

A Plethora of Pain

Some of us still are a little confused about what is going on in this country. One week we hear about billions, and then the next about hundreds of billions and, more recently, about trillions and tens of trillions. How many zeroes are there in a trillion? Words by Tim Findley. Photos by Charles W. Guildner.

We are worried. Our new president tells us in eloquent terms to be calm. Yet, we are worried. Those of us who live on the ranches and farms and the small towns of the rural West feel something fading away. It's out of our grasp, and we're not sure we can recognize it, but it seems to be part of our fundamental values and beliefs, our customs and our traditions, unraveling and adrift as if we all were floating in space.

We are worried—but we are not afraid, everybody should understand the difference. For generations we cannot count, many of us have contended with even greater problems and we have fought through them. We have seen the land go dry, the crops fail, the markets wither. Some have had the bitter experience of putting down our own livestock because there was no profit, and we could not feed them. We can remember when children were forced to work so the family could survive. We know about soup lines and fuel shortages, about foreclosures and failed

banks. That's all part of our history, but what worries us now is something else, something we can't quite define that seems to be leaving us in a way that faith and hard work alone can't restore.

We are not angry. Not yet, but we know resentment is brewing among us, unfocused and uncertain, but darkly sulking in frustration. And before anyone accuses us, it is not racism. We are beyond that and will not tolerate racial attitudes in our communities any more than Washington, D.C., or San Francisco might. We know about cultural bigotry

and discrimination. We have felt that directed at us and our way of life, and we sense more of it coming our way.

We don't resent change, but we do wish that those who so ambitiously seek change will at least match that energy with understanding, beginning with the fact that they need us more than they seem to think.

There are only about two million Americans actively engaged in agriculture, a number that has been falling since the turn of the 20th century. Agricultural production accounts for less than two percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), yet only China and India produce more food commodities than do American farmers. Local business and other industries associated with agriculture represent about 16 percent of the GDP, and the workforce associated with agriculture represents about 17 percent of employment in the United States.

Up until a few weeks ago, the most productive sector of the economy was investments and banking. Maybe by that standard, we shouldn't have much to worry about. Or should the fact that government itself is now the largest single sector of the economy worry us a bit more?

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Main Street, Ashby, Nebraska, 1994. The Post Office, far left, was built in the 1950s; Charlie's Market, far right, dates from the 1930s; and the Cowboy Cafe, center, was built around 1900.

about trillions and tens of trillions. How many zeroes are there in a trillion? It doesn't seem to make any difference, it all adds up to nothing. At least nothing we have seen to make a difference.

We're losing something here, and it isn't just an auto industry or an investment bank. Something already seems gone and unlikely to come back. What is that?

The average age of farmers and ranchers in the United States today is 62. That bothers us, not just because that suggests even fewer farms and ranches in the future, but because it says something about our own kids' lack of interest in working with the land. That's not really new either. It was true of our own generation, and every generation since about 1900. Work seems easier in the city, and the attractions seem greater than a breakfast around the kitchen table.

It's not really even our kids we worry about, it's our kids' kids, the grandchildren growing up in cities and suburbs who know less and less about how the food they eat is produced. From what we've seen and heard, it's the education in general they are receiving that seems troublesome. If all those college kids are so smart that they could make so much money on Wall Street, why didn't they see what a mess was being made of the economy? Or did they just not care?

Funny thing is that Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson had trouble with all those bankers and car makers and city managers looking for bailout money. Heck, he should have gained plenty of experience in his old job as board chairman of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) about paying people off the same way TNC did farmers and ranchers who were bought off or paid for a perpetual easement on their land. But, fairly, one can't just dabble with the auto industry or mortgage banks the way Paulson and his TNC pals did with farmers and ranchers. Those guys at GM or Citibank actually make something, even if most folks don't seem to want it or can't afford it.

Maybe that's it. All people in agriculture produce is something people actually need to survive. What the folks who run the country need to save is others like themselves who mainly produce money, which everybody wants, but which a few of them (like Paulson, who took \$35 million in his bailout from Goldman Sachs) seem to get more of than anybody else. Is that what makes us a rich country?

Well, maybe not the richest in the world anymore. Somebody recently came up with a

copy of the Chinese manual on war where it mentions that even nuclear weapons have become useless mantle pieces and the real war to win should be a "hyposstrategic" financial war meant to overwhelm adversaries without firing a shot. So, who is the main adversary to China? And didn't we all hear something like that from the Soviet Union a few years back?

Some economic reports indicate we owe China at least \$1.5 trillion. Seems cheap to think we only owe Japan several hundred billion. But what if they decided to call in the debt?

That's probably silly. A lot of very well-educated, serious-minded types look upon rurals who suggest such things the same as those who see imaginary "black helicopters."



