

PUTTING THE BARN  
BEFORE THE HOUSE



GREY OSTERUD

PUTTING THE BARN  
BEFORE THE HOUSE



*Women and Family Farming  
in Early-Twentieth-Century New York*

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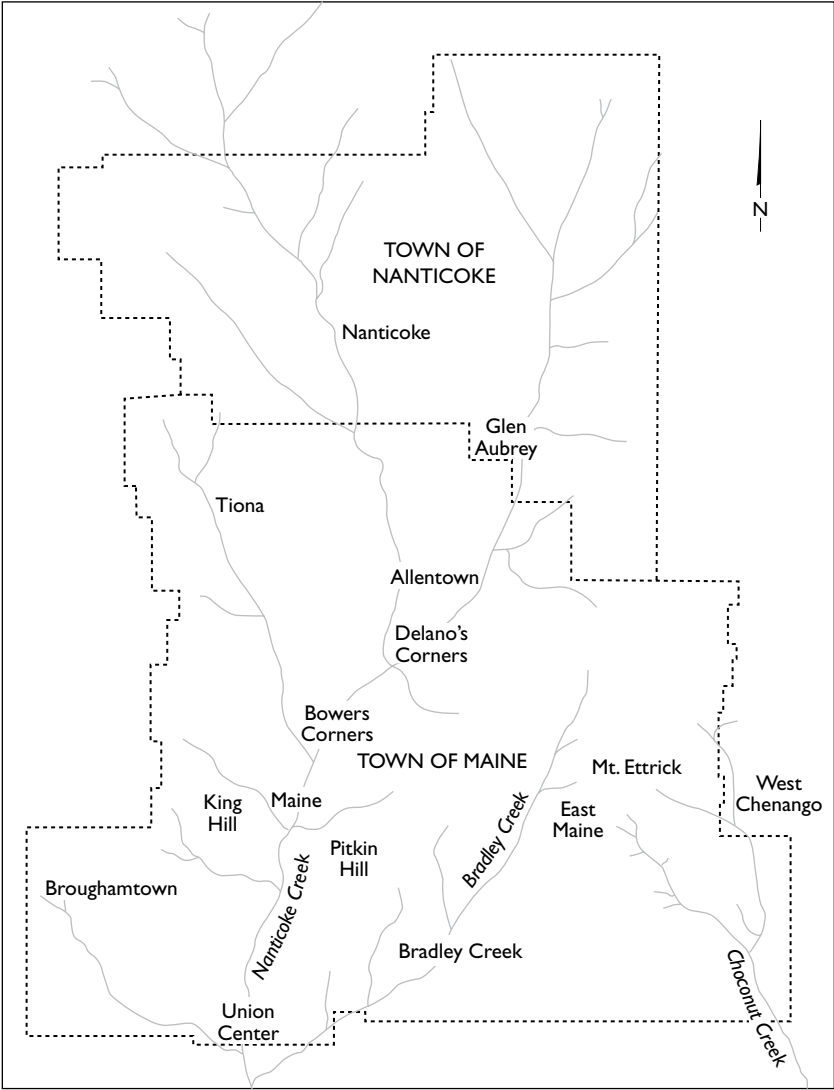
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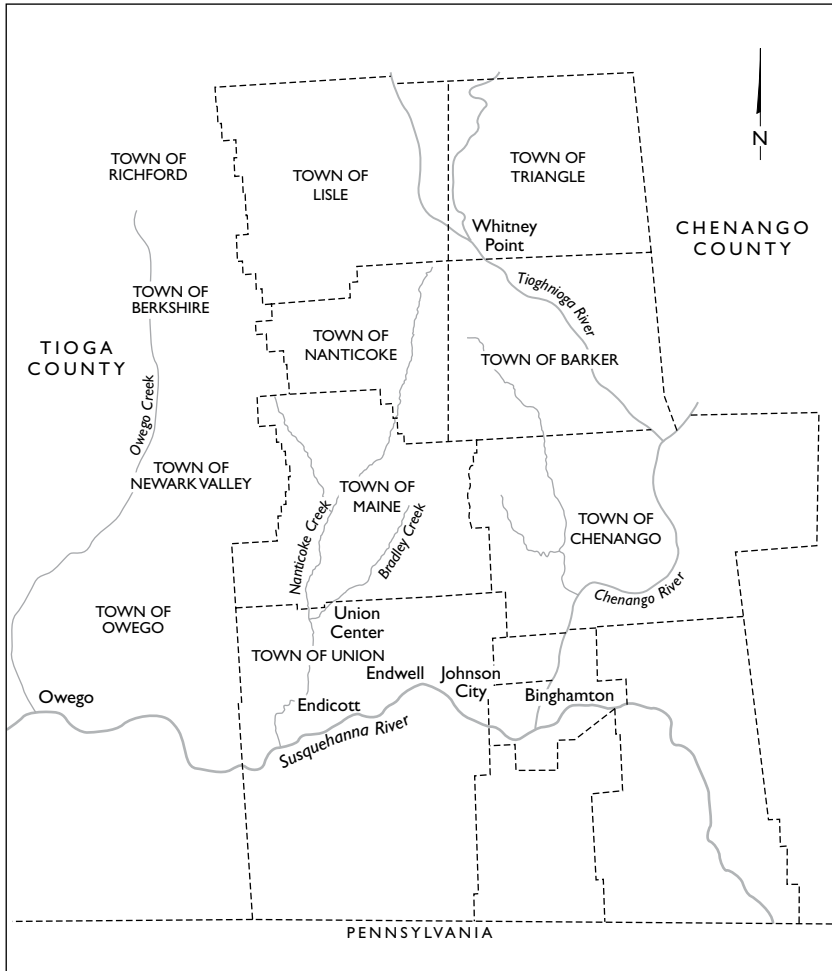
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Map 1. Towns of Maine and Nanticoke, New York.



