose was to be an educational bulletin for teachers and residents of that area, to instruct rather than to discover. It was a Landeskunde of sorts for which I lacked model and preparation. Unschooled observation though it was it was independent observation and I found out some things. The fertility of the upland was due to a well-marked mantle spread indifferently over different glacial materials and rock surfaces, later to be recognized as loessial, though not the kind of loess found along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The distribution of prairie and woodland, strongly outlined by change in relief, began a continuing interest in the origin of grasslands. There were other glimmerings, that Indian sites were governed by considerations other than those of the whites who followed them, that pioneer settlements were relocated because of malaria, that first water and then rail transport determined the changing logistics of townsites, that the farmsteads were dispersed in

terms of farm size and these were changing. Elementary questions that brought some awareness that the scene then presented was the result of almost eighty years of settlement by people of certain ways, and some anticipation of further rural change. A good expression of the Corn Belt, prosperous and stable, which made sense as to its character.

The attitude at the time was that geographers should do regional studies, without too much concern as to how these should be done. It was not yet the time when the boundaries of regions or their hierarchies were taken seriously. In time it was thought there would be a series of regional monographs illustrating the diversity of environment and ways of life across the country. The kind of area might be a political unit or a 'natural region', the larger overview would come by the increase of such studies to be based on field observation. The common background we had was a reasonable ability to identify land forms. How to deal with the presence of man on the land was undetermined beyond estimating the fit of his activities to his physical environment. This was facilitated by turning to census enumerations of population and production of goods plotted on maps, disclosing differences in activity and success by differing qualities of natural resources. Description thereby tended to become somewhat derivative from enumerations in the categories provided for by censuses.

At the time of my study of the Ozark Highland of Missouri (1913—14) the bias was to undertake study of a large area. My inclination was to the St. Francois Mountains, which were thought too small and therefore a large reconnaissance took the place of an intensive field study. The result was not entirely disadvantageous because it gave some insight into the then still marked cultural differences, a small survival of French settlements, a large German fringe at the east and north, New Englanders at the southwest, and the major interior core of hill people mainly derived two generations earlier from Tennessee and Kentucky. The inner Ozarks were a still lustily viable remnant of frontier life, self-contained, relying on rifle and axe as well as one-horse plow, clearing fields by deadening trees, fencing out stock that ranged free, still using rail fences and log houses and barns. Cultural diversity and persistence impressed themselves on the observer, become somewhat aware of the retention of group ways under mild pressures from outside. Contrasts in mode of live were still marked and these were based on cultural conservatism as well as on environmental limitations.

After World War I the University of Michigan set up a summer field camp on the Cumberland River in southern Kentucky. One of the reasons for choosing this base was that its people were of the stock of the original settlers who maintained old ways and attitudes. One of the student exercises here was to make a map of land use along with a map of physical land forms. In trying to assign the entire surface to forms of utilization it became apparent that there were tracts of declining utility, passing from one use to a lesser and different one, in some cases approaching no use. Land deterioration was expressed in soil loss by ablation and erosion of gullies. Fields that no longer served for tillage became pastures or were abandoned to weeds and brush. Plants thus became indicators of the degradation and beginning reconstitution of the land. A regional study of the Pennyroyal followed in which representative localities were studied as to the state of the land, a pioneering attempt to show man induced soil erosion and vegetation changes.

The first objective in a regional study was to make proper identification of the things noted. The recognition of the forms of the land and its mantle presented least difficulties, for these have been most widely observed and named with reasonable validity. The terms thus available largely are genetic and were so used, intrenched meander, doline, ground moraine, flood plain, colluvium, loess, descriptively proper and intelligible in terms of their origin and development. This is said not as discounting inquiry into land forms per se, but as needed in this case only in so far as the terrain is described more readily. The attention to man induced erosion attempted to show the state of surface and soil at the time of observation and thus to provide a datum for subsequent induced physical change.

The effects of human disturbance of vegetation were sketchily presented. Red cedar, sassafras, persimmon, and hawthorn were colonizing old fields. There should have been some mapping of types and stages of such invasion, which documentation would be of considerable interest at the present. The scant identification and failure to show plant distributions in tension sites was not due to ignorance of what the plants were. These aggressive weedy plants, grasses, shrubs, or trees were familiar. What I failed to see adequately was that here an ecologic process was under way that should have been documented as of that moment of time. Nor did I see at all clearly the extent to which Ozark woods were modified by burning or not burning, by open ranging of livestock, and cutting of logs. A rather common blind spot among geographers, not to see the trees for the forest.

