Myth & Reality in American History:
Agrarianism

Teaching American History
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Robert Wesley Amick, "My Colorado Home"

http://bonecreek.org/collection/
Consider farming in America’s past

• List 5 events related to farmers and agriculture in American history.

• List 3 current events related to farming and agriculture.

• List 5 words/phrases/concepts that describe how Americans feel about farming and agriculture.
• Consider the lists you just created
• Mark myth with M
• Mark reality with R
• Look at the photo – and list the myths and reality associated with the photograph
The images in this PP

• Thomas Hart Benton (1889 –1975)
  American painter and muralist. Along with Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, he was at the forefront of the Regionalist art movement

• Grant Wood (1891 – 1942)
  best known for his paintings depicting the rural American Midwest

• Bone Creek Museum of Agrarian Art
  http://bonecreek.org/
Myth or reality?

http://bonecreek.org/collection/
Myth or reality?

• 1896 – “Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic, but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”
  • William Jennings Bryan

• “The city sits like a parasite, fanning out its roots into the open country and draining it of its subsistence. The city takes everything to itself – material, money, men – and gives back only what it does not want.”
  • 1920s - chairman of the Country Life Commission – Liberty Hyde Baily
Wendell Berry – leader of modern agrarianism

• “A corporation, essentially, is a pile of money to which a number of persons have sold their moral allegiance.”

• “The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

• “I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable to feed me. If I am going to eat meat, I want it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant, uncrowded life outdoors, on bountiful pasture, with good water nearby and trees for shade.”

• “Don't own so much clutter that you will be relieved to see your house catch fire.”
Agrarian defined:

- A belief that farming is the best way of life and the most important economic endeavor
  - Implies that farmers willfully sought to avoid commercial agriculture and preferred a “moral economy” in which they produced for subsistence purposes rather than the market and economic gain

- “the celebration of agriculture and rural life for the positive impact thereof on the individual and society.”
  - David Danbom in his 1991 Agricultural History Society presidential address
5 basic ideas of an “agrarian”

• 1. The cultivation of the soil, the first of all occupations, has a positive spiritual good and instills the cultivator with virtues such as manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality.
  • These come from the farmer’s direct contact with physical nature, the medium through which God is directly revealed
  • Farming was blessed by God, since God was the first husbandman when he created nature, and the first employment ordained by God when he made Adam a farmer
2 - Basic ideas of an “agrarian”

• 2. Only farming offers complete independence and self-sufficiency, because regardless of the state of the national economy (provided the farmer and not the bank owns the land), the farmer meet his basic needs of food and shelter.

• An economic system should be judged by how much it encourages freedom, individuality, and morality –NOT by prosperity or wealth

*Spring Shower (Red Hills) by J. Steuart Curry (1931)*
3 - Basic ideas of an “agrarian”

• 3. The farmer has a solid sense of identity
  • Farmers have a long historical and religious tradition
  • A feeling of belonging to a family, place and region
  • Agrarian life is NOT what modern society promotes - abstraction, fragmentation, alienation
4 - Basic ideas of an "agrarian"

• 4. Industry, capitalism, and technology and cities encourage corruption, vice, and weakness and destroy independence and dignity
5 - Basic ideas of an “agrarian”

• 5. Agricultural communities have brotherhoods of labor and cooperation (everyone one helps each other out) that is the model for an ideal social order

1928 John S.Curry
Baptism in Kansas
Two more definitions of agrarianism

• Originally the word “agrarian” was probably derived from the Roman *lex agrarian*
  • the agrarian law that called for an equal division of public lands

• 1. during the past 300 years, the term also means:
  • any social or political movement requiring a forced equalization or redistribution of ownership of cultivated land.