Map 2. Places adjacent to the Nanticoke Valley. Broome County is bounded by the broken lines.

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# Introduction



## *The Nanticoke Valley in the Early Twentieth Century*

People who drive through the Nanticoke Valley of south-central New York today find it difficult to imagine the intricate patchwork of farms that covered the countryside in the early twentieth century. The road following the Nanticoke Creek as it winds south from the upland towns of Nanticoke and Maine to join the Susquehanna River at Union passes scattered nineteenth-century farmhouses with dilapidated barns, Cape Cod-style houses with tidy flower gardens, and overgrown trailers surrounded by broken-down cars and rusting machinery. A few crossroads are marked by straggling hamlets, but none of the three villages boasts a grocery store.

Only one dairy farm remains in operation. At the northern end of the valley near Whitney Point, the Whittakers milk four hundred cows three times a day, use a computerized system to calibrate each cow's milk yield and nutritional needs, and grow feed and fodder on more than 1,000 acres of land. In following the recommendations of scientists at Cornell University, they represent contemporary agribusiness. At the southern end of the valley near the "Triple Cities" of Binghamton, Johnson City, and Endicott, the Wrights have given up dairying. They sold their land in the adjacent town to the Whittakers. On their farm, which has been in the family for 170 years, they raise vegetables, free-range hens, and grass-fed beef cattle, selling produce, eggs, and meat to urban and suburban customers much as the family did at the turn of the twentieth century. With a hint of humor leavening their seriousness, the Wrights say that their main crop is actually red-wing blackbirds, which nest in the rafters of their huge empty dairy barn.



Figure 1. Maine village, New York, ca. 1900. Looking east from King Hill toward Pollard Hill. Photographer unknown. (*Courtesy of the Nanticoke Valley Historical Society.*)

Most residents of the Nanticoke Valley do not cultivate the soil or tend livestock. The open landscape of a half century ago, with cornfields filling the valley floor, hay meadows on the gentle slopes, and pastures stretching over the rounded ridgelines, has disappeared under second-growth forest, with stands of neatly planted yew and pine alternating with thick scrub. Dark hemlocks have crept down from the ledges into stone-walled fields. Even the open vistas have vanished. Within living memory, the labors of generations of farming families have been erased from the land.

Nonetheless, new, market-oriented enterprises have sprung up in the Nanticoke Valley during the past few decades. Not all have survived, but gardens and greenhouses are thriving along some stretches of the creek road. The plot that Leigh Ames so carefully enriched to grow vegetables continues to flourish, and Black Angus cattle graze in their pastures, although the Ames's dairy barn is now used to repair cars. The Green brothers' fruit farm near West Chenango has become a "you-pick" operation and offers a restaurant, a gift shop featuring homemade jams and jellies, and a petting zoo. Those who first planted apple trees there would be startled, and then amused, to hear that a cow is now an exotic animal! Labor-intensive enterprises like the Wrights' depend on customers who are willing and able to pay a premium for quality. Their future is in doubt because the Triple Cities have been in decline since the post-World War II collapse of the shoe industry and the recent contraction of high-tech manufacturing.



Rural residents who now work elsewhere are aware of their community's past. Remarkably, the Nanticoke Valley Historical Society is the largest secular organization in the towns of Maine and Nanticoke, bringing together natives and newcomers to preserve and interpret their heritage. Being "from here" carries no special cachet. Not only does no merit attach to ancestry, but people deliberately refrain from making social class distinctions. Nobody pays much attention to the status of the jobs that others hold, whether they are executives, engineers, and professionals or work on the county road crew and in nursing homes. People care what others contribute to the locality, and the Volunteer Emergency Squad enjoys the most prestige. Those who have chosen to move to this community share many values with those who grew up here and decided to stay or return. All treasure the small scale of the built environment, with its modest houses and winding two-lane roads.

The Nanticoke Valley has been protected from development by being too far from the interstate highways that run between Binghamton and Elmira, Syracuse, Albany, New York City, and Scranton–Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. But its residents have also deliberately kept out interlopers that would have destroyed its character. Two decades ago they defended it against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which planned to construct a flood-control system that locals deemed unnecessary and that would have required widening the creek road, demolishing historic buildings, and removing old trees. Although no historic districts have been created, restrictions have not been necessary to ensure that older structures are preserved. After conducting a survey of buildings and bridges, people put up plaques but decided against demarcating special districts. One longtime resident joked that nobody would want their house left out!

