

Food Stamps for Farmers and Other Absurdities

Power, Empire, and the Loss of American Community

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.



A dry snow scouring the Sherman Mountains east of Laramie turned to rain outside Cheyenne and blew in sheets across Interstate 80, from Pine Bluffs to Sidney to Ogalala to North Platte to Kearney to Grand Island to York, Nebraska, and from York south to Geneva, Bruning, and Hebron: 501 miles of deluging rain from a heavy-hanging waterlogged sky. Just north of the state line, the rain stopped, and I drove the last 41 miles across the rolling Kansas plains, gray from drought when now, in early May, they should show vivid green, or yellow-green. In Concordia, just before Ed Detrixhe's shopping center on U.S. 81 came into view, I made a left turn onto Highway 9 and continued 13 miles east toward Ames, following close behind a horse trailer that raised a cloud of dust each time its right wheels drifted into the shoulder. At the grain elevator, I swung right and drove the last two miles south to the Detrixhe farm. Though I hadn't visited Mari and Ed for two years, I had seen the place just 13 days ago—from 37,000 feet on a flight from Denver to Chicago, passing a couple of miles south of the distinctive house fixed indubitably in the rich Kansas soil, which hadn't seen rain since early April. Life is unfair—to farmers, in particular.

Still, Ed's winter wheat grew brave and green toward the June harvest, and Ed himself remained unfazed by drought as well as by the loss of Wal-Mart, which had moved the year before from its 40,000-square-foot lodging in his center to its own quarters, a new superstore three times the size at the south end of town. (Nobody in Concordia, being perfectly content with the smaller version, had particularly *wanted* the larger store—with the exceptions of the local government, the town boosters and economic growth councils, and the developers who offered Wal-Mart a special invitation, plus inducements financed by a

tax assessment through which Ed is compelled to subsidize his business competitor, America's largest corporation.) We drank a couple of beers with Mari in the kitchen, and the three of us finished off two bottles of red wine in the course of one of her fine suppers, while watching meadowlarks, robins, and gold finches fly in and out of the plum thicket behind the house and the cottontail rabbits make their stealthy advance on Ed's springing vegetable garden.

Ed and I killed four rabbits with four shots from a .223 rifle next morning and, after breakfast, went our separate ways, he to the orchard with his grafting basket, Mari to her flower garden, I to Salina 60 miles southwest of the farm for a chat with Wes Jackson at The Land Institute about Matfield Green, the small town (population 56) in the Flint Hills of Kansas that he and the Institute have recently bought up—or, anyway, into. I found Wes in his writing cabin at the edge of the woods above the Smoky Hill River (it used to be Mari Detrixhe's office when she worked for the Institute in the early 80's), sitting over an abstract of a talk he was preparing to deliver to a Ranchers for Profit meeting in Wichita. I removed my Stetson to shake hands, and Wes motioned me graciously into a chair. "Ranchers are in the most favorable position of anyone who wants to return to sustainable agriculture," he remarked as he handed me a copy of his abstract. "The reason is, they're better able than farmers to use a natural ecosystem as a standard."

"That's heresy to environmentalists where I come from," I told him. "But I agree with you."

Wes and his first wife, Dana—both of them native Kansans—founded The Land Institute, "a nonprofit educational research organization, devoted to the subject of sustainable alternatives in agriculture, energy, waste-management, and shelter," in 1976. The original plan was to start a school, but after the school building burned in the fall of the same year and was rebuilt with the help of supporters, the Jacksons expanded their

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original idea to create an agricultural think tank comprising the house and school building, barns, outbuildings, a greenhouse, windmills and solar collectors, testplots, and gardens. As Wendell Berry describes it, “The one place is home and farm, campus, experiment station, laboratory, and museum. It is a place to live and work, teach and learn.” Already familiar with Wes’s central program (described in *New Roots For Agriculture*, 1980) for a perennial crop of mixed native grains to replace monocultures as a means of preventing erosion, rebuilding topsoils, increasing water retention, and reducing the use of toxic chemicals and chemical fertilizers—“Building agriculture based on the way the prairie works”—I was curious to learn what was behind the Matfield Green project, as well as how it fit with the Institute’s basic concerns. (Maybe if Salt Lake City, Phoenix, and Denver grow together in my lifetime, I’ll retire to central Kansas myself.) “I assume you don’t have in mind a Kansas version of Williamsburg,” I suggested. “Or a bed-and-breakfast American Gothic theme park.”

