

Carnegie Mellon University
Seminar 2, Professor Dave Kaufer
Narrative History
March 5, 2010
Jennifer Shirey

Leaving the Farm: A Story about 1950s Rural America

10-year-old Ben jumped off the school bus, just behind his 11-year-old brother David. Ben's light-brown hair bounced up and down as he jogged along the dirt lane. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved plaid shirt, too warm of an outfit for the sunny Michigan fall day. Both boys were in the school band, and each carried a trombone in a brown case, a hefty load that weighed nearly as much as its carrier. Although they had been dropped off at the end of their driveway, they still had quite a walk before they would arrive home. The narrow dirt drive stretched a quarter mile ahead of them and was crossed by railroad tracks. The boys' feet kicked up gold and red leaves as they walked along, knowing that in a few months, the driveway would pile up with snow. Although their father owned a tractor, he felt that plowing the long driveway was a waste of time and gasoline. Instead, the family would leave their Ford Galaxy at the end of the drive and walk out to it when they needed to go into Perry, the small town where they lived.

At the opposite end of the driveway, the trees suddenly cleared and a two-story farmhouse with a shady porch came into view. The house's exterior was covered in faded, light-blue shingles, its windows framed with peeling white trim. It stood in the middle of their father's 150 acres of land. Framing the house was an enormous maple tree, a long rope swing hanging from one of its sturdy branches. Although it was 1967, the scene was pretty much the same as it had been in 1945, the year their father, Mervin Shirey, bought the farm out of foreclosure from the local bank. The Shirey farm, much like the small town of Perry, was slow to change.

To the left of the house stood a large red barn and silo, quintessential symbols of an American farm. In the barn were a few cows, which Mervin raised for beef. The scent of manure made visitors' noses wrinkle, but the boys were immune to the smell. A few years before, Mervin had kept dairy cows as well, but the cost of maintaining the dairy equipment led him to sell them off. The barn was unheated, and the pipes would freeze in the winter, which meant Ben would have to carry steaming buckets of hot water out to the barn to thaw the cows' drinking water. But now, in the middle of a beautiful autumn, the barn was a place for games and play. When Ben's friends came over, they would build forts out of the bales of scratchy hay, yelling and shooting imaginary guns at each other.

Having friends over, however, was an infrequent event. The Shirey farm was isolated; the few miles to downtown Perry might as well have been 50 miles. Then again, Perry didn't offer much in the way of city life. When the family wanted to go shopping, they would drive 12 miles to the bigger town of Owosso, where Ben thrilled at riding the department store escalators. Most of the time, though, Ben and David would rely on each other for entertainment. They played in the woods surrounding the house and spent afternoons gluing together plastic model Corvettes, spaceships, and WWII war planes. Ben often tinkered with the mechanical farm equipment, fascinated by the way the pieces fit together. His two older sisters weren't often around; they had friends with cars, and after-school jobs. Their mother, Ruth, was always busy with household chores, and Mervin didn't have time or energy to spend on his sons. From the time Ben was born, Mervin had worked two jobs, as a full-time farmer, and part-time somewhere else. In 1967, he held a night shift as a janitor at Michigan State University, a job he kept until he retired at the age of 65.

On most school-day afternoons, Ben and David would enter the house and immediately plop down on the couch in front of the TV. They wouldn't move from their spots for the next few hours. Despite their love for reading Peanuts comic books and adventure mysteries, television was very much a part of their lives. Theirs was the first generation to grow up on an after-school routine of TV that included "The Steve Allen Show," an hour-long variety program, and reruns of "Gilligan's Island" and "The Beverly Hillbillies." The family TV was an enormous, grey box with round dials and a small, 19-inch black and white screen. Keeping the picture static-free was an art form that required expert tuning of the knobs and antennae. Color televisions were introduced in the '60s, but they were far too expensive for a family of six living on a farmer's income. When Mervin woke up in the afternoon, he would join the boys in front of the TV, chuckling with them at the performers on "Steve Allen."

Each evening, the family would sit down together for dinner. Before eating, they always folded their hands and bowed their heads in prayer. Each sibling would pray in turn, from the oldest to the youngest. Ben, being the youngest, would pray last. "God is great, God is good, now we thank Him for our food. Amen." With that, dinner was served. Ruth would pull the cover off an enormous pot of soup, stew, or pot roast. Ben enjoyed the evenings when they ate "Souper Burger," a mixture of hamburger meat stretched with cans of soup. His least favorite meals were liver, or worse, cow tongue, but living on a farm meant that waste was not tolerated.

Despite Mervin's second job, the family always struggled to make ends meet. In addition, private farming was becoming less and less profitable, with factory farms and cheap supermarket chains popping up everywhere. The industrialization of rural America eventually led Mervin to give up farming altogether and become a full-time janitor. As a child, Ben didn't mind or even realize that his family was poor. But as he grew older, he began to resent eating soup for five nights in a row, being forced to share an unheated bedroom

with his brother, and the never-ending chore of keeping the fire going in their antiquated wood-burning furnace. Life on the farm became monotonous and suffocating, and Ben looked for a way out.

He continued to develop an interest in mechanics, fostered by his Uncle Bob, who led Boys Brigade at church and would help the boys to build and launch model rockets. Standing in an empty field with a few friends, Ben would crouch down and touch a lighted match to the rocket's fuse, then run back to join the onlookers. His creation would take off with a thrilling *woosh*, until it became a small speck, suspended for a moment in mid-air. Ben would follow the rocket's descent with his eyes, holding his breath until it landed safely on the ground.

When he entered Perry High School, Ben became exposed to the bigger world outside of Perry, and technology began to creep into his life. Instead of a slide rule, he used a calculator to perform trigonometry functions, a machine that would seem antiquated ten years later, but at the time was on the cutting edge. Ben did well in his math and science classes, and became a National Merit Scholar Semifinalist. Although college was an unusual choice for Perry residents, Ben began to consider it as a viable option. Most of the boys in Ben's graduating class wouldn't attend college. Instead, they would go on to work in one of the nearby factories, where the pay was good, but the work was grueling, and it guaranteed that they would stay in Perry for the rest of their lives.

One day when Ben was a senior in high school, he received a letter inviting him to study at West Point Academy. Excited, Ben showed the letter to Eric, a youth leader at his church whom he admired. "No way," said Eric, "you don't want to go into the military. Why don't you check out GMI instead?" General Motors Institute, Eric's alma mater, offered degrees in mechanical engineering. *Why not?* thought Ben, *working on cars sounds pretty cool*. It was a natural fit for his talents. The auto industry in nearby Detroit was changing rapidly during the mid-'70s. With the advent of new automobile emissions standards, Ben believed that mechanical engineers like him would be in high demand.

Years later, Ben would go on to graduate from GMI and lead a life beyond the wildest expectations of the boy who grew up on the farm. His future career as a director at an automotive company would require him to take business trips to Japan, England, Australia, and Brazil. He and his family would enjoy an upper-middleclass lifestyle that included a large house with a swimming pool, and vacations to California and the Caribbean—trips that Ben's parents could have never afforded. Although he would be glad to have escaped Perry, his life would bring with it new challenges and stress, and a part of Ben would always look back in nostalgia at his childhood. Technology and industrialization would change his world for good, and that young boy walking down the dirt driveway to the farm would become symbolic of a simpler, slower America that could never again be recovered.