In retrospect also I wish that I had been more attentive to cultural elements and variants rather than to aggregates and common qualities. Here I had not dispensed with the blinders to which we were accustomed from economic geography, the domination by numbers, so many of such and such aggregates of people, distinguished as to occupation. Or so much corn, so many hogs, so much pasture land, such and such means of transportation at such distance from place of production. The oversimplified categories and sums of the census takers may come between us and recognition of what is or should be apparent to our eye and mind as significant. The unquantified and unquantifiable qualities of living in a particular tract that was their own began to be of concern as based in part on traditional values. How these were expressed in household and community, their structures and functions presented an unexplored field for which the experience in inquiry was lacking that had been developed in Europe and for primitive societies. The brevity of our national history and its dominant direction had left these areas of Missouri and Kentucky as unconsidered and unimportant backwaters, almost as deviants and laggards bypassed by the great stream of national development and destiny. This was however their attraction that they had ways of life of their own which might be understood and appreciated in their own terms rather than considered as failing to come up to a general norm and standard.

In 1923 I moved to California to other lines of interest than synoptic regional studies. Since then I have had only casual contacts with the Midwest of my earlier years, with the exception of the spring of the present year of 1963. Having now had occasion to revisit scenes observed forty and fifty years ago a comparison of then and now raises thoughts about the nature and purpose of geographic observations. These three field studies were starting jobs, first

delineations of what I thought at the time were the significant expressions of certain kinds of people living in a certain kind of place or environment. Of necessity they bear the stamp of the date at which they were done.

The scenes I had tried to describe and interpret in three midwestern areas would have seemed more familiar to one who had known them at the time of the Civil War than they will be to a person who sees them today. What I had tried to do as functional geography is now a record of superceded ways of life. In a fashion I had caught a late moment of a rural life that was to fade away very soon. I had tried to be aware of changes that were under way, in some degree to place the scenes then observed between the past and an indicated future. What I did not foresee was the greatly accelerated pace and direction of change. Probably there was an emotional bias involved which had attracted me to geography, getting satisfaction out of the diversity of the Earth's surface and its inhabitants, even seeing in the course of organic evolution the suggestion of natural order as continuing accommodation of greater diversity. What I overlooked therefore was the latent power and ambition of technology and political economy to standardize, organize, and integrate life into an inclusive system in which cultures were dissolved into a total society.

The family farm was the basic unit of the rural Midwest, homesteads that were dispersed upon the land the household utilized and usually owned. The farm produced most of the food the family required and the feed for its stock. A large measure of selfsufficiency characterized farm life, from the meagrest Ozark hill farms to the rich black prairies of Illinois. One grew, stored, and processed the meat, milk, eggs, vegetables and fruit needed. When the roads were impassable by mud or high water one busied oneself about house and barn. Elementary schools were spaced within walking distance and usually the children could walk to school whatever the weather. Country churches were of more uncertain attendance by reason of weather but the more devout and sociable families were inclined to get to Sunday meeting by carriage or wagon despite the weather. Poor roads were the most sensible handicap to country living but life was well adjusted to the isolation imposed and which gave substance and solidarity to family life.

Improvement of rural communication was well started a half century ago. In the more prosperous sections telephone lines had been provided. Rural Free Delivery of mail had been established, was resulting in some road improvement by grading for better drainage and occasional surfacing with gravel, and gave rise to the mail order houses that sold almost everything by catalogue. Henry Ford had put his Model T automobile into production and thereby became the first author of the new revolution.

The First World War brought an industrial boom to northern cities and drained labor from the farms. Trucks and tractors entered rural use in the decade after the war as well as selfpowered agricultural machinery. The horse became quickly superfluous and much land that had been planted to oats, and some hay and pasture land became available for row crops. Hybrid maize brought larger yields and more demand on soil fertility. Soy beans became the second crop on the more fertile lands and contrary to first opinion also demanded more fertilizer. Crop rotation tended to disappear, clover and grass giving way to the more profitable seed crops. The Second War brought a new

and strongly continuing wave of urban employment. Commercial fertilizer replaced organic manuring and chemical sprays reduced the necessity of cultivation. Fewer and fewer men could operate larger farm units with greater and greater yields. The open market economy gave way to a politically managed economy of increasing complexity and direction, using rewards and penalties. Taxes increased steeply, in considerable part for public services, as for road construction and consolidated schools. The farm had become a mechanized enterprise, minimizing the labor employed, and requiring cost accounting. The farmer had become a specialized producer or he went to the city to work in a factory or at other urban wage.