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Wes hoisted one foot onto the top of his desk and grinned at me.

“Well, we certainly aren’t interested in gentrifying the place,” he said. “And we’re experiencing the difficulty of establishing—or reestablishing—a presence. We bought up the hardware store and the old school—turned it into residences. The main lesson to keep in mind is, don’t try to do anything with declining towns that is dependent on the pyramid of declining resources: That just marginalizes their potential further rather than bring them into the mainstream. It’s foolish to establish nonsustainable, brittle economies in small towns. We use the school as a place for miniconferences, and to house the folks, but we’re certainly not in Matfield Green to save or improve the town. On the other hand, our presence there serves to validate it for itself: People just don’t believe a town that size—their town—is worthy. ‘Well, you’ve never heard of it,’ they’ll say. Their parents tell them to get out, as fast as they can. The cultural information stored up for more than a century doesn’t interest them anymore. I got the kids to point their cameras at things that appeal to them. Then I got the English teachers to have their kids write essays about the photos. No more ‘prairie weeds’ but ‘wildflowers’ instead—these children began to rec-

ognize the beauty of their environment! They have a potential connection to the land; this exercise helps them to make it. You know: If it weren’t for oil, Matfield Green—all these towns—would be sustainable. Highly dense energy destroys information of the cultural as well as the biological variety. And now I’m going to make a bold assertion. There is not a single piece of technology since the Stone Age that hasn’t drawn down on the stock of ecological capital available at that time.”

According to the Jackson thesis, the technological output of the human race is built on a steadily declining base of ecological capital. Unlike the natural world, which is “sun-sponsored”—runs, that is, on “contemporary” sunlight—mankind in the fossil fuel age depends on the extraction of ancient sunlight for its energy source, stored as geological capital. When humans developed equipment to cut down the rain forests in which an accumulation of biological information was stored, they destroyed the information inherent in the trees and soil in order to “sponsor empire.” The inevitable result of this destruction of biological information is also the destruction, in time, of the cultural information human communities acquired through a less rapacious and more stable relationship with the natural environment. And the reward for both is *power*. (That is why, Wes pointed out wryly, the Beltway types don’t appreciate people like Wendell Berry.)

“Imagine it as a teeter,” he suggested, “with biological and cultural information on the one end, energy on the other. The cutting of the Ohio forest reduced the biological information that forest sequestered. Now, you need ‘stewards of the land’—the Amish—who *still* can’t accomplish what the forest did. The Amish increase their cultural information, while continuing nevertheless to draw down on nonrenewable energy to compensate for the loss of biological information. The system we have now will not be the system we will have for long. Are you aware that farmers today are receiving food stamps? Rural areas have become just as vulnerable and dependent as urban and suburban ones are.”

Here was the connection between The Land Institute and Matfield Green. “So what’s the answer?” I asked Wes.

He shrugged.

“Change will come through the technology that caused the problem in the first place. We may never have had, until now, the technology to know how to change. I’m not interested in the Mother Teresa approach to problems. I’m interested in establishing reform that would obviate the Mother Teresa syndrome. Beyond that . . . None of us wants to make a problem as complicated as it really is. The difficulty with any movement is, we invariably narrow the argument, leaving no chance to address the cultural fabric that represents the greater reality. So, what we go with boils down to something that is both simplified and simplifying.”

We went for lunch at a restaurant in downtown Salina that offered two hamburgers for the price of one, or two bucks. Out of the five or six customers already in the place, three at least were the morbidly obese people—like white elephants—you find all across America these days, in the Plains states and the South especially, perhaps: the bored, unused products (or victims) of the dense energy, rural decline, gathered-in power, and empire Wes had been discussing. Across the street from the restaurant was Kansas Wesleyan University, Wes Jackson’s *alma mater*. At The Land Institute, I bought a couple of his books from the main office before getting into my rental car and dri-

ving west across the Smoky Hill River. An old, red truck sat immobilized beside the borrow pit, while in the middle distance a solitary figure—Wes—came trudging in the opposite direction down the gravel road. I gave him a ride back to his writing cabin, and we said goodbye again. He was heading off to the West Coast on a fundraising trip the following day and, the week after, to Great Britain, where he had speaking engagements in London and Edinburgh.