The impulse to record and preserve local history has deep roots in this community.<sup>1</sup> Unlike many small towns, Maine and Nanticoke did not suffer a century of historical amnesia between the late-nineteenth-century atlases, filled with biographies of white "pioneer settlers" and engravings of their imposing houses and barns, and the grassroots-oriented bicentennial celebration in 1976. Historical pageants were always popular. This awareness was complemented by a concern for the built environment. The Bowers family, who had been business associates of the Rockefellers, preserved several federal-period houses in Maine at the same time the Rockefellers were promoting the reconstruction of colonial Williamsburg. Clement G. Bowers, a botanist, knew that ecological relationships mattered. He preferred conserving old structures in situ to moving them to an open-air museum or building copies from scratch. A cluster of houses and shops dating from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries lends character to Bowers Corners. The family's influence prompted others to take good care of their historic homes as well.

Today, as in the past, the people of the Nanticoke Valley seek to live in harmony with their environment and sustain continuity with those who

created the place they call home. Like those who went before them, they organize themselves to act cooperatively. The Nanticoke Valley Historical Society (NVHS) acquired and stabilized Pitcher's Mill, which used water power to grind grain into feed and sold buckwheat pancake flour; along with the adjacent Norton carriage shops, the mill shows how productive this countryside once was. The historical society also restored a one-room schoolhouse, which is open to school groups. The J. Ralph Ingalls School, which was built in neocolonial style in 1940, is now being rescued from decay and turned into a community center.

The first major NVHS project was a museum of local history. After acquiring a Victorian house, preserving its ornate parlor, and converting the rest of the structure into modern exhibition galleries and storage space for its collection of artifacts, photographs, and documents, the NVHS mounted an inaugural exhibit called, simply, "Nanticoke Valley History." Once it opened, Janet Bowers Bothwell, the cosmopolitan curator, realized that it should be subtitled "The Men's Story" because women appeared nowhere in the exhibition—except in a single photograph. Knowing that women must have played an integral role in local history and wondering what "The Women's Story" might be, she sought financial support and recruited a historian to research and document their experiences, voices, and perspectives for a complementary exhibition. That was thirty years ago, and I was that historian. When people saw old photographs of women raking hay and hauling heavy milk cans to the creamery, as well as sewing and conducting box suppers, alongside excerpts from diaries detailing everyday routines, they realized that the history of women was all around them, in the photographs and documents stored in their attics, in the configuration of their houses and farmsteads, and in the records of their churches and farm organizations.

### Nanticoke Valley Women's Stories

So impressed was I by the rich resources for reconstructing this community's past and by the delightfully original elderly people who still lived there that I continued to do research and write about the Nanticoke Valley. In particular, I sought to understand what social conditions had enabled the women I met to lead lives that suited them so well. Nowhere else, in the historical record or the present, had I observed such marked variations in the gender division of labor. These women performed whatever set of tasks they personally preferred, and couples shared the work as they thought best. Many women had been full partners on farms, working along with their husband, sons, and daughters in the barn and fields. Some preferred the kitchen to the outdoors and others the reverse, but each made her own choices, at least to the extent that the weather allowed. Other women held full-time jobs off the farm but kept the books and did the taxes. Almost all had a say in farm

family decision making. Nowhere outside of African American communities had I seen women who expected and received such respect from others.

In contrast to common stereotypes of farm women as downtrodden drudges, most of these women spoke as if they were the authors of their own lives. Nor were they isolated, as prevailing images of rural regions suggest. Indeed, people were in and out of one another's households with a frequency and degree of intimacy I found astonishing. Everyone knew everyone else's business, including which men drank too much, which wives were at risk of being mistreated, and which children might be abused or neglected. Neighbors as well as relatives felt authorized to intervene to protect the vulnerable. Here privacy was nonexistent, but the safety net woven of kinship and neighboring was intact.

At the same time that I explored the history of this rural community, I realized that its social fabric was not merely an artifact of the past.<sup>2</sup> Although the culture of mutuality across lines of gender and generation and of local cooperation had deep roots, it had survived and thrived because a substantial number of newcomers had adopted and sustained it. The population of the Nanticoke Valley changed dramatically in the early twentieth century, as long-established families abandoned hill farms for urban employment and were replaced by immigrants fleeing the mines and mills. Ethnic and religious diversity replaced the homogeneity that had underlain unanimity of opinion. The rural economy was transformed from a mix of diversified farming and small industries that supported agriculture into a more stratified system, with some large-scale commercial farms and many small-scale, part-time farms. By 1930, almost every household sent at least one person to work for wages in the city. Yet these rural residents remained quite different from workers who lived in town. Despite the disparities among country people in terms of education and economic position, they collectively espoused egalitarianism and inclusiveness, practiced conspicuous restraint in consumption, and undertook projects collectively, particularly in agriculture and environmental preservation.

