CONTINUING FARM LAND ABANDONMENT IN THE ADIRONDACK FRINGE

Joseph W. Brownell
SUNY College at Cortland

ABSTRACT. Pioneer farmers penetrated New York State's Adirondack foothills early in the nineteenth century, and their successors commenced to abandon the more hilly sites as the twentieth century brought with it the agricultural machine age. Field mapping in 1957 showed that the larger part of one St. Lawrence County town had already returned to a forest state. In 1990 a similar field investigation shows that abandonment continues, although at a slower rate. Working farms which remain contend with uncompetitive soils and slopes toward the Adirondack interior and urban expansion in the nearby villages on the St. Lawrence Lowland.

More than seventy years ago the New York State novelist Irving Bacheller wrote The Light in the Clearing, a story of 19th century life in northern New York. Its first-person narrator was a small boy brought up on a farm on "Rattle Road, near the village of Lickety Split, in the Town of Ballybeen." Bacheller, who himself had grown up in that place and time, knew intimately the tiny North Country farm with its horse, cow, and a few acres of land. The farmers were dirt poor and generally raised only enough to feed their own families. In the early nineteenth century these men and women represented a restless tide of emigration from New England and sometimes nearby Canada. Within a generation many had moved again, this time to the Middle West.

Bacheller's Ballybeen was in actuality the Town of Russell in St. Lawrence County, a town that lies almost entirely in the crystalline hills of the western Adirondack foothills (Map 1). It is a nearly rectangular town extending from the Town of Fine in the south to Canton, one of the original 10 towns of the St. Lawrence Lowland.

If farms were small and life was hard, early farmers possessed one glowing advantage; the land was theirs and it was their generation that opened the foothills to farming. Later their descendants saw the coming of the cheese factory and the rise of commercial dairy farming. In the process, many of these descendants were forced out of farming. The new economy would not tolerate the subsistence farmer.

However, that subsistence farmer dominated the early population, and Russell's census count peaked in 1870 when the cheese factory era brought with it the first hint of commercialism (Table 1). Thereafter the town population dwindled until the middle of the 20th century when other factors intervened. By this time over half of the farms were gone.

Decline of the Farms

At the height of the subsistence era there were as many as 344 farms in the town, although there is no evidence that they were all active at the same time, and some sites may have disappeared without a trace (Map 2). Nonetheless, those sites appearing on the USGS sheets for 1915 were verified by field check in 1956 (Brownell 1958). Field examination at that time indicated that the earliest farm abandonment had occurred in the hilliest parts of southern Russell.

Field mapping in 1956 provided a picture of the status of farm abandonment in the middle of the century (Map 3). By this time southern Russell approached almost complete abandonment and the northern half of the town already displayed evidence of both total and partial abandonment. In the latter case the farm had ceased to exist as a unit while part of its land was still used by nonresidents.

