Boob rubes

The new ruralism in TV advertising

by JEFF GREENFIELD

The city has been a repellent attraction throughout America's history; and the more we have become urbanized, the more our culture has reflected a longing for our abandoned rural past. Jefferson said of Americans that "when they get piled upon one another, in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe"; Benjamin Rush described cities as "pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man."

In the popular culture of our century, Norman Rockwell has given us visions of corner drugstores, village doctors, old swimming holes, and lazy summer evenings on the front porch. Hollywood gave us Indiana moonlit nights and heroes abandoning the wicked city for the farm, in dreams shaped by expatriate New Yorkers whose view of rural America was fashioned through the bar car window of the Super Chief. And today, *nostalgie pour le boue* is alive and flourishing, in the hands of the advertising community.

To watch television commercials over the last year or so is to find a yearning for the countryside that rivals that of the new Cambodian government. Home, hearth, fresh air are now as pervasive a cliché of the advertising community as were rock music and freeze frames a few years ago.

A country singer warbles that she "was raised on country sunshine" as a fetching young woman returns to her dusty farm home, to be refreshed by family, boyfriend, and Coca-Cola. Not to be outdone, RC Cola presents a young farm woman, barefoot and blue-jean clad, singing that her new country life "is the way to put down roots." Euell Gibbons touts Post's Grape-Nuts at family reunions, which feature breakfasts set out on huge tables in the yard of a country home. A folksinger on behalf of Country Morning (a new breakfast cereal) urges us to "let Country Morning take you back again," as a wholesome-looking family devours the stuff along a huge table in the yard of a country home. Come dinner time, and another apple-cheeked family is seen wolfing down Kentucky Fried Chicken at a huge table in the yard of a country home. Families snap Polaroid pictures of each other while gamboling in the yard of a country home. And Chevrolet helps bring ma and pa out to the country, where their children have set up housekeeping, finding once again the joys of gathering around the huge table in the yard of. . . . I assume you are getting the gist of the idea.

These advertisements represent a significant shift in Madison Avenue's judgment of what our yearnings are. In the postwar years, and all through the 1950s, the suburban home was the (assumed) centerpiece of our national longing. Whether it was an Oldsmobile ad with a family cruising along a Sylvan Acres development, or an ad in *The Saturday Evening Post* featuring a new ultramodern kitchen in the ranch house, the suburban sensibility was the critical frame of reference in our advertising. To a generation crowded into barracks, apartments, and war plants, the dream of a private house and a plot of land was dominant.

In the 1960s, much of the advertising message attempted to cash in on the new political sensibility. A feminine napkin advertisement promised "Freedom Now," a straight-faced echo of the civil-rights movement. A Jergens lotion ad flashed the peace sign. And the sensual explosion of rock music, bright lights, quick cuts, and cross-dissolves crowded into the world of television commercials.

Now, however, there is a new mood in the land — at least, if we measure the national mood by the calculations wedged beneath the sell-lines of advertising. What these ads tell us is that the yearning for simplicity, for quiet, for roots, for a "real home" has once again surfaced, and with a vengeance. Few Americans are actually willing to throw over the traces of their lives and go back to the hamlets and villages their fathers and grandfathers deserted, but — if the massive research studies are to be believed — the disaffection with the living patterns of an overcrowded city or atomized suburb has made America's old way of living once again a compelling frame of reference for selling a product.

The evocation of this regional, isolated, slow-paced America on prime-time commercial television is awesome in its levels of irony. (One of the gratifying things about the mass media is that there is no need to root out the ironies; they run up to you and slam you in the face.) It probably goes without saying, in the first place, that any product with enough resources to use prime-time network television is an unambiguous product of homogenized America. Kentucky Fried Chicken is not dispensed by some white-suited colonel with a skillet; it is a nationwide operation which — according to Colonel Sanders — has moved substantially away from the quality controls he instituted (enough so that Sanders, who sold his interest some time ago, is now contemplating the opening of a rival chain). Country Morning may come in an old-fashioned-looking cereal box with old-fashioned graphics, but the product is made in a plant, not in a shed out behind the mill.

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What is more ironic is that mass packaging and promotion itself helped to uproot so much of the stable, tranquil America in the first place. It was the power first of nationally circulated magazines, then of network radio, that made nationally distributed products feasible, and which, among other pressures, wiped out small, regional producers of everything from cigarettes to beer. It is the nationally franchised fast food chains — McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Hardee's — that are replacing the individually owned food shops all over the country. It was the reach of new fashions, new clothes, new ideas into the most remote hamlets of the country that helped trigger the wave of migration from rural to urban America in the first place, and the incredible power of television which continues today to eat away at the barriers of distance that once kept our humor, our politics, our customs distinctly regional.

The uprooting of Americans — either from their homelands or their homes within our heartland — is the central story of the twentieth century. And, almost as if in expiation, those institutions which helped in that uprooting seem most determined to celebrate what they destroyed. Just before the start of the Indianapolis 500 auto race, for example, a celebrity is introduced to the crowd of 300,000 people to sing "Back Home Again, In Indiana." Yet this race is essentially a celebration of the machine that gave hundreds of thousands of Americans the freedom to leave their homes in Indiana (or Kansas, or Dakota). This is what is happening on our television screens as night after night the products of an urbanized, industrialized, homogenized land are sold with the visual symbols of what that society has helped eradicate.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is to be found in the audience intended to be reached by these paeans to the Older, Better, Country Way of Life. I recently completed a major study of the National Broadcasting Company's new television season. With unanimity, the network executives emphasized the demographic influence on their programming. Advertisers, they said, do not want just numbers; they want "the demographics" — the economically desirable audiences, who are young-to-middle-aged, relatively well educated, and urbanized. The older, rural audiences are considered so undesirable that television shows — like *Lawrence Welk* and *Gunsmoke* — are canceled *despite* their ratings, because they do not deliver the right audience to the advertiser.

Thus we face the ultimate joke — the advertising community is busily engaged in appealing to a big city-suburban cosmopolitan audience by evoking for them a way of life whose current adherents are considered undesirable. They are selling products which have contributed mightily to the collapse of that way of life; and they are using a medium which, more than any other force, put the last coffin nails in that way of life.

See you at the corn-husking. ■