

Lament for small places

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue



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Eighty-plus years ago, Granddad and Grandma Clapp moved into the Oklahoma Panhandle and established a farm. The farm was still in the making when the great dust storms of the Dirty Thirties engulfed the region.

Grandma and Granddad persisted. They remember dunes forming in the fields and how Granddad would ride his steel-wheeled tractor over them, trying to cultivate the soil. Sometimes the dunes were so steep that the tractor tipped over. During the worst of the dust storms, the family would huddle inside the house and hold damp cloths over their noses and mouths. Despite such conditions, they prevailed. Eventually the drought passed, and then oil was discovered beneath the fields. Finally, the family prospered.

Today the family farm is no more. It lasted two generations, from its founding to the point when Clapps no longer lived there and worked the land. My uncle was the last holdout, and he moved away more than a decade ago. I migrated from Oklahoma to Chicagoland in 1979, and by now have lived more of my life near Chicago than on the flat, sweeping vistas of my birth.

My wife grew up in the same area, on another farm that has since been abandoned. The little hometown where we went to school (and where my maternal grandparents operated a grocery store) survives, but the bank, movie theater, grocery store, drug store, hardware store, lumber yard and most other businesses have vanished. Not only have the businesses died, but many of the buildings housing them have

collapsed. If Main Street were a smile, it would be a thoroughly gap-toothed one.

This is a familiar story not only in northwestern Oklahoma but throughout the Great Plains. The Great Plains is a predominantly agricultural region at the heart of America's breadbasket to the world, sprawling from west Texas up into Montana and North Dakota. And for the past eight decades, the Great Plains region has been hemorrhaging population.

As Wil Hylton wrote recently in *Harper's Magazine*, many cities on the plains have grown, but "rural communities across Kansas and Nebraska, Montana and Texas, Oklahoma and the Dakotas have shrunk each decade since the Great Depression. In Kansas alone, more than 6,000 towns have vanished altogether. Nearly a million square miles of the American heartland currently meets the definition of 'frontier' used by the Census Bureau more than a century ago."

This presents a grim enough picture of the future of the Great Plains. Hylton ups the ante considerably by reporting on the condition of the Ogallala Aquifer, which stretches beneath most of the region. The Ogallala, were it "somehow raised to the surface . . . would cover a larger area than any freshwater lake on Earth—by a factor of five." Its estimated peak capacity was a million billion gallons. Despite that immensity, it's fast running dry.

That's because since the 1940s farmers by the hundreds of thousands have drilled and operated irrigation wells. By the early 1990s, farmers began to notice a decrease in their well supplies. Hylton quotes a scientist who has gauged that the ongoing drawdown on the aquifer drops the water level five to six feet per year, and that it has dropped 80 to 100 feet over the past 15 years. By 2030, the Ogallala will be too shallow to supply any more irrigation.

Agriculture, if it survives at all on the Great Plains, will be very limited. What will take its place? Not a lot of people, that's for sure. Hylton talks to an array of experts who mention two possible scenarios. One scenario is that the plains return to being a "buffalo commons." Those burly ruminants would again roam the country by the millions. In the other scenario, not necessarily exclusive of the first, the Great Plains would become a vast wind farm. Those gigantic, white, three-armed windmills that already dot the plains will grow exponentially in number.

The radicality of the change in my homelands saddens me. It's a paradox of small places today that there, where people hew to tradition and so prize the "way things

have been,” the communities are actually more evanescent and liable to extinction than are the bustling, ever-evolving big cities.

My grandparents’ farm won’t be passed along to me or my siblings, let alone our children. What do I have from them that lasts? Some items in a curio cabinet, including a box camera, arrowheads and 78-rpm records. Those few, dusty things—and the Christian faith that they so winsomely passed on to me. Thank God for its durability, portability and, yes, its capacity for change.