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Map I

Town of Russell (black)
And the
Western Adirondack Hills
(After Thompson)
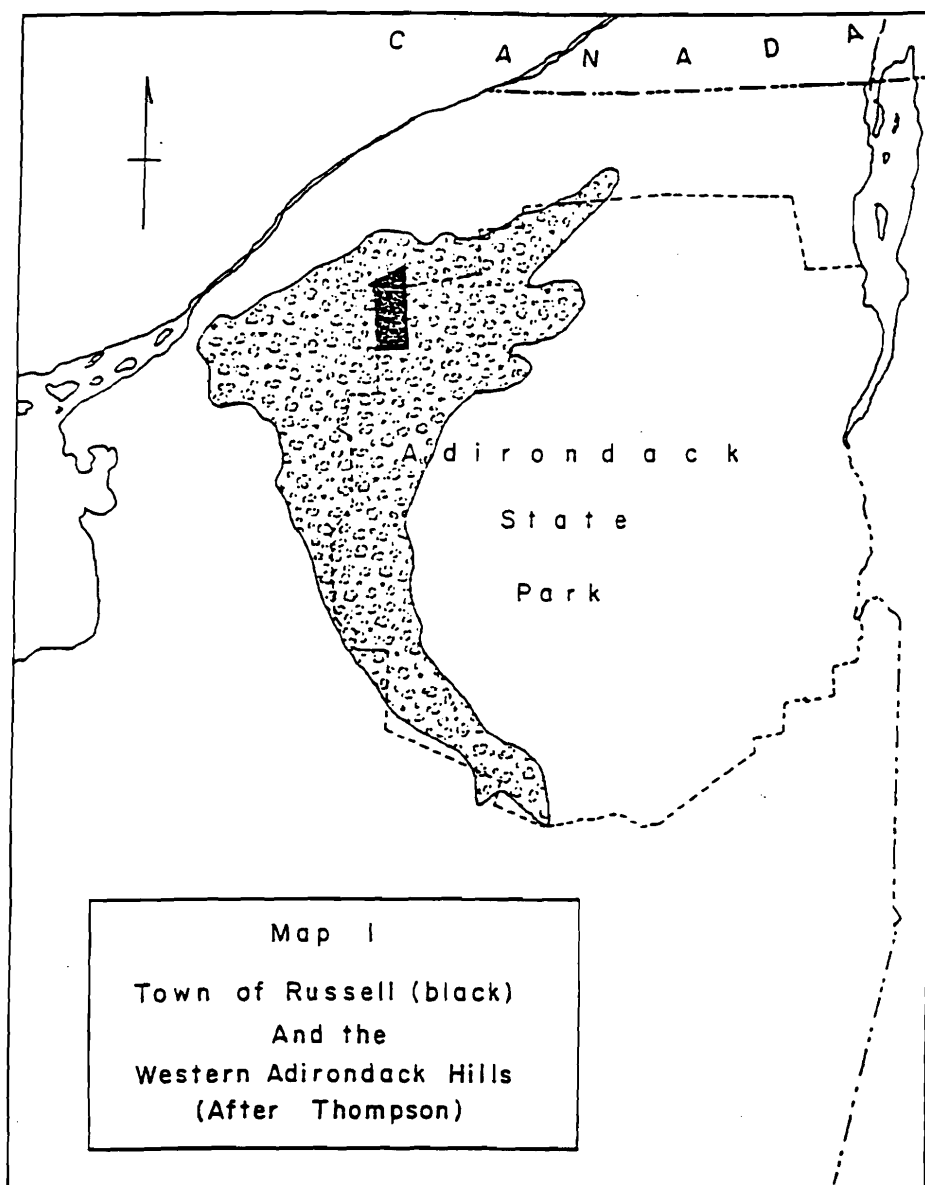
The abandonment of farm life invariably leaves scars on the families who may remain on the property. In many farmhouses visited in 1956 the family was the third or fourth generation to have farmed the site since pioneer days and was the generation to leave farming. The act of abandonment was seldom the fault of the operator because causal forces lay in the structure of modern farming, which requires a high degree of capitalization, large farm size, and workable land. Still, these families inevitably experienced feelings of guilt and often struggled on the public relief rolls as they attempted to survive the transition into the nonfarm sector.

Russell in 1990

A remapping of Russell was carried out in the summer of 1990 (Map 4). The trend of abandonment continues northward toward the St. Lawrence Lowland. Most startling are the clusters of total abandonment along the northern border of the town in landscapes which, a generation ago, were thought to be bastions of agriculture, safe from the economic failures so prominent a few miles away.

Table 1: Population Trends in the Town of Russell (Census)

Census Year	Population
1860	2,380
1870	2,688
1880	2,488
1890	2,132
1900	2,067
1910	1,842
1920	1,757
1930	1,585
1940	1,529
1950	1,472
1960	1,588
1970	1,586
1980	1,638
1990 (preliminary)	1,610

If agriculture was once the basis of the town's economy, its abandonment under-scores the plight of current residents. With the exception of four small urban units, also left over from the agricultural era, Russell is almost totally rural. Little economic activity has taken the place of lost farming.

Aside from a family-run cheese factory there is now no manufacturing in the town. While there was a short-lived endeavor to mine iron ore during World War II, this operation closed at the end of hostilities, and no significant industry remains to provide non-farm employment within the town.

There is no railroad in Russell, and except for the few years of iron nining, there never has been. When New York State farming changed from subsistence agriculture to commercial farming in the late 19th century, it relied upon the shipment of fluid milk by railroad. There was never a milk train in the Town of Russell.

There is no state highway within the town, and all transportation is by county and town roads, which range in quality from excellent to poor. The impetus for highway maintenance comes from the network of school bus routes, and winter plowing is as important (and as expensive) as summer paving. Highway workers from town and county, along with school bus drivers, make up much of the employed within the town.

The small country schools of the town were consolidated in the middle of this century. At that time a town-wide central school occupied a building in the village of Russell in the center of the town. Today the school system has been further consolidated with another town district to the west. The old village school building is boarded up, and all students are bussed to a new campus located at the western town line.

