

Introduction

During the half century that began in the 1950s, the American Middle West—Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, Missouri, North and South Dakota, Arkansas, and Oklahoma—underwent a dramatic social transformation. The region's population grew at only half the national rate. More than three thousand towns declined. Agriculture suffered from adverse weather and wild market fluctuations in the 1950s, experienced worse conditions in the 1980s, and became far less significant to the region's economy. At the start of the period, analysts wondered if the Middle West would ever fully recover from the devastation of the Dust Bowl era. Large numbers of rural families lived in houses without electricity, telephone service, or indoor plumbing. By the early 1960s, the number of farm youth going to college was startlingly low. Social scientists administered IQ tests to determine if these youngsters were intellectually inferior. Journalists wrote of country hicks lacking refinement. Big-city newspaper editors complained that many of these yokels were on the government dole. The region, analysts wrote, was a huge scar on the national psyche that needed somehow to be fixed—or turned back to grassland and buffalo.

But the heartland was far different in the early twenty-first century than predictions of its demise had suggested. The region's economy fared surprisingly well. While its population declined relative to the nation, its economic productivity grew as rapidly as the rest of the nation, and its contribution to the nation's economic strength remained undiminished. Agribusiness was flourishing. Stereotypes of a benighted hinterland had been replaced by images of hospitality and ingenuity. The region's elementary and secondary schools were among the best in the nation. Its commitment to public higher education consistently ranked high. Without any of the nation's largest cities, the region was known for innovative medical research and bioscience technology. It hosted some of the nation's largest businesses and had become a magnet for sprawling exurban commercial districts and housing developments.

A transformation of such magnitude is not without costs. Millions of Americans were displaced. They lost the farms their parents and grandparents had worked hard to create and maintain. They said goodbye to neighbors who moved on and to children who left, never to pursue the lifestyles their parents anticipated. Country schools closed by the thousands and were replaced by large consolidated districts with fleets of yellow school buses. Retailers in small

towns lost business to franchise outlets in regional centers. People who moved to cities in other states where employment opportunities were better experienced in-between lives still tethered in their home communities. Those who stayed sensed acutely that much of the action was elsewhere and composed accounts of why staying was a sensible choice. The region was not devoid of tensions roiling into political, moral, and religious conflicts.

The Middle West nevertheless remade itself without the extreme ill effects that often accompany such economic restructurings. Hardly any strikes, work stoppages, or protests took place. Families who found it necessary to move on did so. They did not hunker down and opt for poverty but sought opportunities wherever they could be found. Unemployment and the numbers of people receiving public assistance remained markedly low. People may have regretted school closings, but they seldom resisted. They found ways to improve the weakest schools and equalize educational opportunities. Racial divisions gradually eroded. The influx of new immigrants that came with agribusiness expansion resulted in fewer conflicts than might have been anticipated.

How did communities adapt to—and indeed facilitate—the kind of transition that middle America experienced during the last half of the twentieth century? Adaptation depends on the resources at communities' disposal and the habits residents have developed for making use of these resources. For the Middle West, land was a key resource. In 1803, Thomas Jefferson purchased the territory that became America's heartland for its water, chiefly the port of New Orleans and access to the Mississippi River, and for security against invasion from the rear that these assets provided. But it was the land that proved far more valuable to the nation's development. Public land, purchased from the French and taken from the native peoples who occupied it, became a vast resource affecting nearly everything the nation did in the nineteenth century. Public land paid for the founding of the Middle West's common schools and subsidized its colleges and universities. It served as an inducement for Northern farmers to join the Union army during the Civil War, it persuaded native peoples to relocate farther west, and it provided the incentive to railroad companies that brought transportation to every corner of the Middle West. Nothing about it was left to chance. Surveyors laid out section boundaries and townships prior to settlers arriving. The Middle West was a planned community if ever there was one.

Land remained the region's principal resource in the second half of the twentieth century. Its productivity increased even as mechanization required fewer people to labor on it. Transporting goods from it and across it kept the region's rail and trucking industry strong. Property taxes ensured revenue for schools and local government services even when the population dwindled. The land—what crops the soil would sustain, how the terrain was configured, where

streams and rivers were located, and who would prosper from railways and roads—dictated the spatial dispersion of communities from the start and continued to shape their dispersal as inhabitants moved away.

