

RURAL RECONNAISSANCE

#39. Agrarian Culture and Education.

The presence of Freeman Jr. College and Academy has had a powerful if ambivalent influence in the formation and life of the Freeman community. When I was proofreading for the *Freeman Courier* I often noted the many cultural events related to the school in the news from 100 or 75 or 50 years ago. More recently, since reading Wendell Berry's latest novel, *Hannah Coulter*, I've been thinking about the relationship between education and agrarian culture.

As a graduate of both Freeman Academy and Freeman Jr. College, I'm deeply appreciative of the educational grounding provided for me and so many others through the years. Yet I'm also aware of how divisive the school has often been in the life of the community. Perhaps if the Mennonites had chosen to close the secondary school in the 1980s and keep the junior college as a community college providing the opportunity for a local liberal arts associate degree, it may have invited more community ownership and avoided the competitive spirit that has plagued the school in relation to the local public school. And there is, after all, an excellent public school system here.

What Freeman Jr. College and Academy has done is to highlight the importance education had for the local Mennonite agrarian culture. This is quite remarkable in view of the limited educational experience of the Mennonite pioneers who settled around Freeman, and the incredible pressure people experienced in trying to develop an agrarian life on the prairie. Yet F. C. Ortman, Christian Kaufman, John Wipf, and other early religious leaders had a vision for establishing a school, and in 1900 the South Dakota Mennonite College was established.

What the school did was change the character of this rural community. It brought teachers and administrators from outside who contributed to the cultural life of the community.

It connected the community, especially the Mennonites, to the larger cultural milieu of the 20th century. It may be why the Freeman community became a center of arts and culture with such strong music and dramatic programs in both local schools, and with events such as Schmeckfest.

More than that, the alumni of the school who went on to complete their college degrees and then returned to the community to farm raised the educational level of the local agrarian culture beyond that typically associated with rural communities. It was always a bit astonishing to realize how many highly educated persons there were in the congregation I served here. Given the Mennonite emphasis on humanitarian service in lieu of military service, many of these persons also came back having had cross-cultural, international service experiences as well.

Education and agrarian culture do not typically make such good bed-fellows. The cultural stereotypes of rural people often portray them as uncouth, dirty, coarse, and barely articulate. This community goes a long way toward dispelling such myths, and portrays rural people as not only having a viable and strong agrarian (agricultural) heritage, but also the educational tools to articulate and to preserve that heritage within the wider culture.

Still, education is not always a good friend to agrarian culture. Many are the rural families who decided to send their children off to college only to discover that they weren't coming home again, even those who had grown up enjoying farm life immensely. My own view is that the technical expertise of the educated elite has all too frequently competed with and trumped long-standing agricultural wisdom of local agrarian cultures to the detriment of the future of rural communities. Despite all this, the role of education in the on-going life of this agrarian culture should be fostered and cultivated and celebrated.

S. Roy Kaufman
Freeman, South Dakota
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