

Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests, by Richard E. Wood. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. xvii, 223 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Jon Lauck is senior advisor to U.S. Senator John Thune. He received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Iowa and is the author of *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly* (2000).

In 2004 Thomas Frank became a national publishing sensation when he released his book *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. With his exploration of the tendency of rural states such as Kansas to vote Republican, Frank, a longtime critic of American capitalism and one-time editor of the Chicago-based magazine *The Baffler*, tapped a deep vein of liberal frustration. Frank went on to become a noted national commentator on politics; was offered, ironically enough, a column on the conservative-leaning *Wall Street Journal* editorial page; and has now released a new book criticizing conservative policy making in Washington titled *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule* (2008).

Richard Wood is not impressed with Frank's work. In his new book, *Survival of Rural America*, Wood takes particular aim at Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Wood, who was a reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News* and whose parents grew up in Kansas, argues that Frank does not understand the social forces at work in rural America. Whereas Frank blamed rural America's problems on a conspiracy of powerful economic actors supported by free-market conservatives, Wood argues that much of the social change in rural America can be traced to technology. Wood notes that the changes in rural life are linked to "long-term trends" that made it possible for farmers to work much larger amounts of land much more efficiently. The result was a need for fewer farmers who worked the land than in earlier decades. With fewer farmers, there were fewer people to support small towns.

Wood views Frank's book about Kansas as a "political polemic" that is intent on making "free-market capitalism" the "evildoer" in the story of rural America's recent history. Wood notes that the title of Frank's book, derived from a famous essay by the Kansas newspaperman William Allen White, is doubly ironic since White blamed the opponents of market capitalism for Kansas's problems in the 1890s. Frank's determination to blame capitalism also causes him to misread critical statistics. Wood explains that Frank's statistics about rural poverty are "quite misleading" and that, understood correctly, statistics indicate that rural poverty in places such as Kansas are *below* the national average. Despite Frank's assertions, the poorest sections of the

nation are in fact located in the South, Appalachia, and the East, not in places such as Kansas.

Wood advances a convincing case about the misleading and polemical nature of Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* But he also focuses on steps that have been taken or could be taken to revitalize rural economies. He reviews the workings of the federal farm program and explores the federal government's past and present efforts to aid farmers and improve rural life. This section of the book has the added effect of again rebutting Frank, who tends to view Congress as a captive of multinational corporations and thus hostile to midwestern farmers. Wood also reviews the success of the ethanol industry in recent decades, which has allowed farmers to integrate forward and control the final and more profitable stages of agricultural production.

Farm policy and the politics and economics of ethanol have received the attention of agricultural historians and newspaper pundits in the past, but some of the other topics that Wood addresses have not received the same attention. He discusses, for example, the efforts of local communities to promote the amenities of rural life such as reduced congestion and traffic and the proximity to nature. Rural living no longer requires alienation from work in urban centers due to the internet.

Such observations and other examples in this book justify Wood's view that we should look beyond the dark portrait of rural life painted by Thomas Frank and his allies. Wood demonstrates that there are many small success stories in rural America if one wants to find them.