RURAL TENNESSEE

SHADOWS OF WHAT WAS

Life in rural Middle Tennessee has changed. As Tennesseans head home this holiday season, many will follow interstates that turn into two-lanes, highways that turn into back roads. By the time they arrive in the small towns where they grew up, they will have traveled into a different Tennessee. A Tennessee unlike the one they grew up in.

Tennessean photographer John Partipilo spent time on the back roads of rural Middle Tennessee, documenting the changing landscape. There are fewer farms. More housing developments. Wider and busier roads. But there also are places — and people — where the past doesn’t seem so far away. Where folks are working to preserve a way of life for future generations.

— Duane W. Gang, The Tennessean

Thankful to be alive

Mom back home against all odds

Risk treatment, family’s faith save poisoning victim

By Tom Wilemon

Craig and Allison Morgan went to sleep in an RV in mid-October looking forward to the thrill of watching a NASCAR race at Talladega Superspeedway.

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Go to Tennessee.com to see a video of Allison Morgan sharing the story of her miraculous survival.

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Happy Thanksgiving!

Online: Predators game results

The Tennessean went to press before the game ended. Find results at Tennessee.com.
Russell Harkai has seen big changes in the rural Williamson County landscape.

Rural Tennessee
A Changing Landscape

Where there were once open fields, subdivisions sprout like weeds. While everything else around them gets bigger, farms and country churches shrink by the day. Still, in some pockets of rural Middle Tennessee, change has had a softer touch.

Photographs by John Partipilo | Story by Duane W. Gang

Russell Harkai once rode his horse across the fields of Williamson County in solitude. Just him, his horse and a herd of cattle. Often a drive down the road on a tractor meant passing other tractors with a wave. He still thinks of himself as a farmer, a cattleman. But things are different now.

“Sometimes riding out on a pasture feels like it was 20 years ago,” Harkai said. “But all of a sudden, there’s a swingset and kids playing and they want to come up and pet your horse.”

Harkai is only 36. He has worked at Tap Root Farm since he was 12. In the two decades since, the rural Williamson County landscape changed forever.

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A rural Tennessee forever changed.

Story continues on Page 11A

sun & ski
Black Friday Sale
Monday!

ALL FOOTWEAR
BOGO 50% Off

2019 Custom Liberty Snowboard
Incl. Binding
(reg $499) $399

Burlington Coat Factory
2019 Custom Liberty Snowboard
Incl. Binding
(reg $500) $369

Burton

Columbia
Women’s Parallel Pant-Jacket
(reg $250) $174

Columbia
Women’s Montrose Jacket
(reg $398) $69

Merrell
Chilkoot ZT Low
(reg $130)

Thrive

13A

THE TENNESSEAN
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2013 - 13A
This quiet spot in Maury County is far removed from the crowded highways and bustling subdivisions in other parts of Middle Tennessee. New subdivisions have arisen where cattle once roamed. More people and traffic crowd the roads — newer, wider roads.

Some of the little country churches they remember from their childhood have seen their congregations dwindle to a handful of believers. The number of farms like the one where Harkai works has dwindled, too, and the farms that remain are much smaller.

Phillip Kelley has seen the changes, too. His family has farmed in Robertson County for more than a century. But in the past few years, he has had to deal with issues his ancestors never anticipated.

Complaints from new neighbors about the smell. Herding livestock across now-busy roads without getting them slaughtered by speeding vehicles.

“If this nation wants to keep eating, they are going to have to deal with the farmer,” Kelley said. “We have a lot of people who have moved into this community who don’t want to get caught behind a tractor.”

Kip Eatherly returns home to Lebanon for Thanksgiving each year from Louisville, Ky. For the past few years, Eatherly, his wife and two children have headed down Interstate 65 to Exit 2 in Franklin, Ky. Then they pass through Sumner County on Highway 310.

The road itself is a sign of how the region has changed. In stretches, it’s a divided four-lane highway — a route like the new State Route 840 that local officials hope can help spur economic development.

“I have been in Louisville since ‘97,” Eatherly said. “Nashville seems to be ever expanding, and sort of swallowing Wilson County as well. We’ve noticed a lot more residential development.

“Houses I didn’t remember seeing in my hometown.”

The new 840, which extends 78 miles from Lebanon to Dickson, has brought a lot of new development. Construction on the route began in 1991, at the Lebanon end.

“My best friend still lives over there, pretty close to one of the interchanges where there is an Outback and Home Depot,” Eatherly said. “That used to be open fields.”

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Rural Tennessee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farms in Tennessee</th>
<th>Acres of farmland</th>
<th>Average size of a farm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>87,595 in 2002</td>
<td>11.68 million</td>
<td>78 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79,280 in 2007*</td>
<td>10.57 million</td>
<td>58 acres</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*most recent year available
Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Census Bureau

Population Boom

545,808 population of nine Middle Tennessee counties in 1990 (Cheatham, Dickson, Dickmen, Maury, Robertson, Rutherford, Sumner, Williamson and Wilson counties).

981,124 population in 2010 for those same counties, an increase of 81 percent.

81,021 residents in 1990 for Williamson County alone.

183,182 residents in 2010 for Williamson County.

Mike Merchaint bows his head and prays during the playing of the national anthem last summer at the Wilson County Fair Junior Rodeo.

At the end of the day, a patron walks through the poultry barn at the Wilson County Fair. Wilson is one of the fastest-growing counties in Tennessee, yet it still has old town squares, barbershops and other signs of rural life.

This quiet spot in Maury County is far removed from the crowded highways and bustling subdivisions in other parts of Middle Tennessee.
Because they remain vital to our existence, farming and rural life aren’t going away anytime soon. Agriculture remains one of the state’s biggest industries—more than $2.6 billion a year.

And there are places—and people—where the past doesn’t seem quite so far away. Those working to preserve their small-town way of life for future generations.

David Ginenich and his family operate a dairy farm in Summertown. Postmaster Roy Ray works out of a small, wood-framed post office in Culleoka.

And then there’s Phillip Day of Madison. He has been a Methodist lay minister for 44 years. He has pastored nearly 30 churches in that span, all across Middle Tennessee. His mission is to keep religion alive in rural Tennessee.

He has stopped telling people he’s a Methodist, though.

“Then you might have Presbyterians. Then you might have some Methodists. I’ve gone to churches and there weren’t any Methodists,” Day said.

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Time passes. Things change. Churches can’t make it if they get too picky, he said.

“The young people move away. Their kids move away. One or two dies off. Now they have three people. I have never asked anybody whether you are Methodist or what you are. It doesn’t make sense.”

The small numbers haven’t stopped him, though. He finds some folks are just happy to have a place to go on Sunday.

In Watertown, in Wilson County, an old town square gives rural life a familiar texture. People know one another’s names.

There are antique shops, for sure. But Watertown still has a family-run pharmacy on the square, a barber shop and new businesses sprouting up.

Robin Vance was in high school when she moved to Watertown. She went off to college and got a law degree, but now she’s back. She could have practiced law anywhere and did so for a time in Nashville. But Watertown is home. Her office overlooks the town square, so she can look out and be reminded of where she came from in a way that’s more than just a memory.

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