• 2. *agrarian* also used as just a synonym for “agricultural”
History of Agrarianism – ancient roots

• 8th century BC Hesiod
  • Greek poet, farmer and contemporary of Homer
  • Works and Days
    • Collection of maxims on farming
    • Major theme – husbandry is better than a life of commerce and soldiering

• Athenian Xenophon (c. 430 - 354 BC, 300 years after Hesiod)
  • quoted Socrates as saying
  • “Husbandry is the mother and nurse of the other arts. For when husbandry flourishes, all the other arts thrive, but whenever the land is compelled to lie waste, the other arts . . . nearly perish

• Roman Cato the Elder
  • De Agri Cultura about 160 BC
    • One of oldest surviving works in Latin
    • To call a man a good farmer and a good tiller of the soil was to pay him the highest possible compliment
    • praises the farmer as the source of good citizens and soldiers, of both wealth and high moral values

• Subsequent ancient Roman writers praised farming
  • Columella - (born 1st century AD, Spain), Roman soldier and farmer who wrote extensively on agriculture and kindred subjects in the hope of arousing a love for farming and a simple life
  • Varro, Pliny the Elder, Horace, Vergil
Agrarian extended into the Middle Ages and Renaissance

- Agrarian themes in Chaucer & Shakespeare
- John Locke
  - 1632 – 1704 – land was the common stock of society and a man’s right to title and ownership could result only from occupancy and use
  - Influenced father of American Agrarianism – Thomas Jefferson

- Agriculture became a fad among the English aristocracy in the early 1700s
  - But later – when Europeans became revolutionary and wanted reform movements to redistribute the land
  - in aristocratic circles agrarian was a term of insult and abuse
    - like the word “communist” in the 1950s because of reform movements to redistribute the land

- Adam Smith – Wealth of Nations (1776)
  - he even agreed, up to a point, that it was at least an indispensable and necessary part of any prosperous national economy

- Subject of many English Romantic poets – Gray, Wordsworth, Burns
The Diggers

- group of Protestant English agrarian socialists
  - begun as True Levellers in 1649, who became known as Diggers, because of their attempts to farm on common land.

- Their original name came from their belief in economic equality based upon a specific passage in the Book of Acts.
  - Book of Acts, chapter two, verses 44 and 45: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

- The Diggers tried (by "leveling" real property) to reform the existing social order with an agrarian lifestyle based on their ideas for the creation of small egalitarian rural communities
  - one of a number of nonconformist dissenting groups that emerged around this time.

- Not a new idea in English society
  - the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 – some wanted to “level” social classes
Farming and Agrarian themes VERY VERY common in art
Always consider adding art to lessons on agrarianism
The Harvesters, Pieter Bruegel, 1565.

Monet, Haystacks, 1890

Van Gogh, The Sower, 1888
Agrarianism in the New World

- In the mind of Europeans in the Age of Discovery, American was a virgin land, an unspoiled and undefiled Garden of Eden, a utopia

- A myth was generated that in America the European could regain a lost relationship with Nature
  - Thomas Moore used the Americas as the setting for his Utopia
  - Explorers – Christopher Columbus, the English, saw lush abundance (sometimes imaged it)

- New England Puritans had a more practical view
  - saw their job in tilling the stony New England soil and their struggle with the wilderness as a part of their larger conflict with evil
  - also write practical handbooks on agriculture in the New World
Thomas Jefferson

• “father of American democracy” and “father of American agriculture”

• In Virginia – where fertile soil and a better climate made it possible to have agricultural as a economic basis
  • “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”
    • Jefferson
Federalists VS Agrarian/Republicans

• Hamilton VS Jefferson

• Federalists – strong, highly centralized federal government, controlled by a propertied few, with the support of commercial and industrial expansion

• Republicans – reliance on local government, under the leadership of a natural aristocracy of talent and virtue, with a primarily agrarian national economy based on small, independent farmers and landholders

• Theme carries into the Civil War
Agrarianism in 19th century America

• Transcendentalists – began in late 1820s and 1830s
  • Ralph Waldo Emerson – farming was the most sacred of callings
  • Henry David Thoreau – lived in the woods – farmed