What was responsible for the remarkable degree of gender equality and neighborly cooperation that I discovered alive and well in the Nanticoke Valley? In this book, I present the answers I have found to that question. Some factors are structural: the economy was based on dairy farming, which demands the labor of all household members and requires flexibility in other work routines. Dairy farmers have formed producers' cooperatives, such as creameries, since the late nineteenth century, and collective action became even more vital during the consolidation of dairy processing and marketing in the early twentieth century. Some patterns are sociological: lifelong friendships were forged across lines of ethnicity and religion by children who attended one-room district schools, and a dense web of kinship was knitted together by marriages among young people who grew up in open-country neighborhoods. Rural social networks and formal organizations

exhibited a striking capacity to incorporate newcomers from different backgrounds and mobilize them for common purposes.

Most important, the mutuality that existed within farm families was reinforced by cooperation among neighbors. As Mary Neth, a feminist historian of agriculture, put it in her germinal work, *Preserving the Family Farm*, “Promoting mutuality was a strategy that encouraged farm survival and improved the status of dependents within farm families. By emphasizing work flexibility, shared responsibilities, and mutual interests, farm people limited the conflicts created by the patriarchal structure of the family” and generated reciprocity within the community.<sup>3</sup> Until World War II, farmers’ practice of “changing work” and their reliance on interdependence served as a viable alternative to capitalist agribusiness and provided the foundation for organizing. The values they held dear and their vision of a cooperative political economy sustained the farmers’ movement. In this way, rural women’s strategies of mutuality and farmers’ practices of cooperation supported and enhanced one another.

It is impossible to re-create these socioeconomic conditions in the early twenty-first century; today they no longer exist even in the Nanticoke Valley. But it is possible to reconstruct the experiences of women who grew up in or entered this social world and to analyze their perspectives on gender and generational relations during what Hal Barron, a social historian, calls the second great transformation of rural society.<sup>4</sup> As I talked with older women about their ancestors, parents, and neighbors, I began to convince them that they, too, had stories worth telling. Most initially protested that they had nothing to say because they had done nothing unusual; they had led ordinary lives within a small circle of family and friends and had not participated in the major national events that they thought made history. I told them that, as a social historian, I was interested in common people’s everyday experiences and their reflections on their own lives. Gradually they were persuaded to talk about themselves as well as about their elders.

I was blessed to be able to interview two dozen women who were born before the Great War (as the First World War was called before the second began). Some were the granddaughters of the women and men whose late-nineteenth-century diaries and letters I had read; these women were all Protestant, and most were of Yankee and Yorker descent. Others were the daughters of immigrants who had come to this rural locality in the early twentieth century, directly from nearby cities and indirectly from southern, central, or eastern Europe; many were Catholic, and a few were Orthodox. I spoke with women from affluent families and from impoverished ones, with those whose families led local organizations and those whose kin groups were socially isolated. Working my way along lines of personal connection and down the socioeconomic scale took time. Slowly, as residents learned over the years that I would never repeat what anyone had told me to anyone else and that I never judged anyone because of circumstances that were

beyond her control, they spoke to me more frankly. The fact that I did not live in the community was crucial; people could confide their secret sorrows, recount their humiliations, and express their deepest doubts to me because they knew they would not meet me in the post office and have to face uncomfortable aspects of their personal past. It also helped that, although I was married, I was young enough to be these women's granddaughter.

The process of oral history interviewing was long term and collaborative, in keeping with feminist approaches that try to redress the imbalance between the narrator and the researcher. I not only listened to the stories these women had to tell but also attended to the ways they structured their narratives. In repeated interviews over several years, I probed their silences, explored the contradictions within their accounts, and invited them to consider the more problematic or troubling aspects of their past. Even more important, I shared interpretive authority, giving them transcriptions of their interviews and discussing the meaning of key turning points in their lives with them.<sup>5</sup> Taking women's politics seriously, I elicited their opinions on the rise of agribusiness and recent changes in women's lives. Their retrospective views, which were influenced by their present circumstances, have shaped the interpretations offered in this book.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes I saw things differently than they did, largely because, as an academic historian, I take a long-term social-historical perspective. In these cases, I have given both their viewpoint and my own.

### Debating Rural Decline

Where I differed most profoundly from some of the elders with whom I spoke is in my assessment of the historical trajectory of the Nanticoke Valley itself. In retrospect, many lifelong residents regarded the transformation of the landscape as the result of economic and social forces outside the locality. In their eyes, a thriving rural community was disrupted by two world wars and subjected to capitalist consolidation as agribusiness superseded family farming. The fundamental changes that became painfully apparent after 1945 had, they recognized, begun earlier, as rural life was gradually eclipsed by urbanism. The decline they described was moral as well as economic; people had been seduced by the eight-hour workdays, household conveniences, and consumer pleasures of the city. Deserted first by their age-mates and then by their children, these men and women stayed on and patched together a living, only to watch the schools consolidate, churches merge, and village shops be converted into dwellings. Of the once-lively local social life, only dish-to-pass suppers in church basements continued, becoming a ritual whose familiarity was reassuring but a bit lacking in spice. To go to work, shop, or see a movie, people drove to the nearby city. In their view, the rural community had lost its integrity, surrendering its sturdy self-sufficiency and becoming indistinguishable from the urban society they deplored.

