

## **New Faces of Rural America**

**Moving to the country is once again the American Dream. The trend is strong, and it will bring inevitable change to the farm community.**

By [Joe Link](#)

For Gustavo and Michelle Huerta, the decision was not all that difficult. They could either stay in Miami and raise their four children in an increasingly violent environment, or they could live their dream and move to the country.

Raised in the city, the Huertas didn't like what they were seeing. One day it was a huge shootout involving 17 U.S. marshals just a few blocks from their home. Another time it was a car abandoned at their doorstep. The driver said he would be back, but the Huertas later learned the car had just been used in a robbery.

"Both of our parents were pretty shocked when we told them what we wanted to do," says Michelle. "They thought we were crazy."

Home for the Huertas is now Bliss Farm, 200 acres of beautiful woods and pastures just outside of Dickson, Tenn., where Gustavo is a general surgeon. Home is a comfortable house in a pasture, sitting well back from a little-traveled road. A garden is nearby, and so is a barn with horses, cattle, goats and chickens. Time here is like the wide creek that runs a few steps from their back door-always coming, always going, peaceful, quiet, reflective.

"When 9/11 hit, my dad said, 'Well, you all are in the best place to be,'" says Michelle. "And you know, it is a safe place to be. It's an incredible life for my children. We love it. We just love it."

The Huertas are not the only ones making the dream of country life come true. Forget what you've heard about people moving out of rural America-that's an old story (though still true in in the Great Plains, the Delta and other remote areas). The reality is rural counties in much of the U.S. actually increased in population during the 1990s, while metropolitan areas lost population. Many are calling it a rural renaissance.

Certainly, some of this move to rural counties in census data is nothing more than the obvious urban sprawl-countryside just outside the city carved into small lots. But the trend is clearly more than that. Consider that most rural counties in farming states such as Iowa and Illinois saw growth during the decade. And in Tennessee, every single county saw population increases. Go 30 minutes outside any sizeable city, and you'll find

housing developments with "lots" of 5, 10, even 20 acres each. In some areas, entire farms are being divided into 40-acre "farmettes."

Why the sudden interest in rural, small-town America? Several reasons. One is that commuting to better paying jobs in larger cities has never been easier. Better roads, more comfortable cars and relatively cheap gas all encourage workers to drive farther than ever. Another trend-one likely to continue growing-is that more people are working from home thanks to the Internet and other new technology.

But the main reason may be the hardest to measure: Could it be nothing more than values have shifted? Has a sense of well-being become more important in our lives and money a little less so?

"People just want a small-town, rural feel," says Calvin Beale, a demographer with the USDA who has been studying the census data showing movement to rural counties. In trying to understand that data, he often calls local people with firsthand knowledge of the movement, including Extension agents, chambers of commerce and real estate agents.

"They tell me people are moving in who simply want to get away from cities," says Beale. "They say they're concerned about their children, that they want to get their children out of urban schools and into rural schools where it's safer and they don't have the gangs." The reasons are social, he believes, not economic.

Despite all of the negative perceptions many have about rural America (it's isolated, behind the times, poverty stricken), there are just as many positives associated with country life. A survey last year by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation found that Americans also see it as the epitome of traditional, family values, a place where life is slower, more friendly and richer in community. Hard work, such as that done by farmers, builds character.

Tim Paramore is quick to point out his admiration for farmers, especially now that he has pieced together his 35 acres 30 minutes from downtown Birmingham, Ala.

"It relates back to peoples' values and a way of life that is better," says Paramore. "People are realizing that the rat race is just not worth it.

"To me it's therapy," he continues. "I'm out there by myself and just enjoy doing this."

Paramore, an information technology specialist, may not call himself a farmer, but he views his 25 acres of hay, Kubota tractor, rake and baler as more than just a hobby. He consults with his county Extension agent, tests the soil, checks the protein levels of his hay. And, being married to an accountant, he pushes a sharp pencil.

"She makes me tow the line," he says, laughing. "This year I have to show a profit." Asked if he will, Paramore smiles. "It depends on whose rules you follow."

Jim Purcell is another who takes farming seriously. He has only 5 acres 45 miles east of Atlanta, and only a small portion of that is planted to muscadine grapes. But when he talks about muscadines, it's clear he sees something much bigger developing from his U-pick farm.

Purcell, his wife and their two children live just a few steps from the start of their small vineyard. Next spring, he will plant another acre of vines and install a network of drip irrigation.

"I just love being in the country and living off the land," says the 35-year-old Purcell, a deputy sheriff in DeKalb County. "They all give me a hard time at work, calling me Muscadine Man and Farmer John. They don't understand."

What they don't understand is that although Purcell grew up in Atlanta, he feels this is what he was always meant to do. He has plans to have a U-pick business fully established by the time he retires. "I must have farming in my blood. I enjoy it so much I wish I could go into business full time now.

"I'm a very private person," he adds. "I want to live out where you can't hear or see your neighbors."

And so Purcell sees the inevitable: If he wants peace, quiet and remoteness, he'll probably have to move further from Atlanta. He is certainly not alone in that thought. How many people can move to the country and it still be called country? If this trend continues-and the USDA's Beale believes it will-there will be many issues everyone will have to address. Among them:

### **Rising land values**

Even in areas not close to large cities, land values have far exceeded their agricultural worth.

### **County government**

More people puts a heavier load on roads and bridges, schools, and other services. Many county governments are struggling to service their residents as it is.

### **Land-use regulations**

Zoning has long been a dirty word in the farming community, certain to fail if brought up for a vote. That's no longer necessarily true as more people see zoning and easements as a way of growing but still preserving rural character.

### **Culture clash**

Spraying chemicals, running combines at midnight and spreading manure are the realities of farmers. Will their new neighbors understand?

So does this mean that these changes in rural America are all bad? Hardly. Change is always difficult, and the growth in rural areas is something as inevitable as growth in the U.S. population.

And who is to say that the Tim Paramores and Jim Purcells of this movement are not farmers? Small, yes, but the motivation and spirit are there. As for the Huertas, Gustavo and Michelle recently told their children that the stock market had reduced their college funds considerably, and they could now invest their money differently if they wanted. Vince, 14, didn't hesitate-he wanted to buy cattle, and now he has 10 bred Angus heifers.

His mother says that, more than anything, the country has offered her children a rich experience in life they would never have found in a city. They have learned about wildlife and hunting, gardening and forestry. Now, one is learning to become a cattleman.

"We've learned so much here," Michelle says. "The lessons, they just don't end."

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