The agricultural revolution came earliest and proceeded farthest in the more fertile and more advantageously situated districts. In the Ozarks some moved to the highways to gain employment on road maintenance, in services to tourists, in part time factory employment. A good many farms passed into the hands of city people for retirement or weekend occupation. The properties may still be farms nominally but their possessors get little or none of their living thus. Southern Kentucky is somewhat less changed, in part because of the great increase in demand for cigarette tobacco, tobacco growing not having been mechanized. Here one still sees horses and even mules on farms. A small farm may provide a sufficient cash income for a family from a few acres of tobacco, enough to keep them on the place as owners or tenants, using a rotation with pasture, pasture sod beeing benefical to the quality of tobacco leaf desired. Here also the corn fields largely have been replaced by grass on which cattle graze, and even some sheep are still seen, now absent in other parts as are horses and mules. This is the least altered rural land of the interior to my knowledge except for the dairy country of Wisconsin where the family farm still is viable and represents a way of life.

As to impressions of change this returning visitor received. First, the wilderness is moving back in. The forms of abandonment of land are various. At one extreme is the utter devastation left by strip-mining of coal that has chewed up areas where coalbeds could be exposed by stripping off the overburden. The more agriculture has become mechanized the more has it selected the smoothly lying lands. The hill farms are out of business even where the soil is productive as it is in the loess covered uplands along the southward flowing rivers. Without benefit of quantitative demonstration the farmer has experienced the cost of steepness and irregularity of slope, mainly in the utility of machinery but also in the retention of fertilizers. In some cases the hill fields have gone into pasture for beef cattle, or for dairy cattle where there is an urban market for fresh milk. To a greater extent they have been repossessed by wild growth. In early spring the tawny patches of last year's growth of broom sedge (Andropogon) outline more recently abandoned fields. The succession of plants that recolonize the land is varied and leads through brush (sumac and poison ivy — both Rhus — being conspicuous) to pioneering kinds of trees. Red cedar (Juniperus virginiana) flourishes especially well in old fields and pastures and may be seen occasionally in a solid stand that outlines the rectangular lines of a former field. There is a great lot more of cedar than there was when I knew that part of the country. Some parts are becoming cedar woods, which they never were in the past. Sassafras has also become more abundant, the persimmon, the third familiar member of these early tree invaders

seemingly less so. Secondary woodlands have replaced a good deal of land that had been cleared with much labor two, three, or four generations ago.

The former woods are undiminished in area and increased in density. Formerly they were harvested for railroad ties, posts and poles, domestic lumber, staves, and especially for firewood. These uses have diminished or disappeared. The practice of burning the woods for additional pasture has pretty well stopped, as has the ranging of pigs and cattle. Reproduction of seedlings is high, utilization low, management rare, and stands become excessively crowded. In the Ozarks a small beginning has been made to reestablish the pines that had been nearly eliminated at the beginning of this century.

The Missouri Conservation Commission has been doing an outstanding job in managing wild life and thereby of managing wild and also agriculturally occupied land. When I tramped the Ozarks as a young man I never saw a deer or wild turkey. The former now are probably more abundant than they were when the white settlers came, increasing also remarkably in the northern, largely prairie counties of the state. Wild turkeys have been successfully reintroduced. Quail, squirrels, and rabbits are responding well to conservation management. Fishing is well maintained in streams large and small and in artificial ponds and reservoirs. The large number of sportsmen from cities and towns have become the main support of game and wild land management, of wild life refuges, of state forests and parks. The Ozarks in particular have become a major recreation area, not only for sportsmen and sports, but for the enjoyment of a near approach to the wilderness that urban dwellers may desire to turn to at times. The occasional need to retreat from the city is one of the interesting and perhaps promising phenomena of our current urbanization.