Although this perspective eloquently expresses longtime residents' sense that change came as a result of forces they could not control, it projects the causes of change onto the outside world rather than acknowledging their roots in local conditions. These stories of declension bore some resemblance to the early-twentieth-century reports of metropolitan observers who had worried about rural decline. Yet these critics articulated a very different analysis of the cause of rural problems. In their view, the countryside was characterized by economic decay and social stagnation. The flight of rural youth to the cities and the abandonment of farms, they contended, were prompted as much by cultural as economic deprivation.<sup>7</sup> Farmers left, businesses closed, participation in religious and civic activities declined, villages vanished, and the remaining rural residents were more isolated and backward than before. The remedy, according to these outsiders, lay in the adoption of urban social patterns, including a competitive, capital-intensive approach to agriculture; social relations that clearly differentiated people along the lines of age and gender; and more formal, large-scale organizations that linked people on the basis of interests rather than locality. Although this perspective recognized the indigenous roots of rural problems, it seriously underestimated country people's resistance to capitalist culture and their ability to adapt to changing conditions while maintaining their distinctive identity and values.

Ironically, both the rural jeremiad and the urban critique assumed that American farmers were passive in the face of economic and social change. Those who lamented their demise regarded farming families as helpless victims of the assaults of capitalism and metropolitan culture, while reformers saw them as benighted objects of ministration by benevolent outsiders. Both views were distorted by a false separation between rural and urban society. A more comprehensive perspective locates the causes of change not in urban imposition or rural decay but, rather, in the dynamic relationship between the countryside and the city. That interaction reshaped the rural political economy and country life, and farm people were active participants in socioeconomic transformation. The process of adjustment that took place in the Nanticoke Valley between 1900 and 1945 shifted the relationship between the country and the city and enabled old and new residents to sustain the economic viability and distinctive identity of rural society.

As historians are well aware, people's recollections and interpretations of the past are shaped by their present circumstances as well as by their life experiences and deeply held values. The laments about the decline in rural culture that I heard from so many longtime residents of the Nanticoke Valley registered the dramatic changes that had taken place since World War II and tended to elide the more recent past with the subtler shifts that had occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. I have linked their rich accounts of the past to the documentary evidence to discern group-level patterns of social interaction.

The rest of this introduction traces fundamental changes in the rural economy, especially the trend toward combining farming with urban wage-earning, and examines emergent patterns in rural society, especially the relationships between natives and newcomers that developed as many families departed and immigrants arrived in open-country neighborhoods. A complex process of social reorganization enabled people to adapt to change and accommodate difference without fracturing the sometimes-fragile consensus on which rural culture depended.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Nanticoke Valley was relatively homogeneous and socially integrated yet in the midst of a long-term process of demographic decline. The population had fallen steadily since its peak in 1880; in 1900, there were 2,200 people living in 627 households in the towns of Maine and Nanticoke, down from 3,128 two decades before. The population continued to fall until 1920, when there were just 1,804 people in 534 households. On average, rural households were quite small, with 3.5 people each; in one in five households, a person lived alone. Nanticoke Valley families no longer resembled their counterparts of a half century before, when parents raised comparatively large numbers of children and worried about how to help them all get established on the land. The population was aging, with relatively few children and working-age adults; just one-third of residents was under twenty years of age, and one-sixth was sixty-five or older.<sup>8</sup>

The causes of this demographic decline were obvious to everyone. The supply of undeveloped land suitable for agriculture was exhausted, and most farms were too small to subdivide. So, although one son or, lacking sons, a daughter might look forward to inheriting the family farm, the other children had to find ways of making a living outside of agriculture. The countryside had deindustrialized during the last two decades of the nineteenth century because the small mills and manufactories could not compete with larger, more mechanized processors and producers in the cities. Local sawmills continued to do custom work for farmers harvesting trees from their woodlots, but most houses and barns used standardized millwork from steam-powered plants that was shipped in by train. Small water-powered furniture manufactories closed as cheap mass-produced chairs, tables, bureaus, and parlor suites became available in city showrooms and mail-order catalogues. Blacksmiths shifted from making to repairing tools. Carriage shops no longer made wagons and wheels from scratch, but assembled and painted vehicles that were mass-produced elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> When people without land found it almost impossible to earn a living in the country, they had to leave. Few had the capital required to move to the Midwest to farm, as some of their parents' and grandparents' siblings had done. Homestead land was no longer available, except in the least fertile and most forbidding regions. Buying enough prairie acreage and the horse-drawn machinery required to cultivate it was prohibitively expensive; even selling a successful farm in Broome County would not bring the amount of money it required. Most



young people who grew up without the prospect of inheriting an operating farm migrated to urban areas to work for wages. Even if they moved only 15 miles over the hills to the commercial city of Binghamton or settled in the adjacent manufacturing villages of Lestershire (later called Johnson City) and Endicott, they entered a different social world.<sup>10</sup>

Those who remained in the Nanticoke Valley adjusted their expectations to local circumstances. Keeping the farm in the family—laboring to improve the land, struggling to pay the taxes and at least the interest on the mortgage, and passing on a viable operation to a grown child—was as much as most families could hope for and more than many could attain. Families expanded their commercial dairy operations, relying on the relatively small but steady income to maintain their farms while continuing diversified subsistence production and small-scale, market-oriented “sidelines” to sustain themselves. Their horizons were limited because the accumulation of wealth was beyond their reach. But most found a certain satisfaction in upholding their place in local society and valued the dense web of relationships that connected them with relatives and neighbors.