Despite these town-wide characteristics, Russell presents two subregions (Map 5). In the north, close to the village and town of Canton, rural nonfarm population dominates. In the south there is more forest than clearing. Only one highway extends uninterrupted from north to south through Russell, funneling through a single bridge across the Grass River in the center of the town. This "choke point" restricts commuters

Map 2

Russell
Original Farm Sites

0   1   2   3
miles
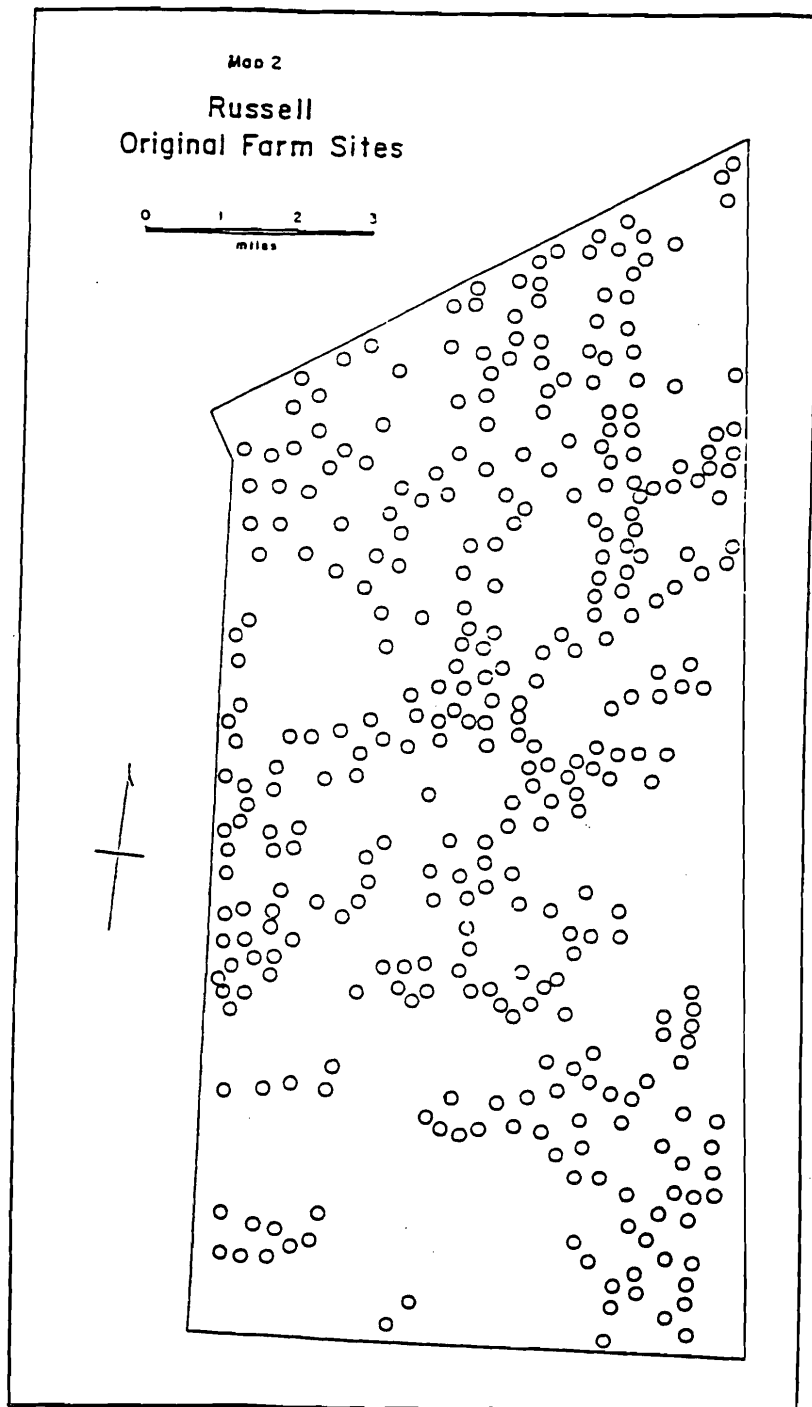
who drive through Russell, and an eighteen-minute driving limit from Canton effectively, if arbitrarily, divides the town into north and south.