Habits reflect the surroundings in which they emerge. Settlers in the Middle West learned quickly that the land necessitated both persistence and flexibility. One year's bounty was followed by next year's drought, and a good harvest could be destroyed in an instant by hail or grasshoppers. Midwesterners took pride in staying through hard times, but they also knew when they were licked. For all the talk about farms having been in the family for generations, residents of the Middle West were an itinerant people. One reason they moved so readily during the second half of the twentieth century was that they had done it before. To have descended from settlers was to have hailed from migrants. Communities forged bonds among neighbors and kin, but those bonds could be broken and routinely were.

The 1950s is the decade for which it has been easiest to miss the extent of upheaval in America's heartland. In standard accounts, migration peaked in the 1930s as Okies fled the Dust Bowl and then movement temporarily surged again in World War II, after which families settled into sanguine rural and small-town prosperity during the fifties. But understanding how the region changed requires taking a closer look. The farms, towns, technological developments, and home improvements achieved across the Middle West during the first quarter of the twentieth century were seriously disrupted by the Great Depression and the war. Things did not return to normal simply with rising grain prices and better cattle markets. People struggled to rebuild sagging infrastructure and to adapt to changing economic circumstances. Part of why the region prospered later was that marginal farmers who had hung on during the 1930s and 1940s lost out completely during the 1950s. Government subsidies helped some of these families, but large numbers gave up. They took blue-collar jobs in towns and cities, moved to other states, retired, or died.

If habits are shaped by conditions, the people who display these habits play an active role in determining what they mean. Students of social life who seek to objectify the people they observe are constantly reminded of this fact. Heartland residents may have paused rarely to contemplate what writers or filmmakers thought about them, but they were keenly interested in crafting their own interpretations of what it meant to live in middle America. There were myths galore: The heartland was rural America, inhabited by rustics who knew little about city life and rarely traveled or read great literature. Its residents spoke with peculiar regional accents and had little appreciation of fine art. That was one image, and it was sometimes comforting for heartlanders simply to embrace the idea that they were simple, unpretentious, plainspoken people. But

that view squared poorly with aspirations to be equal with the rest of America and with the fact that farms and small towns were indeed modernizing and connecting increasingly with the wider world through television and motion pictures. Other available myths needed to be recast. The heartland was—but not quite—Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s pioneer home on the prairie, and Dorothy’s Kansas in the *Wizard of Oz*. For the heartland to remake itself, it had first to redefine itself, and this act of self-redefinition occurred mostly in the 1950s and 1960s. The heartland came to be a region defined less by geography alone and more by attributes associated with and transcending a particular place. To be a heartlander, it was no longer necessary to farm or live in a small town but rather to appreciate those who did and even more so to enjoy the landscape’s natural beauty, to pride oneself on commonsense ingenuity, to cherish family and friends, and with Dorothy to utter simply, “There’s no place like home.”

The stuff of movies and television helped Middle Westerners reinvent themselves, and yet their own futures and the region’s required practical knowledge. Here were people who had grown up on farms and in small towns far from the great centers of learning. How could a region long dominated by one-room country schools and so recently afflicted by the Depression possibly compete? The truth was that Middle Western states had taken education so seriously from the beginning that by the early twentieth century, the region was often referred to as the nation’s education belt. In 1950 the top four states nationally in percentage of adults having completed high school were Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota. An extensive system of well-financed and well-supervised public elementary and secondary schools gave the region an enormous advantage as it sought to advance economically and culturally. Over the half century that followed, the proportion of adults with high school degrees steadily increased, exceeding the national average, and rising numbers went on to college. As the population became better educated, the region nevertheless faced a new challenge. Could it make appropriate employment opportunities available? Or was it destined to experience a massive brain drain as its best-trained young people took jobs in other regions? One thing was certain: higher education had become a major dislocating force. Young people in their twenties left in massive numbers to attend college and to seek jobs upon graduation. The region’s policymakers increasingly wondered how to lure them back and how to attract newcomers.