The process of economic and demographic contraction that occurred during the late nineteenth century actually facilitated the formation of stable social networks. As Hal Barron pointed out in his study of nineteenth-century Vermont, population stagnation, or even decline, did not disrupt the lives of “those who stayed behind”; instead, continuous outmigration allowed rural residents to maintain their way of life in spite of economic contraction. Most people had grown up in the immediate vicinity; they were bound together not only by lifelong association but also by ties of kinship and friendship several generations deep. The rural population was relatively homogeneous, and public life appeared harmonious. The social and political conflicts that had accompanied economic expansion, especially in a diverse and dynamic population, were either resolved or removed from open debate; consensus and the avoidance of conflict characterized community life. Social stability accompanied rural depopulation.<sup>11</sup>

By the Great War, however, Nanticoke Valley residents were becoming worried about the massive outmigration from upland farms to the urban areas of Broome County. The exodus of young people had increased quantitatively to the point that it differed qualitatively from the previous pattern. Farmers now faced a genuine shortage of labor. The high wages offered by factory jobs, coupled with the rapid inflation of prices for consumer goods, drew unprecedented numbers of young men and women into the cities. No longer could farmers hire their neighbors’ maturing sons to help with haying and the harvest and their growing daughters to work in the dairy. Indeed, few could keep their own sons and daughters at home. Some families, especially those in upland areas, left the land altogether. Farms were rented out or left vacant, and fields grew up to brush. It was apparent to the remaining farmers that migration to urban areas no longer served as a safety valve for



a surplus population but was undermining agriculture and the rural society that depended on the land.

People who stayed in the Nanticoke Valley interpreted this crisis as one of family succession and neighborhood stability as well as economics. The sons and daughters of farming families preferred the regular wages and limited hours of factory jobs to the unremitting and often unrewarding toil on the land. The amenities of urban life, ranging from movie theaters to indoor plumbing, were more attractive than the isolation and inconvenience of country houses. Youths who attended high school and found jobs in the city seldom returned; they established themselves in nonagricultural occupations, married, and aspired to purchase modest homes in urban neighborhoods. Even those young men who initially stayed on the farm, working with their parents and hoping to inherit the land eventually, often became discouraged and departed because the prospects seemed bleak and the delay intolerable. Neither generation had the capital required to expand the enterprise so it would be able to support two families. Most aging parents could not afford to retire without selling the land, and most adult children could not afford to buy them out. Many couples continued their customary pattern of farming as long as they were physically able to do the work and did not expect their children to succeed them. When they died or were forced by ill health to quit farming, the land was sold or left vacant. The failure to secure intergenerational succession was a serious matter; those who identified their families with the land they had inherited felt that they had broken faith with their forebears. Yet they did not blame their children for leaving. Rather, they understood that their own economic position made it at best difficult, and at worst impossible, for them to fulfill their aspirations.

As the farm population aged and declined, the character of rural neighborhoods began to change as well. Distances between neighbors increased, both physically and socially. In upland areas whole hillsides reverted from pasture to woodland, and inhabited farmhouses stood relatively far apart. The dispersed pattern and declining density of settlement made daily visiting more difficult. Neighbors were less likely to be close relatives than they had been previously, so intimate forms of contact and substantial material aid became less common. However, the norm of neighborly cooperation remained firmly ensconced in the rural value system.

### Reforming the Agricultural Economy from the Grassroots

The demographic and economic history of the Nanticoke Valley during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resembles that of many other rural areas in the northeastern United States. By 1910, the exodus of young people and the abandonment of farms had become a matter of national concern. Responding to an unsettling sense that the iconic American farmer was disappearing, the Country Life Commission appointed by President

Theodore Roosevelt focused its attention on rural social problems. Its report looked to country people to provide a bulwark against the changes demanded by the urban, largely immigrant working class, which was expanding rapidly and mobilizing politically during this period. The problem, as these metropolitan observers saw it, was that white Americans of native parentage whose attachment to the land made them the best popular defenders of the rights of property were abandoning the virtues of rural life and defecting to the cities, where they might be corrupted by the “foreign element” of political radicalism.<sup>12</sup>

The solution suggested by agricultural economists and rural sociologists—transforming farming to make it more profitable and reforming rural communities to make them more attractive—was politically conservative, but it had little or nothing to do with preserving a threatened way of life. The rural idyll these reformers imagined in the past had never existed. Across the country, farm people had sought to protect and advance their economic and social interests by adhering to noncapitalist or anti-capitalist ideas and practices that valorized producers over “parasites,” resisting their subordination to profit-minded shippers and processors, and refusing the blandishments of political leaders who told them that what was good for the commodity market was good for farmers. The Country Life Movement implicitly accepted capitalist control of the agricultural economy and explicitly endorsed the trend toward commercialization and specialization that was leading to the consolidation of farms and the displacement of families from the land. Experts’ advice to farmers, which centered on the application of cost-profit analysis to farm operations and the adoption of capital-intensive farming techniques, was designed to make individual farms more competitive in the marketplace, not to restructure the market or change the relations of power among producers, shippers, processors, and mercantile firms. Equally important, it ignored and, in practice, would have eroded the interdependent relationships among farming families. The Country Life Movement attempted, with some success, to shift the terms of public debate away from the Populist agenda and focus attention on the problems within rural society rather than on the unequal economic relationship between farmers and capitalist agribusiness.<sup>13</sup>

