

Matfield Green - April 1996

Courtesy of The Land Institute - Salina, KS

When people, land, and community are as one, all three members prosper; when they relate not as members but as competing interests, all three are exploited. By consulting Nature as the source and measure of that membership, The Land Institute seeks to develop an agriculture that will save soil from being lost or poisoned while promoting a community life at once prosperous and enduring.

The Land Institute's mission statement, above, makes our work at Matfield Green a natural outgrowth of our other research, Nature's ecosystem communities run on sunlight and feature material recycling. They are, therefore, self-renewing and sustainable. We believe human communities should apply the same principles, successful for millions of years. In Matfield Green, Kansas, we are "setting up the books" for a new "ecological community accounting" which will measure, as ecologists do for ecosystems, the flow of energy and materials into and out of the community.

Matfield Green is located in the heart of the scenic Kansas Flint Hills on the banks of the Cottonwood River's South Fork. The river bottom in which the town is located is wooded and is surrounded by rolling and rocky hills, most of which are covered by never plowed prairie. Here, thousands upon thousands of cattle have fattened in summer since the late 1800s.

Matfield was a thriving community at the turn of the century, supporting several small groceries, a butcher, a creamery, a general hardware store, a lumber yard and, at various times, other small businesses. As recently as the early 1970s, the town maintained its own school. Today, however, the school and post office are closed and the population has dropped to 50.

Like other small towns, Matfield has lost much of its population to the cities, where young people can make a living. Yet the quality of life in cities is compromised in important ways: air, water and solid waste pollution literally poison the environment and pose myriad threats to human health. Believing that human health is the product of a healthy landscape and community, The Land Institute is committed to discovering another way. Particularly for those who wish to stay in or return to America's small places, we seek "new" ways to conserve cultural information and ecological capital. Toward that end, we hope to establish in Matfield Green a sort of rural studies center where participants will engage in the discovery of what it means to live within ecological limits.

This is not a community development project. We do not seek to create a utopia in the Flint Hills, nor do we intend to import "experts" who will impose their ideas on local residents. Rather, we believe that every question, properly posed, contains its own answer. We hope, through conversations with our neighbors in Matfield, to arrive at the proper questions and, again in cooperation, to seek answers which are culturally rich and sustainable. When we consider the thousands of small towns "going downhill" throughout agricultural America, towns in so many ways like Matfield Green, with their closed buildings, houses, schools, lumberyards, and banks, why shouldn't we require that these long ago cut forests now in the form of 2x4s, 2x6s and 2x8s be saved? That alone will save forests. What if people in small towns

begin to examine the carrying capacity of their natural community--the number of humans and the lifestyle which can be supported sustainably?

What if they think through newly creative ways to live richly through cultural adaptations rather than with material consumption? This can be done by working in the little paces of the ecological mosaic. Thus we return to the principles of ecological community accounting which will, we hope, inform our dialogue with and about the community of Matfield Green. We assume, first that communities can be studied as ecosystems. That is, we can impose a mental cube around Matfield, and observe what comes in, what goes out, and what activities happen between. We assume, further, that communities are endowed with "ecological capital" such as timber, minerals, deep soil or, as in Matfield's case, grass. The loss of this "capital" through export or destruction must be accounted for (e.g., the export of nutrients in crops and the loss of topsoil downstream). To create a truly sustainable community, the "books" must eventually be "balanced" so that inputs and outgoes are relatively equivalent and are based primarily on renewable resources like sunlight, water and human or animal muscle power.

The Land Institute owns and has renovated the old lumberyard into a small cafe and bakery. It is open to guests from 8 a.m. to noon, Monday through Friday. We are also developing a meeting center in the old grade school. From this base, and in cooperation with our neighbors, we hope to accomplish the following:

- (1) Develop a historical ecological narrative of human habitation in Chase County, including settlement and land use patterns;
- (2) Learn the story of how people made their living on the land at different times;
- (3) Identify and qualify the key flows of energy and materials into and out of the county, as well as their connections to dominant land use and production regimes;
- (4) Construct a simplified, generalizable model of the narrative--a map of key landscape elements and boundaries and description of the ecological impact and contribution to human needs of various settlement and land use patterns.

Fundamentally, we seek to answer Wendell Berry's question, "what will nature help us do here?" for more information, please call 316-753-3405 or 913-823-5376.

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