I arrived at the farm in time for drinks and an appetizer—pizza with cheese and salsa, made from scratch by Mari—followed by a supper of pot roast served with early garden vegetables and two more bottles of red wine, the second the product of Ed's vineyard and Mari's labors at the wine press; dessert was an exquisite gooseberry tart (another Mari creation). Ed had chosen Brahms for our dinner music, and we sat late around the dinner table by candlelight, enjoying the cello sonatas as we conversed and watched the dry lightning flashes explode within boluses of black cloud that hung tantalizingly in the northern sky. Mari excused herself finally to help Ben with his homework, and Ed and I retired to his den, where we lit pipes, opened a bottle of brandy, and settled into comfortable chairs to finish watching a documentary about John Paul II in which Andrea Marcovicci makes a cameo appearance, enchanting as ever as she dabs at her eyes while describing how she had faith as a girl, only to lose it "in a flash."

"You *can* have a complete life out here," Ed concluded, "but you have to make it on your own, for yourself."

In the morning we took another whack with the .223 at the rabbit population, enjoying the mayhem more than was good for us. ("We're the Culture of Death," Ed remarked with a grimace, mindful of the papal documentary.) Breakfast was served on the nearly completed loggia, designed and built at the expense of backbreaking labor by Ed over a period of eight seasons, its three Romanesque arches beneath a bas-relief frieze overlooking a plum thicket, the crushed gravel drive, and the rough Kansas grasses stretching away toward the wheat that springeth green. An inscription inside the curve of the inner wall read: "We learn only when it is too late that the marvel is the passing moment—François Mitterand." "Of course, Mitterand was a socialist," Ed conceded, "but, oh well."

He showed me the new garlic standing in green spears from the loamy soil and the potatoes struggling to recover from a late frost the week before. Following paths cut by the cutterbar through the tall grasses and lined by pedestaled statuary in the classical style hauled down by pickup from a stone dealer in Nebraska, we passed by the Tower—a concrete gazebo on stilts—and came at last to the vineyard, where Ed called my attention to the pinpoint grapes in tiny clusters, a miniature of their own maturity, touching as a sonar image of a child in the womb.

"You know, you have a lovely place here," I told Ed. "It's a work of art, really."

"It's Mari's and my life's work," he said simply. "As well as my refuge from . . . everything."

Later, I accompanied Ed into the hickory orchard southwest of the house where I watched as, using his grafting knife, he cut away the bark from the lower end of the scion wood, dormant from three months' refrigeration, and fitted the stick with its three buds into three bark flaps rising three inches above the root stock. He wrapped the graft firmly with tape to hold it in place against birds and the Kansas wind and added a covering of tin foil as protection for the vital cambium—the thickness of

about a single cell—against the UV rays. Finally, he clipped one of the small buds, leaving two to receive the little tree's total sum of sap and energy.

"And that's all there is to it?" I asked him.

"That's it. It's called a three-flap graft. I'll come back around the middle of July and remove the tape and foil. And in a couple of weeks, when the buds start to swell, I'll check for stinkbugs, which are the bane of my existence. Anything you try to raise, it seems like all of nature's out to beat you to it. Let's go try that exercise of Cooper's I was telling you about."

We got the rifles from the Cave, the concrete-lined excavation where Ed keeps his tools and reloading equipment and Mari has her wine press, and drove over to the quarter-section where the 600-meter swath with a bench rest at one end that is Ed's rifle range stretches along one side of a wheatfield. According to Col. Jeff Cooper, anyone calling himself a rifleman ought to be able to assume any position besides the prone one, take aim, and fire a shot *inside ten seconds* that strikes within a ten-inch-wide target set at a distance of 200 meters. As Ed and I have the utmost respect—not to say veneration—for Colonel Cooper, and as both of us regard ourselves as serious shooters, the colonel's challenge was not one we felt willing to ignore. At 200 meters, the pie plate, appearing like a white pimple in my nine-power scope, bobbed discouragingly behind the black crosshairs. I took a deep breath, squeezed off a dry shot, and shook my head.

"I don't think I can hit that this way," I said.

"I don't think I can, either," Ed agreed.

"You go first," I suggested magnanimously.

I pushed the button on the timer and watched as he dropped to a sitting position on the grass, braced his elbows on the insides of his knees, and began the trigger pull. Thinking: *This is what Wes Jackson wants to get back to. This is how the place called Kansas was meant to be realized by human empathy, effort, and skill. This is what human civilization was meant to be.*

The sound of the exploding .7 mm shell crashed around us and the timer flashed 9.57 seconds.

"You made it on the time, anyway," I said.

Ed shook his head.

"I don't think I hit," he said.