As to the farm scene these impressions of then and now present themselves. First of all the uncertainty as one drives by whether the farmstead is the home of a farmer, of a part time farmer, of a person who has retired to the country, or of some one who works somewhere else at something else. Farm houses often were solidly and sometimes attractively built. Many are on all weather roads of convenient access to cities. They may be bought at considerably less cost than a comparable place in town and the taxes are likely to be much lower. The consolidation of farms into larger operations, whether by purchase or rental, is leaving a surplus of houses. This I suppose is in part included in what is known as urban sprawl. Historically it is a farm house, but is it so functionally? How the census taker has rules for a proper distinction between a farm family and a non-farm rural family I do not know. If the yard is unkept and cluttered I am pretty sure that the occupants are not resident farmers, as I am if it has a tennis court or paddock. An historical identification I might make, an actual one perhaps not. Since farming is a numerically declining way of life houses of current styles are not commonly farm houses. My recognition may tell whether the house has the end chimneys and long verandas of southern mode or otherwise tells something of what kind of people built it and whence they came. Largely they are monuments of generations that are past, of days of lumberyards stocked with northern white pine for framing and weatherboarding, of local brickyards. Function is a matter of time, circumstance, and taste and to say a house is a house is less than identification or giving of meaning.

The barns in particular tell of the passing of the family farm. Largely these are no longer needed. Some have been remodeled to serve other ends.

Some have been torn down and others are falling down. Passing by you look at the barn to get a summary at a glance of the fortunes of its farm. The barn of the Midwest had different forms and sizes according to the kind of farming and farmer but it was likely to include in one structure such functions as the stable for the work stock and milch cows, above it the loft for keeping the hay, bins on the ground floor for feed oats and some of the feed corn, other bins for the seed saved for the next crop, a harness room, and space for some of the machinery, all under one roof. The work stock is gone and so are the milch cows and there is no more need for hay loft, stable, or bins. The utility of a common structure has disappeared and so have the varied activities of the barn yard about it. If beef cattle are raised these are not stabled but are given their rations of baled hay, grain, or mixed prepared feed in the open or from feed racks. Poultry is gone from the barnyard and if pigs are kept it is likely to be by movable pens where they are fed in number for marketing. Milk and butter, eggs and dressed poultry, fresh meat, ham, and bacon are now bought in town as do the town dwellers. Stable manure has been replaced by commercial fertilizer. The barn is obsolete because it was built for many purposes and the farm of many purposes is gone or going.

The farm orchard, once as ubiquitous as the horse, is now about as rare. The common element was the apple tree of which there were numerous kinds, early and late ripening, preferred for eating out of hand, for baking, cider, apple butter. Some were favored varieties brought from the East with the original settlers. Others were of local origin, Missouri providing several kinds that became widely grown. A well kept orchard had a dozen kinds or more. Sour cherries were perhaps next in importance, also known as pie cherries. Plums were likely to be natives, introduced from Indian sources, such as the Chickasaw and Wild Goose, but also the dark blue damson, its name telling of its remote home in the Levant. Peaches were grown in the always recurring hope that the year would escape a late spring frost to nip the bloom. Pear trees it seems to my memory grew tallest and lived even longer than the apple trees. Some men knew how to take cuttings for grafting or budding, or there were the nurseries in number and even tree salesmen who drove about with their wares and brightly colored catalogues. This spring I stopped on occasion to find an ancient apple or pear tree surviving in a flourishing stand of red cedar, or some forgotten planted plum in a thicket of briars. Once I saw hemmed in by cedars an Indian peach, a small frost resistant form that in manner unknown was handed on from Spaniards to southern Indian and to pioneer American settlers, and which reproduced 'true' from the pits.

The kitchen garden and its topography also are passing into oblivion. The potato patch of several kinds early and late, the beds of carrots, beets, turnips, cucumbers, melons, beans and peas climbing on tented poles, tomatoes, rhubarb, asparagus, cabbages, and berries. In season fresh, for the rest of the year stored, canned, or dried, these supplied cellar and pantry with the needs of the family. Along with the care of the poultry they were the care of the women of the household. One could make a fair guess of national and sectional origins by what was grown in the gardens.

The country school houses have given way to consolidated schools, served by buses. The country church is holding somewhat better, in part because it may be flanked by family burial plots and sentiment may hold a balance against

convenience. The statistically minded could plot the reduction in rural churches by population and the differential tenacity by church denominations.

