

The Meaning of Home in Rural America
Joseph L. Parkin Memorial Lecture on Aging
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“Home” is where we belong. It provides a sense of identity, a locus of security and a point of centering and orientation in our world. To be at home is to experience a state of being “at one” with one’s world. Indeed, being at home is related to both physical and psychological wellbeing. Often, although not invariably, home is grounded in place—in a dwelling or a community in which we have resided for some time, that encapsulates our history, or where, surrounded by the familiar, we feel comfortable and embedded. Nowhere is such a perspective on home more apparent than in our “images” of traditional rural America where notions of residential and social stability, community orientation, extensive social support networks, and a sense of community responsibility are pervasive themes within a bucolic, if somewhat unrealistically romantic, public image.

In an increasingly mobile society, traditional notions of home are under threat as frequent residential change and rapid community transitions reduce the stability of lives, make it more difficult to establish a sense of being at home, and foster alienation from place in our lives—what Relph (1976) termed “placelessness.” In the face of such challenges each of us tends to develop a set of personal behaviors and adaptations that enable us to maintain or to create a sense of home. In addition, on the community level, local planning initiatives increasingly are focusing on making the landscapes and environments of villages and small towns more welcoming and homelike.

Rural America is in the midst of change: fewer people work on farms, population turnover is increasing, new economic activities dot the landscape, rural settings are increasingly tied as bedroom communities to large urban areas, and rural resources and services are being concentrated into fewer settlements. Indeed, the very essence of rurality is changing. In this lecture, I argue that the traditional meaning of home experienced by long-time resident elders who may have resided for decades or, in many cases, their entire lives in a single residence in a socially and economically stable community, is under threat. For some rural elders, the response to such change involves a process of holding on to home, for others it entails adaptations to sustain a sense of being at home amidst the changes wrought by the need to relocate or by community change (the recreation of home). And for yet others, retirement into or back to a rural area involves the creation of new senses of home on both a personal and community level.

Following the development and illustration of these themes, the lecture will conclude by tracing some of the implication of newly emergent manifestations of home and “being at home” in rural America for the wellbeing of rural elders and for the future of rural communities. I argue that the essence of retaining the “rurality” of rural America may lie in our ability to create and sustain residents’ sense of being at home amidst change.

Relph, E.A. (1976) Place and Placelessness. London: Pion Press.

6/24/06