

Routes of Rural Discontent

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Routes of Rural Discontent

Cultural Contradictions of Rural Free Delivery in Southeastern Iowa, 1899–1917

ROY ALDEN ATWOOD

THE POPULAR IMAGE of country life at the turn of the century was a negative one. The causes of rural decline—real and imagined—were typically identified as the social isolation of farm families, urban growth and development, and the general unavailability of modern conveniences in the country. Solutions to these problems were, of course, many and varied. Rural free delivery mail service (RFD) was one such solution that was greeted with much fanfare. The United States Senate's Commission on Country Life suggested in 1911, for example, that the "awakening" of rural culture would be "greatly aided by the rural free delivery mails."¹

Despite the great expectations for RFD, however, this service came to epitomize the ambiguity of "modern improvements" in communication technologies for agricultural communities. Rural delivery promised "permanent progress" in the conditions of country life, but it permanently changed the very character of the country in the process. Rural discourse and rural culture were fundamentally transformed with the introduction of this new means of communication. Rural newspaper editors articulated much of the ambivalence rural residents felt toward RFD and the changes it wrought in their lives. Initially greeting the mail service with enthusiasm, these editors rethought their support when RFD's implications began to be manifest in their communities.²

1. U. S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 60th Cong., 2nd sess., 1911, S. Doc. 705, p. 114.

2. The data collected for this study came primarily from newspapers published in southeastern Iowa's Johnson, Iowa, and Washington counties between 1900 and 1917. The dates in parentheses indicate the years the following newspapers were searched. Iowa County: *Marengo Democrat* (1905–

By the time rural free delivery was first introduced in West Virginia in 1896, Iowa's image as "the richest and most desirable region of country ever obtained by the nation" had begun to fade. The sense of lost glory was highlighted by the 1910 federal census report that Iowa was the only state in the nation to lose population in the previous decade. Along with the population decline came a barrage of advertisements and news stories in Iowa's rural weekly newspapers that contributed to a negative image of farm existence and to an increased awareness of loneliness and isolation among rural families. The *Washington Press* assumed, for example, that "the isolation of farm life . . . made so many women go insane thro' sheer loneliness, coupled with overwork . . ." and that this was a source of many rural social problems.³ Advertisements often depicted farm women as isolated by the distance from the farmhouse to the city, vulnerable and without help nearby, lonely from the inaccessibility to friends and family, ill-informed because of the slow arrival of news, bored from living on the fringes of society, and ill-equipped to meet these and other challenges of the modern age.⁴ According to one editor, these adverse social conditions meant that "many wives and mothers have faded away in the lonesomeness of their toil, far from those in whom they had an interest."⁵ For some at least, the growth of the cities and the decline of Iowa's farm population had signaled a general deterioration of rural life. Loneliness and isolation punctuated the growing social and economic problems facing Iowa's rural communities.

Rural social and economic conditions at the turn of the century were not ideal, but they were far from disastrous. Nevertheless, the press so frequently portrayed country life in negative

1906); *Marengo Republican* (1902-1904); *North English Record* (1909-1917); *Iowa County Advertiser* (1902-1905, 1907-1910, 1912-1914); *Victor Index* (1906); *Williamsburg Journal-Tribune* (1909). Johnson County: *Hills Echo* (1905-1906); *Iowa Post* (German, 1900-1901); *Johnson County Independent* (1912-1916); *Iowa City Daily News* (1906-1907); *Iowa City Citizen* (1900-1917); *Daily Iowa State Press* (1900-1904, 1909). Washington County: *Ainsworth Clipper* (1915-1917); *Crawfordsville Imprint* (1912-1917); *Washington Evening Journal* (1900-1903, 1916); *Washington Press* (1900-1906); *Washington County Press* (1907-1917); *Wellman Advance* (1900-1915).

3. J. B. Newhall, *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846* (1847; reprint, Iowa City, 1957), 12; *Washington Press*, 10 July 1909, 2.

4. *Iowa City Citizen*, 10 June 1910, 3; 15 February 1910, 7; *Washington County Press*, 31 October 1912, 7; 14 November 1912, 2; 21 November 1912, 2.

5. *Telephony*, April 1905, 363.

terms that the image of rural decline in Iowa became pervasive. And the image eventually became reality. Consequently, many Iowans began to ask, "How can we stop rural decline and improve our meager lot in life?"