• “living the good life” on the farm became a major theme in fiction, essays, and poems.
  • Two 19th century movements gave impetus to this theme
    • 1. realism – with its emphasis on middle and lower class economic and social problems and the its use of common vernacular
    • 2. local color – conscious use of highly peculiar and distinctive regional characters and customs
American Utopias & Agrarianism

- Brook Farm
- Fruitlands
- Shakers
- Harmony – Rappites
- New Harmony – Robert Owen
- 20th century “hippie” communities

- See article in today’s TAH folder
  - “Dreaming of a Better Life: Utopia as a Focus for Thematic, Interdisciplinary Instruction”
Challenges to Agrarianism

• But not everyone thought agrarianism was the cure to all ills
• Has always been many dichotomies in American tradition
  • The natural and the artificial
  • The virtuous and the corrupt
  • The independent and the conforming
  • The creative and the imitative
  • The spiritual and the material

• These ideas easily transferred to

• Agrarianism VS Industrialism

Claude Monet (1840-1926) *The Saint-Lazare Station*, 1877
Agrarianism VS Industrialism

- Some historians suggest that the Civil War was less over slavery and states’ rights and more about longstanding antagonism between:
  - Farm and factory
  - Agrarianism based upon slave labor VS industrialism based upon free labor

- The defeat of the South was a clear triumph of
  - the capitalist over the farmer
  - the assembly line over the corn row
  - industrialism prevailed
  - Technological knowledge and industrial methods applied to agriculture

- But many still defended the cause of the independent farmer being crushed by the larger, impersonal forces of capitalism
  - a theme in Robert Frost’s poetry
  - the poems and stories of the Southern Agrarians
  - Robert Penn Warren 1905 –1989
    - born in Guthrie, Kentucky, near the Tennessee-Kentucky border
“Agricultural fundamentalism”

- A belief in the social, economic, and political superiority of rural citizenry
- Changes that helped to create this:
  - Universal white manhood suffrage in the age of Jackson,
  - Rise of corporate power during the late 19th century
  - Development of agribusiness in 20th century
  - Shifted economic and political power from the countryside to the city
- Farmers and supporters, unable or unwilling to accept this transformation – continued to express an ideological belief in the merits of agrarianism
Critiques of American Agrarianism

_Achelous and Hercules_ by Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). It was originally painted in 1947 for Harzfeld's, a department store in Kansas City, and was donated to the Smithsonian when the store closed in the 1980s.
Critiques of American Agrarianism

• Agrarianism – fact or fiction
  • Often an intrusion of myth into history

• Myth has often replaced the reality for the explanation of American agricultural history
  • Some have created a past that they prefer rather than the one that existed

• Many still equates agriculture and rural life with family values of hard work, thrift, honesty, neighborliness
  • opposite of what is believed to happen in cities
  • BUT – is everyone in the country hard working, thrifty, honest, neighborly?
Myth is most obvious in the South

• Planters, small-scale farmers, sharecroppers, and tenants planted tobacco, cotton, sugar cane, and rice for the sole purpose of making money
  • They were businessmen (but did operate on different levels)

• Reward was not measured by producing their own food or moral righteousness
  • The reward was the cash or credit they earned for the purchase of more land, daily necessities and slaves

• Southerners emphasized staple crops for commercial gain
  • One-crop agriculture – enabled them to exploit the soil and labor supply to their best advantage

• The reality of capitalism instead of the romanticism of agrarianism
The Agrarian Myth in the West

• Railroads, speculators, and land companies took the first claim to most land
  • NOT small scale independent farmers who had to purchase their acreage from these companies at high prices
• Commercial agriculture paid the mortgages, taxes and purchased what could not be produced
Agrarianism offered prosperity and civil rights to white men only

- Only hard work and subservience for rural women, white and black
- Women worked in the fields, but seldom owned the farm and the land didn’t give them a vote
- What did women get?
  - serving as *a moral presence* on the land