Formerly there were general stores and blacksmith shops to be found in the open country. Now one may see thus an occasional service station for gasoline and soft drinks, and here and there even a 'beauty parlor' of a hairdresser, or an antique shop which has collected old handcrafted furniture to sell to the passing tourist. The fortunes of the country towns are various but have not been good in most cases unless a factory moved in to provide employment. The county seats have fared best, the business of government at all levels tending to ramify more and more. The general story of family ownership and management persists but is being largely replaced by groceries and specialty stores belonging to merchandising chains. The decline of hotels is especially notable, the accommodation of visitors and passing travelers having shifted to the food and sleeping facilities purveyed by new structures (motels) built along the highways which bypass the town. The more heavily traveled highways are assuming more and more the aspect of an unending Strassendorf catering to the wants of private cars, trucks, and buses, replacing the older town plan related to railroad station, main street, and converging roads upon a town center.

The nature of rural commerce is greatly altered in the direction of standardization of product, mass production, and governmental credit and fixing of prices. In older days live stock, grain, wood in its marketed forms were made as cash sales to buyers of such staples. A host of lesser and occasional products were known as 'produce' disposed of by 'trade'. The keeper of the general store was also a trader, exchanging the goods on his shelves for diverse items brought in by people from the country. Such produce he sorted and stored to be shipped mainly to 'produce firms' in the cities. The farmer was of secondary importance in this exchange; he might bring his surplus of cured hams and bacon, of salt pork and lard and hides. The farm wife was the principal participant in produce trade. By custom the poultry, eggs, and butter were hers to dispose of. He might have the disposal of the fruits of the orchard, she of those of the garden. In the Mississippi Valley that I knew there were no markets such as in Europe but Saturday was a sort of market day when the country people came to town to trade produce for store goods or for money, the cash price being somewhat less than the trade value. The business extended beyond the products of husbandry, especially for the young folks and the poor hill people, who grew very little. In winter dressed game was brought, mainly rabbits, and pelts of fur-bearing animals. In autumn nuts were gathered of hickory trees, walnuts, butternuts, and pecans. In summer wild berries were picked and in early spring roots and bark were taken, to be shipped as flavoring and medicines to be processed in the cities, ginseng, sassafras, and wild cherry being among the best known.

Such were characteristics of the social geography of the early part of this century, largely lost in the changes that were soon to set in. Some of them I described at the time, many I failed to note although they were familiar to me. What I tried to record was a then functioning way of life, its origins and relevance to the kinds of place and kinds of people. They were beginner's exercises with some awareness of the differences in the qualities of living as well as of livelihood, of becoming and being. The rising forces of change into new

directions which we call progress largely escaped me. I must confess that they did not then have special appeal nor do they have such now. I could not anticipate the two world wars nor the enormous impact they would have on ways of life. Nor did I foresee that a free economy was to change into central control by a welfare oriented state. That I was viewing the approaching end of an era was somewhat foreshadowed by the beginnings of a new mode of transportation. The American scene had experienced two such revolutions, first by steamboat and then by railroad. The third, by internal combustion engine and improved roads, began to appear in the second decade. With it came not only a new pattern in the transport of goods and persons but a new interest in the experience of motion. When the first automobiles came to my home town there existed a single stretch of eight miles of smooth road to a neighboring town. People who had cars soon formed the habit of evening drives back and forth over this stretch for the sheer exhilaration of rapid motion, not in order to get to another place. The sedentary home and community centered life began to give way to wider, more frequent, more casual, and more rapid mobility. The American has become habituated to relocating himself beyond the proper call of bettering his position, a new restless nomad. Also many have acquired a satisfaction in speed of motion not in objective of enjoying new scenes. One of the new experiences in revisiting the Midwest was to see the many speedboats on trailers en route to the numerous lakes, mainly built by the Corps of Engineers across lesser rivers. Nominally constructed for navigation and flood control they serve primarily for recreation and especially for boats that dash back and forth for the sake of the sense of speeding they give.

The landscape of the Midwest has been greatly changed in the past fifty years. The cities have taken over the countrysides. What was functionally good then has been largely replaced by other ways of life, cast in a different economic and social pattern, to a large extent fashioned by a new political economy. The social geography of the early part of the century is now no longer functioning, the vestiges still apparent in process of attrition or absorption into another and more generalized convention of living. Social geography soon becomes historical geography, and never more rapidly so than at present. I call to mind Alexander Rüstow's pregnant phrase of the Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart. It may be possible to gain insight into how people live in a place by knowing how that living was fashioned. This I take is the objective of regional description, an appreciation of the qualities that are expressed in a particular habit and habitat. Their projection into the future is another matter that involves imponderables which cannot be predicted merely from present trends.