



Photo: Ken Light in With These Hands. Used with permission.

# This Land Is Home

By Lorette Picciano-Hanson

## U.S. Historical Overview

A century ago, Native American tribes and nations cared for and were sustained by over 500 million acres of land in the contiguous United States. All of Alaska and much of Hawaii were still homelands to native peoples there. Following the Civil War, the government promised "forty acres and a mule" to freed slaves. Although that promise was revoked within months, over 900,000 black farmers were able to acquire and operate more than 15 million acres of land by 1920.

Late in the last century, family farm agriculture prevailed in the East and Midwest, and along the West Coast. Ranching and farming were primary occupations in the Southwest region. Land ownership was relatively widely dispersed in most areas.

Then, railroad companies received large tracts of land and with it, the power to determine prices of products which farmers sent to Eastern markets. At the same time, new mineral and energy resources, easier to extract than those in the Appalachian region, were discovered throughout the West. Transportation and extractive industries controlled the economies of whole regions of the nation. Strip mining has ravaged large acres of land there. The unsaturated quest for energy continues to affect the land and people.

The great wealth of this continent, once widely dispersed among Native nations and peoples, and for a relatively short period within the last century, shared among many peoples and cultures, has been concentrated increasingly and alarmingly in fewer and fewer hands. In recent decades, rural people and communities have faced a continuing struggle for the right to care for the land entrusted to them and for the right simply to survive economically on the fruits of their labor.

## Effects of Power Shift on Farming

Despite increased production and trade, over 600,000 family farmers and ranchers lost their land during the 1980s. Just 300,000 farms, of the 2 million that remain, produce more than half of the nation's food supply.

Rural people, many of them minority and/or poor, are "hanging on to go home" by only a thread. The wealthy and the powerful have turned vibrant rural communities into a stage for exploitation and extraction. Decisions over the lives of people and the future of communities are increasingly controlled by outsiders in far-away centers of power.

Farmers and rural communities have become beholden to agribusiness and other occupations who control the land by controlling the markets and price. In a struggle to keep up with creditors by increasing production, farmers have used chemical and machine-intensive production. Although sustainable agriculture practices are becoming more widely adopted, precious topsoil has been lost forever, and groundwater across the nation remains contaminated.

As more farmers lose their continual struggle for economic survival, farmland in the United States is itself concentrated in fewer hands, among them banks and insurance and timber companies. Rural communities, having lost the economic and tax base once provided by family farmers, have fewer means to survive themselves.

## Effects of Power Shift on Minorities

If current trends continue, African-Americans will be landless by the year 2000. In 1920, one in seven farmers were black. Today, less than one percent of all farmers are black, and they are losing land at a rate 3.2 times faster than other farmers—one thousand acres a day, every day. Despite the struggle of groups like the *Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund*, continued discrimination and neglect by federal lenders and the Department of Agriculture, combined with the over-all decline in the farm economy, have disproportionately hurt minority and Native farmers and ranchers.

Native Americans, the continent's earliest farmers, still count agriculture as the largest occupation. Of the 54.4 million remaining acres of Native homelands, nearly 47 million are used for crop or livestock production. Today, however, less than 35 percent of the land is actually farmed by Native Americans, with the remainder either leased to others or idle. Foreclosures have removed over 150,000 acres from Native homelands in the Dakotas and Montana alone and have damaged tribal economies.

While landholdings by Mexican-American people in the United States—some for generations—have remained relatively constant, millions of migrant farmworkers, many of them Latino, care for land they do not own or control. Their wages are low, their working conditions are among the most dangerous in the nation, and

they do not share collective bargaining protections won by other workers. Many of the chemicals they must apply have not yet been tested for safety.

As the U.S.-Mexico Free Trade Agreement near completion, farmers and farmworkers on both sides of the border fear that wage, benefit, and health and safety protections will be reduced to Mexican standards. For example, DDT, banned long ago in the U.S., is still available for sale in Mexico, and farmers are able to purchase it there and carry it across the border. The agreement also requires Mexico to remove land reform protections from the Mexican constitution, a step farmer fear will speed concentration of land control in Mexico.

## Signs of Hope— Need for Support

As land and economic issues are increasingly controlled and influenced by government entities and big companies, do rural people and communities have a future? Who is caring for the land? There are signs of hope.

In 1991, the Gwi'tichin people of Alaska and Canada, and their allies, successfully overcame an attempt to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil drilling by defeating S 122. At stake for the "Caribou People" was the very basis of their lives, culture, and economy—the protection of the calving grounds for the Porcupine River Caribou herd.

The Gwi'tichin victory is not a secure one. S 39, to protect permanently ANWR, was not passed. Two other bills, S 279, sponsored by Sen. Bryan (NV) and HR 446 by Rep. Boxer (CA), to increase auto efficiency standards were not voted on. Until this nation's energy needs are comprehensively addressed, the struggle for saving the land continues.

Another sign of hope is *The Rural Coalition*—a multi-racial, multi-cultural alliance of organizations united in their commitment to seek just and sustainable development for rural communities and people.

*The Rural Coalition's* membership is composed of grassroots groups, like the *Federation of Southern Cooperatives*, working for twenty-five years among black farmers and small communities in the South, using people-oriented strategies of pooling resources and promoting local leadership in community development; and *Proyecto Organizativo Sin Fronteras*, assisting migrant workers on the U.S.-Mexican border.

The most recent project of the *Rural Coalition's* Native American task force was an assessment of groundwater quality for a dozen tribes, preparing them to address the issues of poor water quality. In 1992, new projects include rural access to health care, jobs, and the environment. Work on minority farmers' rights, the *North American Free Trade Agreement*, and other issues, will continue.

As people continue to come together to work for just and sustainable policies and lifestyles, the land will be home for all U.S. citizens. ♦

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