But when we walked forward to look, he had.

Wes Jackson is the author of several books, including:

Becoming Native to This Place
(University Press of Kentucky, 1994)

Altars of Unhewn Stone
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987)

New Roots for Agriculture
(University of Nebraska Press, 1980)

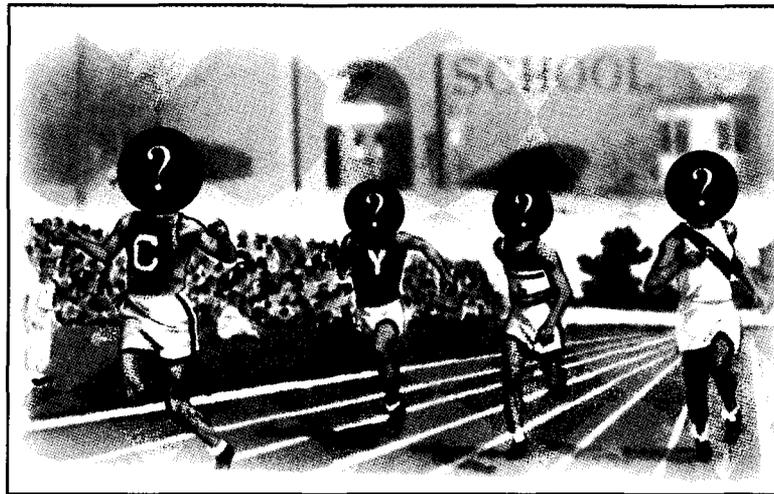
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Not Separate and Not Equal

The San Fernando Valley

by Roger D. McGrath



Oh I'm packin' my grip and I'm leavin' today,
'cause I'm taking a trip California way
I'm gonna settle down and never more roam,
and make the San Fernando Valley my home.

I'll forget my sins, I'll be makin' new friends,
where the West begins and the sunset ends.
Cause I've decided where yours truly should be
and it's the San Fernando Valley for me.



So sang Roy Rogers in the 1943 Western *San Fernando Valley*. The song, sharing its name with the movie and written by Gordon Jenkins, became a hit the next year when it was recorded by Bing Crosby. Small wonder: GIs were preparing to land at Normandy, and Marines, at Saipan. The song evoked the kind of images a war-weary nation dreamed of, and no one could bring emotions to lyrics better than Crosby. It may have helped that, in those days, Crosby lived in the Valley, as did Bob Hope, Roy Rogers, Walter Brennan, John Wayne, Clark Gable, and Gary Cooper. In the Valley, they could own acres of rural land, stable horses, and ride into the sunset.

After World War II, the rush into the San Fernando Valley began. By 1950, the Valley's population had more than doubled, reaching 400,000. Much of the Valley, especially its western reaches, still consisted of wide-open spaces. I had an uncle who, for a time, kept a horse with a trainer in the far western end of the Valley. Occasionally, I would tag along with him. We would drive from home in Pacific Palisades, a coastal community lying between Santa Monica and Malibu, inland through Topanga Canyon to the stables. It was as if we were slipping back through time into the Old West. The western end of the Valley was still mostly horses, pumpkin patches, cornfields, and walnut ranches. There was even a dairy farm that produced

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goat milk.

By 1960, the Valley's population had more than doubled again, to a million. My sister and her husband bought a house in that same far western end of the Valley in 1961, on what had been a walnut ranch. Old properties in the area were still horse-zoned, but, when they were resold, new zoning went into effect that prohibited the keeping of horses. This was not popular among Valley residents, but zoning decisions were made "over the hill" in the city.

By the 1950's, the Valley teemed with children—white children. The Valley gained a reputation for its lack of racial diversity, as those living in Los Angeles proper were quick to point out. It was the "white suburb," and from it came the "conservative white vote" in Los Angeles city elections. Except for a few pockets of Mexican-Americans, especially in the incorporated east Valley community of the City of San Fernando, and a very small number of blacks in the same area and in nearby Pacoima, the Valley was very white indeed. The whiteness of the Valley high schools contrasted sharply with those in East, Central, and South-Central Los Angeles. From the mid-50's through the mid-60's, high schools could not be built fast enough in the Valley—Birmingham, Reseda, Monroe, Taft, Cleveland, Grant, Sylmar, Chatsworth, Granada Hills, Kennedy, El Camino. All soon had 3,000 or more students, and these were only three-year schools.

Along with the older Valley high schools (such as Canoga