Northern Russell

Northern Russell contains most of the remaining operating farms of the town as well as the larger number of farm units that exhibit the process of ongoing abandonment. Although there are active dairies, few existing farms display the large fields and extensive buildings of the St. Lawrence Lowland.

Most farms mapped as "partially abandoned" have hayfields that are now being harvested by neighboring farmers who have bought either the standing hay or the land it-

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Map 3

Russell
Farm Unit Abandonment
1956

● total
○ Partial

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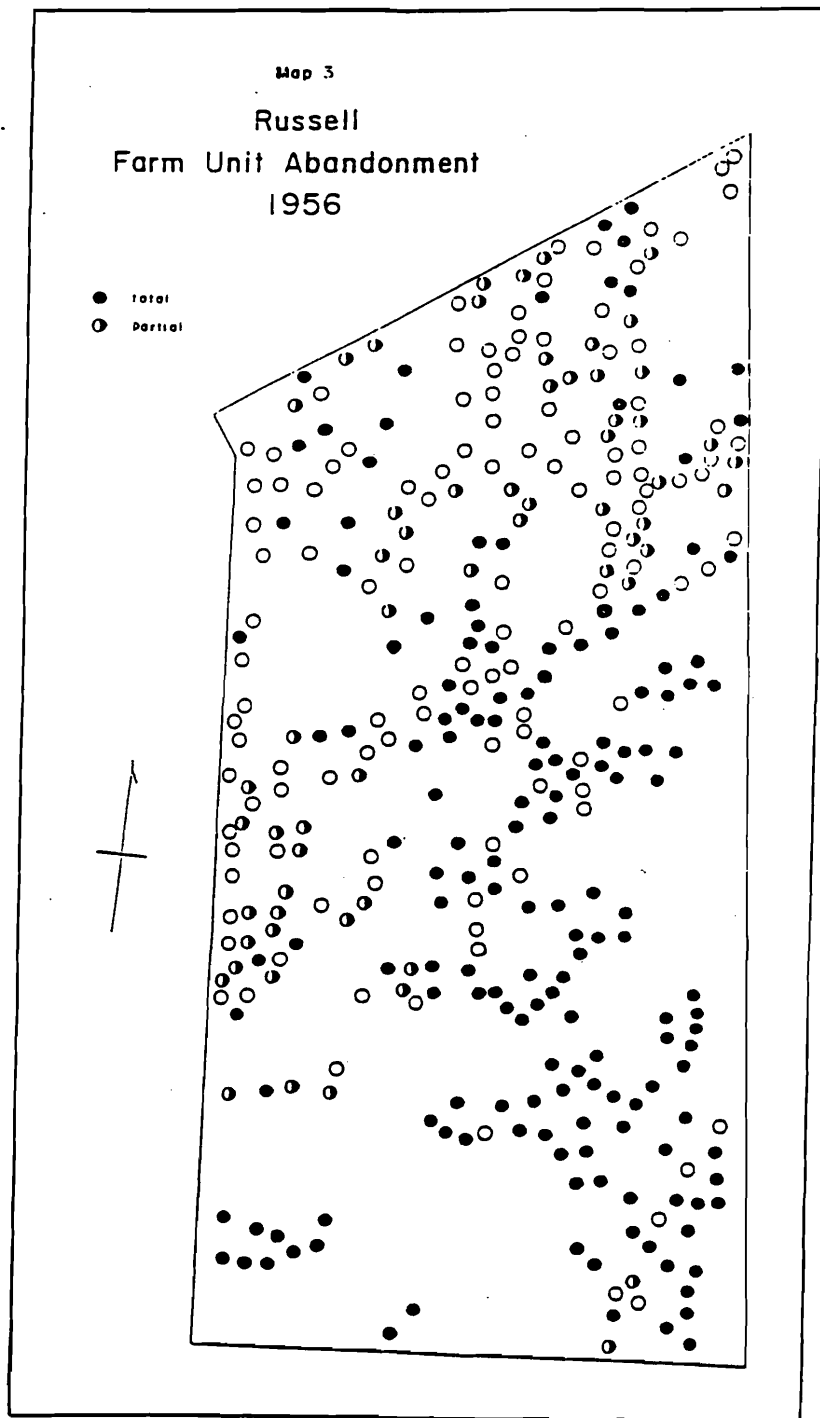
self. Much of the farm, however, is unused agriculturally. Typically, the barns and outbuildings are in disarray even if the house is occupied and the hayfields mowed.

