

The following article, based on the lecture Richard Critchfield delivered at the North Dakota Heritage Center in March 1994, was originally published in *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* (vol. 62, no. 3, Summer 1995) and is reprinted here with the permission of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. His appearance was part of a program co-sponsored by the North Dakota Center for the Book and the State Historical Society of North Dakota in conjunction with a traveling exhibit on loan from the Library of Congress. The exhibit, "Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary America," identified American authors and explored how their writing became an interpretation of their regional landscapes. Some months after his appearance in Bismarck, Critchfield was on a book tour to promote his newest book, *Villagers*, and suffered a stroke. After a week in the hospital, he died December 10, 1994. He was sixty-three.

Preserving Rural Cultures in the Twenty-First Century by **Richard Critchfield**

In not much more than five-and-a-half years, the twentieth century, which gave us two world wars, Nazism and Communism, and such great scientific advances in astronomy, biology, and physics, will be over. In a book coming out late this year, *Villagers: Changed Values, Altered Lives—Closing the Urban-Rural Gap* [published by Doubleday, October 1994], I report from villages in Poland, Russia, China, India, Egypt, Mexico, Africa, and rural America on what I think is another great change. This is the end of the old isolated, autonomous, local-minded, culturally self-contained village. The whole world is getting wired into the same electronic nervous system that Marshall McLuhan in the sixties called "a global village." But it is turning out to be much more of a dysfunctional global city.

The gap—in consciousness and world outlook between village and city—is closing. This is a very deep transformation. Some would rank it with man's transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer ten thousand years ago. It means, as we move into the twenty-first century, that we must use our minds to solve problems of the magnitude of learning to place a seed in earth to grow, or finding an animal can be fed and tamed and not just hunted, or scratching marks on trees and rocks so that those who come behind us won't get lost. It means quantum leaps like these inventions of agriculture, husbandry, and language.

Matthew Arnold called culture "the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been said and known in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit." If we renew this acquaintanceship at its origin, we must look, not to our decaying cities and the probably failed experiment of suburbia, but to the basis of all our behavior, arts, and beliefs—the rural community.

I speak of the urban-rural gap closing. The problem is, as I quote from a letter from historian William McNeill near the end of my new book: "Human beings are not yet adjusted to urban living and may never make the transition. Attracted to it, yes and for sure; but the moth is attracted to the flame."¹

Our problem is that no substitute for the rural base of urban culture has been invented. In other words, rural life is the source, and the only source, of such aspects of our culture as religious beliefs, the agricultural moral code, the institutions of family and property, and the work ethic. When President Clinton says, "Our problems go way beyond the reach of government. They're rooted in the loss of values, in the disappearance of work and the breakdown of our families and our communities . . .," he is really saying America has moved too far away from the farms and small rural towns that, well into this century, shaped its culture.

Let me define a few concepts. First, I define culture in the anthropological sense as a set of rules or solutions to problems, handed down from parents to children. This cultural transmission, or nurture, works best on farms or in villages because parents are physically with their children so much of the time, in the home or in the fields. A woman does most of the nurturing until a child is three or four; then the man's role starts to widen and he, too, becomes engaged in cultural transmission because he wants help with his farm work. Children learn useful chores—how to collect eggs, how to milk a cow. Handed down at the same time are religious beliefs, morality, respect for family ties and property, a work ethic, and subordination of self-interest for family and community solidarity. This is how it works in small farming communities all over the world. And since just under 60 percent of humanity is still rural, it gives human society much of the stability it has. Possibly for not much longer as city-values and city-ways penetrate everywhere on television. This is how the age-old gap is closing.

Second, while nature and nurture both matter, man is a cultural animal. Culture, or a mode of living, Aristotle showed us long ago, depends on how any creature gets its food. And our tools shape our ideas so that all villages share a common culture giving prime value to property, or land, the means of producing food, and family, the tillers or producers.

As Will and Ariel Durant found at the end of their monumental, ten-volume *Study of History*, all the elements of civilization can be found in any small farming community: the making of fire and light; the wheel and other basic tools; language and art; the family and parental nurture; social organization, morality, and charity.