By Dorothea Lange
Decline of farmer population

• Between 1870 and 1889 - Farmers dropped below 50% of the population
• 1920s – rural population fell below 50%
• But Bernard Baruch – leading businessman in 1920s insisted
  • “Agriculture is the greatest and fundamentally the most important of our industries. The cities are but branches of the tree of national life, the roots of which go deeply into the land. We all flourish or decline with the farmer.”
Farming today

• subsistence agriculture is gone
  • Farmers produce for a market economy – a few specialized crops and buy their food like everyone else

• Today it is **agribusiness** often run by corporations:
  • crop production (farming and contract farming), seed supply, agrichemicals, breeding, farm machinery, distribution, processing, marketing, and retail sales.
  • Examples:
    • Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Monsanto, and Syngenta; AB Agri (part of Associated British Foods) animal feeds, biofuels, and micro-ingredients, ADM, grain transport and processing; John Deere; Ocean Spray, farmer's cooperative; and Purina Farms,

• Federal government has been very active in farm policy, especially since the New Deal
Modern Agrarianism

Jim Hamil, "Giant Haystack, Late Afternoon"
http://bonecreek.org/collection/
In modern America

• Boundaries between rural and urban communities are unclear
• Flight to the countryside for benefits of rural living
• Some are “refugists” – seek rural life to escape or relatively cheap living rather than farming

• agrarian ideology had gone mainstream
  • nutritionists, novelists, journalists, foodies, chefs, environmentalists, new urbanists, average suburbanites, and college students
  • calling for changes in how we live and how we eat and produce food.
Wendell Berry & New Agrarianism

- launched many of the debates about the broad implications of industrial agriculture with his 1977 book *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*

- born 1934
- has written dozens of novels, short stories, poems, and essays
- Lives in Henry County KY

Pres. Obama awards Wendell E. Berry the 2010 National Medal of Arts and Humanities.
Themes in New Agrarianism

• “The way that we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world.”
  • Michael Pollan

• “Eating is an agricultural act.”
  • Wendell Berry

• “the chemical system of agriculture is killing us,” poisoning our soil, water, and air, our children, and ourselves with our use of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).
  • Robert Rodale, the son of J.I. Rodale, both pioneering promoters of organic farming and gardening in the United States
Themes in New Agrarianism

• New agrarians believe
  • modern industrial agriculture—the agriculture that now dominates world food and fiber production—is destructive rather than sustainable.

• urban and suburban sprawl has eaten up thousands of acres of open land, displacing wildlife and destroying arable acres

• Unlike many traditional environmentalists, the new agrarians focus not on wilderness preservation but on wise land use that safeguards soil for the future use of human beings.

• BUT still believe in PRIVATE land ownership
New Agrarianism will save the world

• Like earlier generations of thinkers, new agrarians argue that agrarian values are vital to the health of our democracy.
  • Like Thomas Jefferson, the new agrarians argue that the concept of the free citizen is rooted in yeoman farming

• will create a cultural renewal

• focus on the revitalization of local communities.

• a national embrace of their ideals will mend our ailing society
  • “What makes agrarianism the ideal candidate for cultural renewal is that it . . . [is] a deliberate way of life in which the integrity and wholeness of peoples and neighborhoods, and the natural sources they depend upon, are maintained and celebrated.”
    • Wirzba
focus on the revitalization of local communities

• Place based education-
  • seeks to help communities through employing students and school staff in solving community problems
  • Place-based education differs from conventional text and classroom-based education in that it understands students' local community as one of the primary resources for learning.

• LOTS of ideas
History of New Agrarianism

• Local Food Movement
  • began with California restaurateur Alice Waters
    • advocate for sustainable food production methods
    • founder of the Edible Schoolyard program that aims to teach children about healthy food production.