Given the widespread perceptions of rural isolation and the desire to improve social and economic conditions, it is not surprising that many magazines and newspaper articles praised the advent of rural free mail delivery service. These sources lauded RFD for "rendering rural conditions more tolerable and making more endurable the inconveniences to which such life is subject" and hailed it as the "common people's luxury" because it was the one service that "really touches people as a whole."⁶

Three years after the government's initial test of the concept in 1896, Iowa had established twenty-three rural mail routes. The apparent success of these early routes prompted petitions from numerous rural areas throughout the state for extension of the service. For example, the editor of the *Wellman Advance* reported on November 29, 1900: "Two petitions are in from Wellman for rural free mail delivery routes. . . . Ours were filed but little later than the Parnell petition, and our turn ought to come soon. If there are any other practical routes that could be figured out, those interested should look after the matter at once or there will be such a flood of petitions in ahead that the turn will be a long time coming." Similarly, the editor of the *Washington Press* suggested that "rural mail carrier routes should thread the country thick as telephone wires." Petitions for rural free delivery routes were "being liberally signed" throughout the rural districts. When the routes were not immediately forthcoming, however, editors often protested: "It is going to be a decided injury to Wellman if rural mail routes are granted to all the neighboring towns while we are left out in the cold. It doesn't require a keen mental penetration to see that folks are more apt to transact their business in a town where they can send in any day and have the mailman bring out parcels for them."⁷

Rural communities anxiously awaited the new communications service because it promised informational, social, and eco-

6. Lena B. Hecker, "The History of the Rural Free Mail Delivery in the United States" (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1920), 82.

7. *Wellman Advance*, 29 November 1900, 4; *Washington Press*, 12 June 1901, 2; *Wellman Advance*, 31 January 1901, 4; 12 December 1901, 1.

conomic benefits. The rural mails provided farmers with a channel for obtaining information of vital interest to them. Market reports, weather forecasts, political developments, railway schedules, and general news became more accessible through the daily mails. Such information, often readily available to urban families and businessmen, would make farmers the equals of city dwellers. With rural free delivery, farmers hoped to be more up-to-date and to overcome the time disadvantages associated with their geographic isolation. In addition, the availability of current information promised to remove one stigma of rural decline—rural ignorance: "Through the reading matter which is obtained by means of this rural mail system, the farmer acquires a store of general information, the want of which stamps him as being narrow or ignorant of the ways of this world."⁸ With mailboxes at the farmhouse gates, farmers gained access to all the current literature, news, and entertainment typically available in cities.

Purveyors of news and information, of course, eagerly took advantage of this innovative means of reaching customers. The larger city newspapers, for example, sent their solicitors from farm to farm. One rural editor complained: "The new rural routes have brought daily newspaper canvassers into this town nearly as thick as fleas in dog days. . . . If a few more of the fellows get in here the life of the farmer will become an intolerable burden. A fellow doesn't like to be canvassed to death."⁹ A small-town newspaper fellow did not like competition with big city papers either. The price of rural free delivery may have been enduring sales pitches and new competitors, but the service expanded rural communities by bringing more current news and information to the farmhouse.

The rural mails were also credited with increasing personal correspondence. The rural routes provided a more reliable and rapid means of communicating with families and friends beyond the local area. According to one postal official at Davenport, most rural mail was personal correspondence between women. The official believed that the new rural mails had made it easier for farmers' wives and daughters to "carry on corre-

8. Hecker, "History of Rural Free Mail Delivery," 85.

9. *Wellman Advance*, 2 April 1903, 4.

spondence with other women whom they may not have seen for years."¹⁰

News and entertainment also became more readily available to rural families with direct subscription services to monthly magazines. The advent of rural free delivery opened a vast new market that magazine publishers and national advertisers quickly penetrated. New magazines appeared, published exclusively for rural readers. The *Chicago Tribune* noted, however, that the new magazines were directed particularly at rural women: "One factor in increasing the proportion of mail matter received by women is the circulation of the monthly periodicals. The magazines are most popular with women, while the greater number of periodicals of the 32-page octavo type is published exclusively for readers of the sex, as the mail order advertiser recognizes that the farmer's wife makes the purchases for the household."¹¹

The rural mail system improved a farmer's financial lot by putting him "on an equal footing with his city neighbor in all the advantages which early news can give, but which is of special advantage to the farmer who has something to sell and is thus directed to the best market for his purpose."¹² Even land values increased for those who lived on or near the rural routes. In 1902, the *Wellman Advance* reported, "It is estimated that the value of land along rural delivery routes has increased from \$2 to \$5 an acre."¹³ Taken together, the benefits of "the common people's luxury" appeared to be an inestimable boost to rural conditions. Clearly, RFD played a principal part in the plan for Iowa's redemption at the turn of the century.