In my last book, *Trees, Why Do You Wait?*, which was partly researched in Fessenden, North Dakota, where my family lived when I was born, I concluded:

My main argument in this book, if you'll accept that I'm painting with a very broad brush, is that what kind of urban culture we have in America is going to depend on how many Americans farm. All culture, as we've said, has a rural origin . . . Successive generations are growing up without rural ties. This in turn produces social ills like homelessness, crime, vandalism, and drug abuse . . . Rural life can have its shortcomings. Farming has always meant hard physical labor. But my main point is: farming creates societies that work. It creates a very durable and basic culture. And we need to save as many farms and small towns as we can because America's urban culture is at stake.²

This idea, that we cannot solve our social problems until we face and tackle the urban-rural issue, formed only gradually. I first saw traditional villages as a student in Europe, a soldier in Korea, a teacher in India, and a war correspondent in Vietnam. After that, starting in 1969 when I was thirty-eight, I began to systematically study villages. This involved sixteen longer stays of three months to a year, and about twenty shorter studies. Gradually, coming and going over the years, I came to see that most villagers were more culturally stable, socially healthier, if you want to put it that way, than we were. This vague, intuitive feeling that something was going wrong in America that was not happening in the villages did not fully crystalize until *The Economist* of London in 1986 asked me to write its first twenty thousand-word survey on Britain itself. Over the next four years, living in London part of the time, I turned it into a book, *An American Looks at Britain*, published in 1990. Britain is one of the most urbanized societies on earth (90 percent), and its cultural ills are the same as ours but much more advanced and clearly defined. If too many Americans ended up living in cities, it seemed to me, the same kinds of decline could come to us.

Five years earlier, in 1981, coming home from Africa and stopping over with friends in England, the phone rang and it was Roderick MacArthur from Chicago telling me I'd just been awarded a quarter of a million dollars, tax-free and no-strings-attached. Today, MacArthur Fellowships are familiar, but in 1981, their first year, it came as a stunning bolt out of the blue. But I knew at once what I wanted to do: go back to North Dakota for the first time since 1948 and research a book on my family while people whose memories went back to early this century were still alive.

Book reviews, both praising and critical, can tell an author things about his work he may not know. When *Those Days* got the front-page review in *The New York Times Book Review* on March 23, 1986, which happened to be my fifty-first birthday, Hugh Nissenson, the reviewer, wrote, "The Edenic imagery makes *Those Days* mythic. The book is a beautiful American variation of the Fall. His characters lose their innocence and acquire the knowledge of good and evil, life and death."³

Although *Those Days* is social history and nonfiction, like all my books it was generally reviewed for its literary merit rather than social content. Indeed, in *The Washington Post*, Hilary Masters, the son of *Spoon River Anthology*'s Edgar Lee Masters, wrote that I assembled "a staggering amount of material from interviews, newspaper accounts, school records, club and professional minutes, diaries, motion pictures, university archives, photography collections, probably the most comprehensive list of resources ever assembled to recreate the lives of ordinary people."⁴

Nissenson liked all the detail: "specificity is the essence of his narrative technique. He artfully uses leitmotifs: booze, blizzards, hailstorms, flowers, cars . . ." ⁵ Masters, in a much more critical review, found:

the reader is overwhelmed by the routine of farm and house chores, exhaustive inventories of country stores, book titles, popular song lyrics, picnic fixings, car makes—an enormous pile of facts (even the specific dimensions of a camping tent) as if the sheer weight of these artifacts will convey the truth of the lives they furnished. True, these are the facts of ordinary people, but they remain ordinary . . .⁶

Near the end of *Those Days*, one of the characters asks the narrator much the same question: "What's your story going to be? That's what escapes me. . . . A country doctor lived a terrible hard life. And I think his story . . . was the story of a man who went the same way an awful lot of them went." The narrator continues:

I listened to his words and watched the scenery rush by. It was their ordinariness that made them matter. Clouds raced across the sky, and moving shafts of sunlight broke through and radiated on all sides—fields, trees, farms, everything glittered with yellow light. I could feel the faint chill of the glass and lowered the window a little. The cold air felt good. The wind was rising, and cascades of yellow leaves whipped over the ground and flew furiously round and round in the air. Days were getting shorter, nights cooler—the familiar summer look was going, and in the fresh, bracing air I could feel that winter was not so far away. And I thought of the scene at the grave once more: the mourners, the birds, the wind, the light, the whirling yellow leaves. Individual life was by its very nature a tragedy; it came to an end; for all of us it was going to be a short way to that grave. But the ordinary life of a society was a comedy that just kept going on.⁷

This is one of the great lessons of writing about groups of villagers, often the same villagers, over twenty, twenty-five years: so many of their lives end tragically. But the village life itself, human comedy more often than not, just goes on.

Anton Chekhov, who probably wrote about villages better than anybody, saw himself in the modest role of reporter, a witness to the world of his time. There is an entry in one of his notebooks, “Man will become better when you show him what he is like.” This is why, if someone asks what I do for a living, I say I am a reporter who writes about villages. I’d like to think there is a progression in this body of work—nine books so far—and that it is all part of a single exploration into how technology affects culture in our time.