• Norman Wirzba’s 2003 collection of essays,
  • *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land.*
    • first in a University Press of Kentucky series called “Culture of the Land: A Series in the New Agrarianism”
    • explores “a new agrarianism that considers the health of habitats and human communities together.”
      • *From the Farm to the Table: What All Americans Need to Know about Agriculture*
      • *Learning Native Wisdom: What Traditional Cultures Teach Us about Subsistence, Sustainability, and Spirituality*
      • *Growing Stories from India: Religion and the Fate of Agriculture*
      • *Fields of Learning: The Student Farm Movement in North America*
      • *The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love*
History of New Agrarianism

• 2006- agrarian ideology went mainstream with the publication of Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Lamenting “our national eating disorder,”
  • Pollan revealed many of the dirty secrets of the corn-based industrial food chain and praised small farms committed to producing healthy food using sustainable practices.

• 2007 - *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*
  • novelist Barbara Kingsolver, her biologist husband, and her daughter recounted their family’s adventure in local eating. (farm in Virginia )
  • Some of her novels:
    • *The Bean Trees*
    • *Pigs in Heaven*
    • *The Poisonwood Bible*

1. Critique of New Agrarianism - Cost

- Fresh, local food often costs more
  - people inclined to share the values of the new agrarians are often those who can afford to pay
  - Need more for locally produced, fresh food purchased directly from the farmer at a farmers’ market or through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangement.

- In the past the amount of variety and nutrition in one’s diet has often depended on socioeconomic status.

- See article in today’s TAH folder
  - “Dreaming of a Better Life: Utopia as a Focus for Thematic, Interdisciplinary Instruction”
2. Critique of New Agrarianism - accessibility

• Can the average American really have access to locally produced fresh food all the time?
  • disadvantaged urbanites live in “food deserts”
    • communities where the only food outlet is the local convenience store.

• Do people really want to restrict themselves to a diet that is locally produced?
  • Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle brings home the challenges of eating locally; it means you must eat seasonally.
3. Critique of New Agrarianism – economic success of small farmer?

• Can farmers can make an adequate living on the land?
  • Unless small-scale farmers can achieve a modern middle-class standard of living, very few people are going to want to farm.

• Berry himself admits that it is difficult for small-scale farmers to earn an adequate living without off-farm jobs.
  • young farmers without inherited land struggle to afford the start-up costs of obtaining land and equipment for even small-scale farming

• Even if farmers could make a good living, how many people want to farm?
  • Farming is hard physical labor; it is also among the most dangerous occupations.

• USDA reported that the total number of farms grew
  • from 2,129,000 in 2002
  • to 2,205,000 in 2007

• BUT most of the gain came from tiny farm
  • farms with gross sales of less than twenty-five hundred dollars—not farms that could provide an adequate living for a farm family.
4. Critique of New Agrarianism – corporate support

• Will mega agri-processing and food corporations support or distort?
• French-based company Dannon Yogurt now owns 85% of organic brand Stonyfield Farms.

• In fall 2010 Wal-Mart announced a commitment to purchasing $400 million worth of local produce each year
  • Has the potential to transform the landscape of food production and distribution
  • BUT NOT been great for all of the farmers

• Whole Foods
  • Does NOT deliver on its implied promises to offer mostly local or sustainably produced food
  • Whole Foods stores are festooned with banners proclaiming “Our Commitment to the Local Farmer” and “Help the Small Farmer”
  • BUT most of the produce sold is grown by mega-producers in California
    • [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2006/03/is_whole_foods_wholesome.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2006/03/is_whole_foods_wholesome.html)
5. Critique of New Agrarianism – government subsidies

• altering the structure of our federal agricultural programs is the biggest obstacle of all to making agrarian dreams a reality

• public policy continues to subsidize cheap corn and cotton
  • NIOT cheap broccoli and blueberries
  • farmers are discouraged from producing food in sustainable ways
6. Critique of New Agrarianism

- the problem of private property
  - Farm land is VALUABLE!
    - A farmer can sell land for development at a much higher rate than selling it for farmland
    - Farmers want to be free to sell their land to the highest bidder, regardless of use the buyer intends to make of it and how that use might affect the local community.

- What does local really mean?
  - 10 miles? 100 miles? 500 miles? In the same nation?