Broome County farmers rejected this diagnosis of their difficulties and prescription for change. Instead of adopting capitalistic solutions to their predicament, they took over the countywide agricultural improvement organization formed by Binghamton’s business leaders, renamed it the Farm Bureau, and transformed its mission, focusing on raising farmers’ incomes rather than on producing cheap food for urban dwellers. They eagerly adopted the scientific methods offered by experts at Cornell University’s New York State Agricultural Experiment Station but rejected the business models its farm management advisors recommended. Instead, they promoted producers’ cooperatives—associations that sold their members’ produce, as

well as purchasing fertilizer and feed, and used their size and strength to drive better bargains with processors, suppliers, and shippers. Building on the strong local tradition of the Grange, which had founded the cooperative creameries that were still in operation in the Nanticoke Valley at the turn of the twentieth century, they joined the Dairymen's League en masse in 1919 to negotiate higher prices for the fluid milk they sold to dealers in New York City.<sup>14</sup>

Farmers' customary patterns of cooperative work and the habits of mutuality that pervaded open-country neighborhoods provided a foundation for collective action. Nanticoke Valley farmers established groups in Nanticoke, Glen Aubrey, Maine, and Union Center that included hill farmers with marginal land as well as valley farmers with somewhat less stubborn soil. Local solidarity proved crucial in the 1919 milk strike and the subsequent campaign to secure contracts that equalized the return to large fluid milk producers and smaller producers who sold cream to condensaries; neighbors pressured neighbors to withhold their milk and then to sign pooling contracts.

Older men and women whose parents had been active in the Grange, the Farm Bureau, and the Dairymen's League and who remembered these struggles from their youth expressed pride in the fact that in the Nanticoke Valley, unlike other places nearby, there had been no incidents in which striking farmers seized and dumped milk cans that nonstriking farmers were taking to shipping stations because nobody even tried to ship milk.<sup>15</sup> Carrie Northfield of Nanticoke said that all of their neighbors observed the strike, although there were violent incidents just to the north near Whitney Point. Ralph Young, who farmed with his father and brother near Union Center, explained, "Sure, there were some farmers who thought the strike could never succeed and who were afraid to break their contracts with the processors. Mostly, they had larger herds. But they also depended on their neighbors at haying time and on hired hands for help with chores, so they could be persuaded. Not violently, but...they could be persuaded."

Gender integration was as marked a characteristic of local farm organizations as their neighborhood base. Although the state-level leaders of the Farm Bureau and Dairymen's League thought of farmers in the masculine gender, grassroots activists did not. The Grange tradition of family membership was more in accordance with local gender-integrated customs of farming and organizational life. Nanticoke Valley residents acted as if the Farm Bureau were a mixed-gender group; husbands and wives joined together and shared leadership responsibilities. Not even the establishment of the Home Bureau as a distinct department designed to serve the needs of women led to significant gender segregation. Broome County adopted a coordinate structure that provided for joint decision making and common activities, officially becoming the Farm and Home Bureau in 1920. In April 1923, the *Broome County Farm and Home Bureau News* reported on a

dinner held by the Maine Dairymen's League to discuss the development, problems, and projects of the organization: "One of the interesting things about the meeting was the presence of the women folks. They took part in some of the discussion too, which shows that they are interested in the problems which confront the dairymen today. This is as it should be, and there is room for many more such gatherings where both men and women talk over their problems frankly together." Members would not have appreciated the editor's condescending tone, for in their experience both women and men were integral to dairying. The tradition of flexibility in farm work and shared family decision making, as well as joint participation in neighborhood and organizational life, permeated and reshaped the activities of supposedly masculine groups such as the Dairymen's League and ostensibly gender-segregated groups such as the Farm and Home bureaus. In the process, women as well as men were enlisted in securing the unity of action on which producers' cooperation depended.<sup>16</sup>

The people of the Nanticoke Valley responded to the farm crisis of the early twentieth century by sustaining cooperatives and undertaking new forms of collective action. Customary gender-integrated modes of neighborly association provided the base for powerful economic and political organizations.

### Forming New Connections between the Countryside and the City

People not only responded to economic crisis with concerted action but also adjusted gradually, although sometimes grudgingly, to changing conditions. New connections between the Nanticoke Valley and the industrial centers of Broome County made rural revitalization possible.