And there is a constant comparison between ourselves and the villagers. The great changes I observed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the 1960s and ‘70s, especially in agriculture, compare to the American transition from human muscle to horse-drawn machinery in the Civil War and 1870s, just as horses gave way to tractors during the two world wars. So that the sixty years, 1880-1940, from the disappearance of the frontier to World War II, saw much the same cultural changes too: the shift from country to city, farm to factory, fundamentalism to science, home-grown entertainment to Hollywood films. The next great change, the worldwide spread of television to almost every village on this planet, has largely come in the last ten, fifteen years, mostly in the 1980s.

Luckily, in 1959, when my mother was seventy-three, I interviewed her about her life; she lived to be nearly ninety-five and when her memory was failing she liked these interviews to be read to her; they came to eighty-one, single-spaced pages. These and other family letters and diaries, including a lifelong journal from one set of grandparents and a grandfather’s sermon outlines, a 27,000-word, 1896–1957 diary kept by a college classmate of my mother, newspapers to provide both a family chronology and a cultural history of the times, old movies, marvelous exhibits at Fargo’s Bonanzaville, Old World Wisconsin, the Wells County Museum, and several historical societies, the Library of Congress, the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, and so many other sources, came to a huge amount of research material. My most vivid memory is sitting day after day with my research assistant, Tim Holzkamm, an anthropologist who miraculously came from my father’s hometown of Hunter, and poring over old copies of the *Wells County Free Press* in Charlie Eldredge’s backroom in Fessenden on black-and-maroon folding chairs loaned by the funeral parlor across the street.

About seventy people were interviewed, forty-four of them quoted in *Those Days*, though most of the story is told by six main characters. . . . Books have a way of writing themselves and early on I dropped the idea of bringing in comparisons with Third World villages. The family story took over. It begins with a prologue which Nissenson summarized in the *Times* review:

This powerful memoir begins with a wedding in the garden of an Iowa parsonage on April 19, 1913. Anna Louise Williams and Jim Critchfield, the author’s parents, are married by the bride’s father, the Rev. Hadwen Williams. Neighbors have filled the house with daffodils, tulips, violets, ferns and lilies of the valley . . . This is an American Eden. But in the garden, among the lilacs, Anna Louise confesses to her father that Jim “drinks a little,” and Mr. Williams wounds his daughter forever by blurting out, “I wish you were marrying Forrest instead.”

Forrest is Anna Louise's college classmate—a local boy. Jim farms in North Dakota. He's not a churchgoer. His mother was "lace-curtain Irish." He's descended on his father's side from an English convict, a Virginia infantryman in the Continental Army, and an Ohio pioneer. Anna Louise, the preacher's daughter, is a Methodist who comes from New England Quakers. They went west in 1859, pursuing "the vision of a purer, simpler society."

Anna Louise and Jim leave for North Dakota. Her baby sister, Helen, bursts into tears. She's packed off to the town's newly opened nickelodeon. A rinky-dink piano accompanying the silent fall of hooves on a flickering screen ends the idyll in the garden

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At this point I explicitly stated the book's theme, drawing it into the main body of my work:

Two highly divergent American cultural strains met, clashed and—in Anna Louise and Jim—united in marriage.

She, familiar with both worlds, was making the clearest choice. Yet, how much freedom to choose do we have? How much of what we do is decided by our culture and time? And how much by the essence of our own nature unaffected by culture and time? The answer, if answers are to be found, must lie in the years that went before, and would come after, this, the happy couple's wedding day. Was Reverend Williams right?⁹

Working on *Those Days*, there was great fascination in reconstructing things like an old-time revival meeting ("Let them feel, O Lord, the awful peril they are in, . . . like men walking in a fog on the brink of a terrible cliff who don't see the road signs, hear the foghorn or the bells. Wake up these sinners in time, O Lord."), words taken from one of my grandfather's actual sermons.¹⁰ Or, advertisements seen along the Mississippi in 1904 when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came to town ("See Eliza's escape on the Floating Ice, followed at full speed by the Furious Pack of Panting Bloodhounds, goaded on to Madness by their Savage Masters"), even as the same posters righteously declared, "A High Tone of Morality Will Be Rigidly Maintained."¹¹

There are scenes of bicycling in Yosemite Valley in 1899, visiting the wreckage of the San Francisco 1906 earthquake, the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, shantytowns and Wobblies, the golf, bridge and minstrel shows of the 1908 small towns. "You thought it would go on forever," one of the characters says. "We all expected to stay in farming all our lives. None of us knew there was any other world. How would you know?" . . .