- Are all local farmers using sustainable methods?
Nostalgia

• Nostalgia - a sentimentality for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations

• Much of the new agrarian rhetoric romanticizes some “golden age” of our food past

• But were the “good old days” so great?
Farming today

• in 2007 (last agriculture census)
  • 2.2 million farms
  • covering an area of 922 million acres
  • With an average of 418 acres per farm

• Top 20 agricultural products of the United States by value

1. Corn
2. Cattle meat
3. Cow's milk, whole, fresh
4. Chicken meat
5. Soybeans
6. Pig meat
7. Wheat
8. Cotton lint
9. Hen eggs
10. Turkey meat
11. Tomatoes
12. Potatoes
13. Grapes
14. Oranges
15. Rice, paddy
16. Apples
17. Sorghum
18. Lettuce
19. Cottonseed
20. Sugar beets
Many, Many, Many Related topics

• Agriculture and government policy
  • Distribution of land
    • Homestead Act
    • Morrill Act of 1862, which initiated the land-grant college system
  • Price Supports
    • 1922 Grain Futures Act
    • 1929 Agricultural Marketing Act
    • 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act
Related topics – Impact of gov. policy on what we eat

• Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture to Richard Nixon
  • Under Butz, corn crops multiplied, leading to the increased production of high-fructose corn syrup
  • high-fructose corn syrup
    • “sugar” cheaper
    • protected frozen foods from freeze-burn, prolonged the shelf life of other foods
    • baked goods look more appetizing
  • "The legacy of Earl Butz was that Coca-Cola and Pepsi switched from a 50/50 mix of corn sugar and cane sugar to 100 per cent high-fructose corn syrup, enabling them to save 20 per cent costs, boost portion sizes and still make profits."

• Palm oil became available because of trade agreements with Southeast Asian nations where is was grown

• Source - Greg Critser in *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*
Name more topics from your teaching units related to agrarianism.
Why this topic?
The agrarian myth is important to my history; even though it might not all be “true.”
This research made me see the agraraian theme in my life - Resor articles

• Food as a Theme in Social Studies Classes: Connecting Daily Life to Technology, Economy, and Culture.

• Place-Based Education: What is Its Place in the Social Studies Classroom?

• Using Community Cookbooks as Primary Sources.

• Dreaming of a Better Life: Utopia as a Focus for Thematic, Interdisciplinary Instruction.

• Using Community Cookbooks as Primary Sources.

  • http://www.ag.auburn.edu/auxiliary/srsa/
Just a few essential questions for teaching American History

- Does racial equality depend upon government action?
- Should African Americans have more strongly resisted the government’s decision to abandon the drive for equality? (Booker T. Washington’s “accommodation” v. W.E.B. Du Bois’s “agitation” approaches)
- Has rapid industrial development been a blessing or a curse for Americans?
- Were big business leaders “captains of industry” or “robber barons”?
- Should business be regulated closely by the government?
- Should business be allowed to combine and reduce competition?
- Can workers attain economic justice without violence?
- Did America fulfill the dreams of immigrants?
- Has immigration been the key to America’s success?
- Has the West been romanticized?
- Can the “white man’s conquest” of Native Americans be justified?
- Have Native Americans been treated fairly by the United States government?
- Who was to blame for the problems of American farmers after the Civil War? Or: Was the farmers’ revolt of the 1890s justified?
- Did populism provide an effective solution to the nation’s problems?
- Is muckraking an effective tool to reform American politics and society?
- Can reform movements improve American society and politics? (Progressivism)
- Were the Progressives successful in making government more responsive to the will of the people?

https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/resources/essential-questions-teaching-american-history

- You will need to create a free account to access the good stuff.
Sources used in this presentation

• American Agriculture, A Brief History
  • By R. Douglas Hurt

  • See today’s TAH file for a PDF if this article

• Agrarianism in American Literature
  • M. Thomas Inge 1969

• And various information from Wikipedia