That worry was compounded by the fact that towns were dying. Or so it seemed. The Middle West had been settled by farmers who needed towns and by entrepreneurs who eagerly catered to their needs. As farms became larger and transportation improved, the dynamics changed. By 1920 many towns were

losing population. The baby boom of the 1950s reversed the trend in some communities, but it continued in others. By 1980 the nine Middle Western states ranked first through ninth in having the highest proportion of towns with fewer than fifteen hundred people. And during the quarter century after 1980, nearly two-thirds of the region's towns declined, and few of the others kept pace with population growth in the rest of the nation. Shifting agricultural patterns, uncertainties in oil and gas production, and military base closings all contributed to the decline. Yet the region's established towns proved resilient. The ones that declined most were already quite small. Other communities held steady, experiencing what demographers of the 1970s touted as ideal zero population growth, or declined gradually enough to avoid major increases in unemployment and poverty. Quality-of-life rankings confirmed what residents argued: that their communities were good places to live, make friends, and raise families.

The few rural towns that grew dramatically did so because they became heavily implicated in agribusiness—especially the region's increasing role in packaged-meat processing for fast-food distribution and consumption. The key example of this transition was Garden City, Kansas, which became one of the fastest-growing communities in the 1980s and the home of the world's largest meat-processing facility. With a flood of new immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia, Garden City became the new face that scholars projected onto the region. Surely the region was remaking itself, they argued, by importing cheap labor to work in conditions reminiscent of *The Jungle* and with ethnic tensions as the expected result. But the restructuring of agribusiness proved to be a more complicated story. It required looking to the first half of the twentieth century to understand the social infrastructure that made agribusiness possible. It also necessitated looking at the complex multinational conglomerates in which meat processing became involved.

With so many farms and small communities losing population, the remaining question was whether enough people would stay to keep the region in business, and if so, what business that would be and where they would live. Edge cities were not expected to emerge in the Middle West to the extent they did in the Sunbelt and on both coasts, but they did appear and increasingly became symbolic of the Middle West's new role in the national economy. By 2005 there were ninety-five independently incorporated edge cities with at least ten thousand residents within twenty miles of the region's eight largest cities. More people lived in these suburbs than in those large cities combined. Logic held that people were attracted by capacious homes with ample yards near shopping malls and interstate highways. But the reality was again more complex. Much of the growth could be traced to World War II, when defense industries expanded onto open land adjacent to the region's cities, and to the manufacturing firms

that grew out of these defense industries. At first, commuting to center cities increased, but it later decreased as more employers located in the suburbs. Those employers were the principal architects of the region's new emphasis on avionics, fiber-optic communications, finance, medical technology, and bioscience.

The remaking of a region is a large story that can be told only by combining evidence of the big picture with details about individuals and their communities. The big picture comes from hundreds of datafiles constructed by the U.S. Census Bureau and other government agencies about topics as diverse as the populations of towns and counties, the education levels of residents, the locations and output of meat-processing plants, and the crop yields of wheat farmers and beet growers. This material covers the past half century, and for some topics, it was necessary to examine a much longer period. The fine-grained details resulted from delving into the business records and community histories of selected illustrative towns, from reading back issues of their newspapers, from searching through oral histories and minutes of town meetings, and from conducting scores of interviews with ordinary residents and community leaders.

If there is a single lesson to be learned about how communities remake themselves, it is this: the capacity to change depends on the institutional arrangements that precede it. America's heartland was never as down and out as its detractors in the big cities and elite universities believed. But its transition from the Dust Bowl era to the twenty-first century was not simply a matter of shucking bad habits and rewarding innovators either. Much of its success was attributable to the fact that the U.S. government decided early on to fill it with settlers and to the institutions these settlers created for themselves, including the market towns, the farmsteads, the one-room schools, the townships, the rural cooperatives, and the manufacturing centers that gave the region its identity. These institutions had to adapt as economic and demographic conditions changed, but they had been established as adaptable social forms in the first place, and they served well to provide the incentives, legal frameworks, and support networks needed to make new arrangements possible. What later would sometimes appear to be entirely new was seldom quite as novel as it seemed.

The story of the heartland's transition is, for me, a matter not only of academic interest but also of personal exploration. It is about the road not taken, the region I left behind many decades ago and have always wondered about, always loved, often visited, and never before taken the opportunity to look at through the eyes of an outsider or tried to write about with the heart of a person still there.