NOT ALL RURAL INHABITANTS benefited from "the common people's luxury," however. Ironically, rural free delivery signaled a significant shift in the character and control of rural culture and communication when fourth-class post offices closed in most farming villages. Rural mail routes made most small fourth-class post offices obsolete almost overnight. With rural routes radiat-

10. *Washington Press*, 10 January 1900, 1.

11. Quoted in the *Washington Press*, 10 January 1900, 1.

12. Hecker, "History of Rural Free Mail Delivery," 84.

13. *Wellman Advance*, 2 January 1902, 4.

ing from larger towns, the fourth-class offices—which had served as relay stations between distribution centers and rural addresses—simply obstructed the new postal system. The efficiency of mail service improved, but the demise of the fourth-class stations threatened the social and cultural identities of the very communities that had encouraged RFD.

The small local post offices began closing as early as 1901.¹⁴ In 1909 alone, 207 Iowa post offices closed and with them went many of the local stores that had housed them.¹⁵ The post office at Green Center in Iowa County closed on October 30, 1902, and the one in nearby Amish (or Joetown) in Johnson County closed on September 17, 1903. The rural mail service for both areas was then assigned to the Wellman post office in Washington County. By November 1903 the stores that had housed the former post offices in Green Center and Amish also closed. For the people in the Amish area, at least, this change represented “the passing of an institution” and the removal of “an old landmark”—the end of a rural cultural tradition. When the post office in the town of Lexington closed in 1905, the editor of the *Wellman Advance* lamented, “The discontinuance of this post office marks the passing of one of our earliest landmarks in the civilization of this community. It won’t seem natural not to have a bundle of *Advances* for Lex.”¹⁶

The loss of the local post offices and the cultural trappings that went with them left many rural families feeling betrayed and, to some extent, even more isolated than they had felt without RFD. The rural routes “citized the country” by diminishing rural cultural autonomy and by transferring the locus of public discourse and social interaction from the small rural villages and country trading centers to larger towns and cities. That loss of social and cultural autonomy prompted some to ask, “Why not keep our country post office and let the rural routes go?”¹⁷ In the

14. Numerous accounts of post office closures in the small communities in southeastern Iowa, such as Pilotsburg, Frendale, Windham, Cosgrove, Amish, and Green Center appeared in the *Wellman Advance* alone between 1901 and 1903. Also see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York, 1973), 118–36.

15. *Iowa Official Register*, 1909–1910, 842–44. Boorstin, *Americans*, 133, comes to a similar conclusion.

16. *Wellman Advance*, 17 September 1903, 5; 16 November 1905, 1.

17. *Ibid.*, 11 April 1901, 1.

end, however, the epitaph for the rural post offices, the country stores, and the agricultural community's control over its cultural affairs read: "Will be greatly missed by the farmers."¹⁸

Local merchants also missed the sales made by the mail order houses whose business was born with rural delivery. The mail order business had a double-pronged effect on the rural communities. On one hand, mail order sales extracted sorely needed revenues from the local rural economy and deposited them in urban accounts of Sears, Roebuck and Company and other great Chicago firms. On the other hand, the mail orders brought a whole host of mass-produced cultural commodities—and the urbanized, industrialized values they embodied—into Iowa's agricultural setting. Many rural communities hotly contested the mail order issue.

Campaigns urging local citizens to "trade at home" began as early as 1902 in eastern Iowa.¹⁹ By 1903 local businesses launched a full scale offensive against the mail order houses. Local businessmen, including newspaper editors, charged the mail order houses with excessive profits and accused them of having no genuine concern for the local communities.²⁰ One editor asked rhetorically,

Who sympathized with you when you were sick? Was it your home merchant or was it Sears, Roebuck and Co.? Who carried you last winter when out of money? Was it Montgomery-Ward and Co. or your home merchant? When you want to raise money for some needy person in town do you write to the "Fair" store in Chicago or do you go to your home merchant? . . . When your loved one was buried, was it Marshall Field and Co. who dropped a tear of sympathy and uttered the cheering words, or was it your home merchant?²¹

The mail order market apparently threatened local business sufficiently that merchants began meeting the catalogs directly. Stores offered goods at prices equal to or lower than mail order prices and on the same terms. "Take your catalogue, either

18. *Ibid.*, 15 October 1903, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 14 May 1901, 4.

20. *Iowa County Advertiser*, 11 December 1903, 1.

21. *Wellman Advance*, 12 May 1904, 4.