Sybrant Public School, Bassett, Nebraska. Seven pupils, K-8, in 2003. Sadly, this lovely little school, as for many others like it soon will, closed in 2005.

They tell us with some logic that is difficult to follow that owing that money is actually a good thing. The debt is just paper and numbers, they say. What counts is all the consumer goods we have, sent here from China.

It's a little like the President of Doomsday Al Gore telling us all this cold weather this winter is proof of global warming. It has gone so far that the Environmental Protection Agency actually considered charging farmers and ranchers for what "wisegreens" politely call the "greenhouse gas emissions" of livestock. That would be \$175 per dairy cow, \$87.50 a head for other cattle and \$20 per hog. They seem to have calculated the value of every cow fart. Can we sell those as carbon offsets? And, of course, they plan to keep track of just whose livestock is greengassing up the place with use of the National Animal Identification System (NAIS). Maybe, if we weren't

so busy out looking for black helicopters, we might be getting upset about such arbitrary absurdity. Not to worry, said the Bush-era leaders of the Clean Air Act, they wouldn't really charge farmers and ranchers for such livestock emissions. *They* wouldn't but President Obama's new climate advisor is Carol Browner, who worked closely with Gore.

Don't get it wrong—farmers and ranchers are the best real environmentalists you're likely to find. Global warming doesn't do us any good at all, and if our cows are responsible for it, we should certainly speak to them.

And while we're on the subject, what has happened to the bees? Nobody seems to know, although it is said that bees working organic crops are not dying at the rate of bees

in fruit and nut orchards created from genetically altered seeds—an idea the government liked to create more production.

But we can fix the bee problem.

But that's not what seems so worrisome. It's the attitude we see coming from all those distant grandkids who seem to be coming back not to work the farm or the ranch, but, with all their education, to tell us how we should do it.

They all expect us to have straw in our teeth and talk like a relative of Sarah Palin, dropping our g's and such in a manner they found so inappropriate for a national candidate. These smart kids are following up on the ideas from the 1992 conference in Rio de Janeiro that created Agenda 21 and the "Smart Growth, Sustainable Use" movement meant to show us how to live.

According to them, everybody should eat



Matthies Farm in Nebraska in 1995. This image is the quintessential Midwest farmstead. It is neat, clean, well cared for, and suggests the satisfaction of living in the country. On this day, late morning, the air is crisp and clear with the threat of an impending storm.

locally, serving only foods grown nearby. This, they say, will reduce greenhouse-gassing transportation of food, be more healthful, and even produce cheaper food. So it would work out that while we are paying more for Bessie's farts, we'll be getting less for her milk.

And there's the next shoe likely to drop. It's really the same people who peddled mortgages they knew couldn't be paid who now send out zero-percent credit cards that may run up to 20 percent interest before they are maxed out. More than 20 million of those "free" cards were mailed out this year, crisis or no crisis. Today, a lot of American kids get a credit card before they get a driver's license. Lots of those cards mean lots and lots of unsecured debt that somebody will have to pay. That's part of the reason Secretary Paulson wants to slip all those trillions in bailouts to his old friends in the investment banks. He wouldn't want to see those folks losing their mansions.

Okay, that seems unfair. After all, it's always been that way—those who create the jobs and the credit should earn more than those who actually work and pay. But the funny thing is how much the disparity between them and, well, us has changed.

Only 25 years ago, chief executive officers (big bosses) earned about 45 percent more

than their workers. Last year, the average CEO raked in 531 percent more than the average working Joe or Jill who is either producing his product or using his credit.

That's who we are: the richest nation on earth...on credit. A good thing, the smart economists say, something that makes it sure we will recover from this recession. How many zeroes in a trillion? Enough to cost every American \$4,000 just to pay off the Chinese, but never mind, that's a good thing. It's enough to cost every average American 10 or 20 years of work to get even, but not enough to bother Henry Paulson.

Oh, well, that's not worrying to rural America any more than it is everywhere else in America. We can get through it. Of course, to do so, we need to trust the leadership of not only President Obama, but House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (worth a reported \$62 million) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (said to have assets in excess of a piddling \$3 million). Has the gerrymandering of her district and all those years of fundraising for the Democratic Party given Pelosi special wisdom as well as a gavel? Did Reid learn from his real estate deals with Las Vegas interests the real value of property? Do we expect that such people will begin to work on our behalf instead of as our self-serving adversaries?

No.

Years ago, a number of people in the rural West especially began noticing the disturbing relationship between the Clinton administration and special-interest nonprofit organizations like The Nature Conservancy. Those potent organizations, which puffed themselves up as NGOs (nongovernment organizations) to attend United Nations' conferences on behalf of the United States, soon also began to look like shadow governments.