From 1917 on, rural residents could work in the city and urban workers could live in the country. At the height of the war mobilization, a private company began to operate a twice-daily "workers' bus" on the newly macadamized road from the Nanticoke Valley to Union. Some people went to the boot and shoe factories in Endicott and Johnson City, and others took the Triple Cities streetcar to jobs in Binghamton. As soon as civilian vehicles were available, farm families purchased automobiles and trucks, which they used not only to carry goods to market but also to commute to work. At the same time, urban workers began moving to the countryside. Many of the newcomers were immigrants from rural regions in central and eastern Europe who had held on to their agricultural aspirations through years of toil in railroad construction, in the anthracite mines and silk mills of north-eastern Pennsylvania, and in the tanneries and boot and shoe factories in Endicott and Johnson City. Poles, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and Armenians<sup>17</sup> invested their precious savings in run-down farms. While some members of their families continued to work in the city, the others devoted themselves

to agriculture. When local youths no longer had to leave the countryside to find employment and new families began moving in, the decline in population was arrested and rapidly reversed.

Between the First and Second World Wars, the Nanticoke Valley enjoyed modest growth. The population of the town of Maine, which was closest to the urban areas along the Susquehanna River, rose from a low of 1,360 in 1920 to 2,076 by 1940, while that of the town of Nanticoke rose from 444 in 1920 to 546 in 1940. In 1940, the 2,622 residents of the Nanticoke Valley included many more children; almost one-third of the population was younger than fifteen. The proportion of people of working age was also much larger; less than one-tenth was sixty-five or older. The newcomers from the city included many young couples who brought up their families in the countryside and contributed mightily to the demographic renewal of the Nanticoke Valley.<sup>18</sup>

The rural economy was supported, rather than undermined, by its close reciprocal connections with the urban economy. Families combined wage labor, subsistence production, small-scale market gardening and poultry raising, and commercial dairying in a variety of ways. They could shift the balance of their efforts over time, as the composition of their household or the relative advantages of different activities changed. This flexibility was especially important during the depression of farm commodity prices in the 1920s and the collapse of the urban labor market in the 1930s. Families invested their savings from wage labor and from selling farm products in purchasing land and expanding farm operations during the 1920s, and they relied on their subsistence production and commercial operations during the 1930s. Flexibility was central to families' survival strategies, and economic diversity sustained the locality.

Some farmers continually expanded the scale of their operations to maintain the profitability of their enterprises. They kept large dairy herds and sold fluid milk, which required them to pour a cement floor in their barn and construct a holding tank. A few raised poultry to supply other farms with chicks as well as sending eggs and chickens to market; others had commercial apple orchards. These farmers readily adopted new techniques and machinery once their practical benefits had been demonstrated, provided that the innovations would pay for themselves in a few years. They led the new farm organizations and sponsored local meetings for the discussion of farm problems. Their economic reliance on marketing milk and purchasing feed, coupled with their custom of changing work with their less prosperous neighbors, ensured that they reached out to others.

Most farmers operated on a more limited scale. They usually relied on time-tested agricultural methods because they had little capital to invest in improvements and were profoundly risk-averse. These families produced a wide range of marketable commodities, as well as providing for their own subsistence. Many had small dairy herds, which they milked only in

the summer to avoid having to buy much feed. Some sold their milk to the creameries, and others made high-quality butter at home. They kept chickens, raised potatoes, and grew vegetables such as cabbage. Often they marketed their produce themselves, either in the public markets of Endicott and Johnson City or on regular routes through urban neighborhoods. People who had moved to the Nanticoke Valley from the city or sent a family member to work there every day were especially likely to sell directly to consumers because they had personal connections with particular neighborhoods or workplaces. Although these small operations appeared inefficient to outside experts, they provided much-needed cash income as well as a secure subsistence.

Many of these families aspired to farm on a larger scale, but relatively few succeeded in making the transition to specialized dairying. The prices of farm products were too low, and the capital costs of large-scale farming too high, to enable them to expand simply by reinvesting their profits. Native sons and a few daughters who inherited land and livestock relatively young, or who shared labor and machinery with their parents and siblings while they built up their dairy herds, might manage it—if they were lucky. Some rented or bought land from an elderly widowed relative, paying for it over the years in cash and kind. Everybody knew better than to take the risk of going deeply into debt, even if they could find a banker foolish enough to loan them money. Some determined families might subsidize the expansion of their farm operations with their earnings from off-farm jobs, provided that they were willing to forgo consumption and work a double day. But the majority continued to farm on a small scale, supplementing their farm income with wage labor.

For a significant minority of Nanticoke Valley families, in fact, farming supplemented wage-earning rather than vice versa. In 1925, 40 percent of all adult males in the community reported nonagricultural occupations on the New York State census, twice the proportion that had listed nonagricultural occupations in 1900. Over time, the distinction between farmers and wage workers became blurred. In 1940, 40 percent of farm operators in Broome County reported on the federal agricultural census that they had been employed off the farm during the previous year, averaging 187 days of paid off-farm labor in 1939. A similar combination of agriculture and industry had characterized the local economy in the mid-nineteenth century. Although farms and factories were now located some distance apart, the automobile enabled Nanticoke Valley residents to be part-time, small-scale farmers and casual laborers or permanent industrial workers. Their dual occupations complemented one another. Although they sometimes regretted the enormous amount of labor they performed and lamented their lack of control over either wage rates or farm commodity prices, they also prided themselves on their relative independence from bosses and milk dealers. When low commodity prices jeopardized their