Montgomery Ward or Sears, Roebuck and Co., or any other and make out your order for anything in the Hardware and Implement line and bring it to us and we will fill it complete at the same price quoted by your catalogue house on their orders, spot cash. You will have one advantage—you can see most of the goods before buying."²²

Not all rural residents accepted the anti-mail order arguments or went along with the pressures to patronize home merchants. In some cases, farm families were suspicious and cynical about the local merchants and the mail order houses: profiteering was still profiteering whether its source was the local merchants or distant big city merchants. Farmers were incensed by the high prices they had paid over the years to local merchants and by the sudden drop in local prices at the first hint of competition. Local merchants' hypocrisy also angered farmers. According to one farmer, local businessmen "repeatedly violated the rules imposed upon the farmer along the lines of patronizing your home town. They have mail-ordered their carpenters, and decorators, and their layers of brick and stone."²³ Overzealous merchants also drew a negative response from farmers: "There's an argument in the urging of the patronage of home industries, but don't make of the farmer a target for the whole trouble; and above all, refrain from boycott or intimidation. The business sense of men should see clearly that a quiet appeal to reason is the diplomatic way to handle the home patronage question. The farmer will meet you half way."²⁴

Despite some resistance, the home patronage movement continued among local businessmen—especially after the inauguration of parcel post in 1913—through advertisements, special newspaper supplements, resolutions by city councils, and town commercial clubs lobbying at the local, state, and federal levels.²⁵ The key argument used by locals against the mail order business was that it killed local communities:

22. *Ibid.*, 16 March 1905, 5. See also *Hills Echo*, 25 January 1906, 4.

23. *Marengo Democrat*, 18 May 1905, 4.

24. *Ibid.*

25. A special four-page supplement on home patronage published by the Home Trade Publishing Company, Chicago, was inserted in the May 7, 1909 issue of the *Washington County Press*. See also *Marengo Democrat*, 18 May 1905, 4; *Iowa City Citizen*, 13 September 1911, 1.

If one kills himself, he is called a suicide; if he kills a brother, he is called a fratricide; if he kills someone of no kin, he is a homicide; but if he kills his town by sending away to buy things he ought to buy at home, he becomes the entire lot of "icides" mixed into one. . . . We wonder if people who continually buy goods away from home ever think of the tendency of the nefarious practice. They are helping to kill the town in which they live by destroying its business and lowering the price of its real estate and driving out its population. If enough people engage in this business it will depopulate any town in a short time.²⁶

Ironically, the problems the mail order business brought to the country—depopulation and rural decline—were the very problems rural free delivery was supposed to solve.

Not surprisingly, some rural newspaper editors delighted in the fight between local business and mail order houses. No matter what resulted, their newspaper businesses won. "How do the mail order houses sell their goods? By advertising. They spend annually, thousands of dollars on newspaper and circular advertising. Does it pay? Well do you think they would continue if they were losing money? The home merchant must meet fire with fire—he must, if he wishes to kill the mail order houses, fight them with their own weapons—he must meet advertising with advertising."²⁷ Still, most papers stood by their towns—and their local advertising dollars—in support of home patronage. After all, as the *Iowa City Daily News* knew, "it pays to stand by your own Merchants."²⁸ No matter where people stood on the mail order issue, however, no doubt they understood that rural free delivery had brought new social, cultural, and economic battles to their doorsteps.

Early advocates of the rural free mail delivery service clearly had not anticipated the difficulties it engendered. Rural free delivery had been touted as a rural redeemer by many, including President Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life, and regarded as a symbol of "permanent progress" in the rural districts. Yet the promise that with "a rural mail box at the gate, the problem is solved [of] how to keep the girls and boys on the

26. *Wellman Advance*, 12 January 1905, 5.

27. *Ibid.*, 23 March 1905, 4.

28. *Iowa City Daily News*, 5 January 1907, 1.

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farm" proved to be false in the face of rural social and cultural trends.²⁹

Whatever news and color of the outside world the rural delivery system may have brought to the farmhouse gate, it rendered obsolete the small local post offices and general stores where people had gathered to share news and gossip. In addition, RFD enabled the mail order houses to challenge the very economic stability and the cultural values of Iowa's rural communities. Rural free delivery thus epitomized the ambiguity of modern improvements in country life. Rural free delivery represented rural "progress," a progress that fundamentally changed—for better and worse—the character of public life and public discourse in Iowa's rural regions at the turn of the century.

29. Boorstin, *Americans*, 133; *Telephony*, April 1905, 363.

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