And of course the county fair, Fessenden's pride and joy, as it was in 1929:

The Fairgrounds, with its freshly painted white buildings, shade trees, tents and flags flying from the bleachers and grandstand, was just south of town. Daddy said the gate on opening day was over seven thousand people, a new record. He parked his Buick and we all piled out. The July heat, even in early evening, was terrible and there were dust clouds from so many people stamping around. Inside the gate, men were selling squawking toys and rubber balloons on sticks, and Kewpie dolls and little wind-up clowns with canes. From the grandstand, somebody was shouting through a megaphone, "Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight you will witness one of the greatest death-defying feats ever attempted in these United

States!” Down the midway, painted banners billowed in and out of the wind and promised “The Snake Charmer,” “The Alligator Wrestler,” “The Fattest Woman in the World.” Barkers were yelling outside the sideshow—”Twelve United States Cavalry swords are going to be thrust through a box while this little lady is inside.”¹²

In *Trees, Why Do You Wait?*, the Wells County Fair is again described, this time in 1989, when the crowds have fallen to barely 2,000 on the average day:

These days there is just one Ferris Wheel and the wrestling shows and girlie shows are long past. The 4-H poultry exhibits were down to three this year and five last year; there used to be more than fifty. The cattle barns are half empty, but there are more racing horses than there were in the old days. In the women’s hall, wooden and white painted and going back to the 1920s like all the Wells County Fair buildings, there are still big heaps of vegetables and quilts, embroidery, hooked rugs, and cut work, and all kinds of flowers.¹³

The last day a storm hits just as the races end and everybody scrambles for the Catholic food tent as the first drops spatter down, and there are rumbles of thunder and lightning flashing every minute. There must be hail nearby for there is a sudden drop in temperature and when everybody takes their seats in the grandstand for the last event of the fair, a talent show, it feels more like October than July, and families huddle together, wrapped in jackets or blankets for warmth. There are a piano and a microphone on the wooden stage.

The wife of the fairgrounds custodian comes on first, a tall, nervous-looking woman in a cotton dress. She says she will sing a revival hymn. It is “Keep Your Hand on the Throttle and Your Eye on the Road.” Her voice is hesitant and not always audible, but she is warmly applauded. Everybody gets a good hand. Charlie’s barbershop quartet, all dressed up in red vests and black string ties, sings “The Streets of Laredo” and “The Colorado Trail.” Their harmony is good and the crowd brings them back for an encore, “Rise Up, O Man of God.” The quartet has to come on early, as Charlie has to drive up to Harvey for a rehearsal of *Oliver*—he will be Bill Sykes.

Lannis and Lisa Faleide come on third and sing “Tumbleweed.” After them a very old, bent-over, white-headed man plays “Red River Valley” on his harmonica. Beyond him, across the racetrack and the fairgrounds, now rainswept and looking very wet and green, is the open North Dakota prairie itself, looking just as flat and bare and empty as it must have looked to the Sioux. How vulnerable your little society is, it seems to say. One tries to imagine how lonely and isolated the first settlers felt under such an enormous cloud-heavy sky. . . .¹⁴

In closing I’d like to read the last lines of *Those Days*:

Those days. They’ll never come again. But somewhere there was always going to be a circus coming to town or a workman walking down a morning street. Or wind blowing yellow leaves or black branches dripping rain. Somebody was always going to be swinging a golf club or a baseball bat or playing a piano or cracking a joke. Or taking a deep breath or drowsing off to sleep or dreaming or waking up. Or passing from youth to old age, and hardly knowing where all the years went. Time, in the instant, in the irrecoverable passing

moment, time continuous and remembered, going on and on . . . I wish I'd known them better. And they were with me now. What were they like? . . . Oh, I could guess, I suppose, how he would end this . . . With something like a grand windup number from the band, all brass and drums and oompah-pah . . . Or with a funny story . . . *Well, for Ker-risst sake! Look what the cat dragged in! How the hell are you? C'mon in and make yourself at home. Anne, honey, look who's here! Hey, I've got a good one for you . . .*¹⁵

Endnotes

1. Richard Critchfield, *The Villagers: Changed Values, Altered Lives—The Closing of the Urban-Rural Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 470.
2. Critchfield, *Trees, Why Do You Wait? America's Changing Rural Culture* (Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1991), p. 203.
3. Hugh Nissenson, review of "Those Days," *New York Times Book Review*, March 23, 1986, p. 1.
4. Hilary Masters, review of "Those Days," *Washington Post Book World Sunday*, April 27, 1986, p. 11A.
5. Nissenson, p. 1.
6. Masters, p. 11A.
7. Critchfield, *Those Days: An American Album* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1986), pp. 412-413.
8. Nissenson, p.,1.
9. Critchfield, *Those Days*, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
13. Critchfield, *Trees*, p. 119.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
15. Critchfield, *Those Days*, p. 413.