With no oversight and no accountability, TNC was suddenly taking over jobs for the Corps of Engineers, scoping out land to buy from farmers for the U.S. Army, and otherwise telling farmers and ranchers how to avoid taxes by turning their property over to TNC. The Sierra Club could not resist, loudly blowing its own horn for the money and volunteers that it poured into defeating California Rep. Richard Pombo in 2006. Pombo, it realized, was in a position to begin reformation of the out-of-control Endangered Species Act, a fundamental law of the land belonging to the unaccountable environmental movement.

They seemed like a shadow government, similar to the secretive academic "advisors" appointed to meet with others like them from

Mexico and Canada in what they insist is not a plan for creation of a North American Union out of the North American Free Trade Agreement. If it isn't such a secret plan, we have as yet to hear what it really is.

That's more black-helicopter stuff, of course, but isn't there a strange amount of vague talk from Washington these days about shadow financing?

The Endangered Species Act is due for a review and presumed renewal in the next year. Some of us think it's too powerful already, but some with new friends in Washington think it should be made even tougher to protect the new wilderness they want to create and stock with predators like wolves and grizzlies. Humans would be on their own, and visits by children would not be recommended.

We shouldn't worry. It's a free country, and we have our own representation. Don't

we? Actually, what some of us see happening in Washington is the creation of a new aristocracy beholdng to its sponsors in special interests, but indifferent to run-of-the-mill Americans it mocks as "WalMart shoppers."

Even some well-known greens seem to be getting out of the mix. Reed Noss, the respected earth scientist who is considered, along with David Foreman, to have authored the Wildlands Project, says he has quit the project, preferring "science over politics." Foreman also has left the Yucatan-to-Yukon trail idea, but apparently for other, unknown, reasons. Still, some of us wonder if they didn't just accomplish their goal with an omnibus bill of 150 pieces of legislation dealing with wilderness set to move through Congress this session.

All over the West and across rural America in general, concerned folks are meeting in conference rooms, coffee shops, churches and private homes to discuss how to protect their

rights to property and water. Leaders like Fred Kelley Grant of Stewards of the Range are conducting workshops on how to take back control of at least local politics. Inevitably, it seems, these meetings focus on defending rural people from the federal government. Isn't that contrary to what we all believe, or at least used to believe?

That new aristocracy often points out correctly that, although by far the majority of agricultural operations in the U.S. are still family owned, a minority of less than 10 percent of corporate farms produce the most food. Is that what it thinks is sustainable? Or does their drive to eat locally suggest an end to corporate dominance?

Does any of that really make any sense? Something's missing, Uncle Sam. Something is just not there anymore. It worries us. ■

Tim Findley is fretting in Fallon, Nev.

Salazar Suits Up...a Relief to Many

Standing next to President-elect Barack Obama in a cream-colored Stetson and a slightly baggy suit with a silver-skull bolo tie, Sen. Ken Salazar (D-CO) looked awkwardly hopeful.

Reporters who normally cover politics said it wasn't his usual style, but others took it as a less-than-subtle message from the Interior secretary-designate to the rural folks he knows who are anxious about the generally left-leaning Obama administration.

Salazar seemed to be saying he is a real rancher with 12 generations behind him dating back to Spanish settlement, not another Babbitt with a silver spoon in his saddle bags. Bush administration Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne called him the "best choice" for the job; Wyoming rancher and influential head of the Family Farm Alliance Pat O'Toole added his support for the Colorado senator; and even the up-and-coming R-CALF rancher organization

said its members are pleased.

Salazar, in fact, may be the most welcome new Interior secretary in the West since James Watt. Even so, with people like presidential advisor on Energy and Climate Carol Browner and slightly ethanol-edgy Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack of Iowa at the same table, Salazar may want to loosen that bolo just a bit before they get a grip.

Just as did Babbitt before he took the job in 1990, Salazar earned a 100 percent rating

for the last Congress from the League of Conservation Voters (LCV). Salazar is not, however, the "Babe Ruth" that LCV made of Babbitt and, in fact, Salazar took over the senate seat from Ben Nighthorse Campbell, who was so infuriated with the Clinton secretary that he became a Republican.

Salazar is still a Democrat, but his family is the real thing with a working ranch in southern Colorado's tough San Luis Valley for a couple hundred years. The senator has estab-

lished some close relationships with land-trust organizations, but his positions in Congress have also broken party ranks in favoring multiple use and resource development on public lands.

It may be that Salazar will face some pressure from environmentalists believing the federal administration has gone sustainably green but, from early appearances, it seems apparent that Obama intends at least to let him wear the hat.

—Tim Findley



On Dec. 17, 2008, Sen. Ken Salazar was chosen by President-elect Barack Obama as Interior secretary.