The dominant characteristic of northern Russell, both in totally abandoned and partially abandoned areas, is the recent emergence of a significant nonfarm population. The proximity of Canton, a county seat with two colleges, is a large factor in this. It is this sector of population that has caused the census count to recover after its 1950 minimum. In the recent 1990 census, Russell almost held its own against a regional loss. In 1990 every contiguous neighbor but one lost population at a far greater rate.
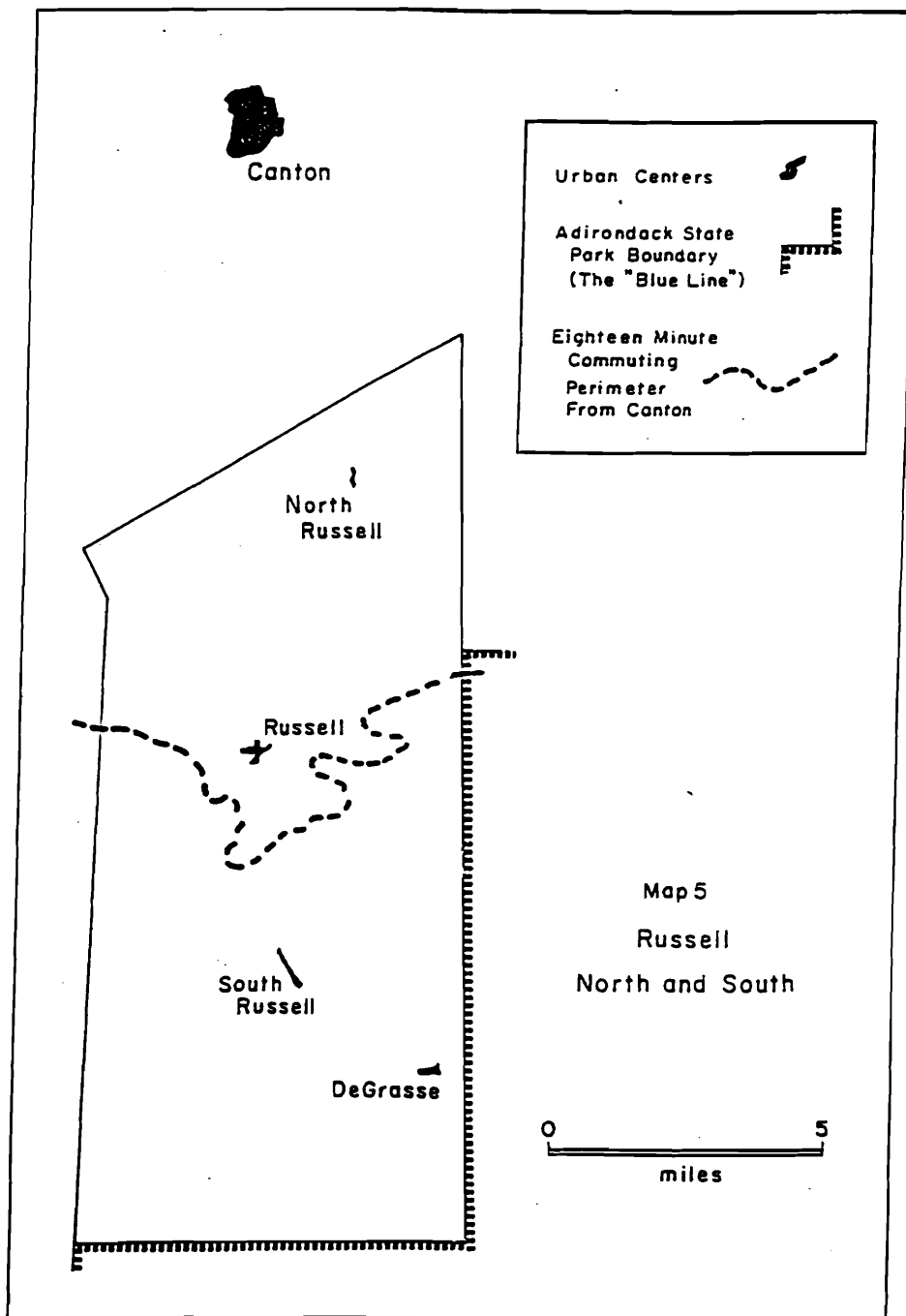
As a "bedroom area" northern Russell represents a broad social spectrum. Middle-class academics, lawyers, and business people are balanced by both the unemployed and

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Map 4

Russell
Farm Unit Abandonment
1990

● total
◑ partial
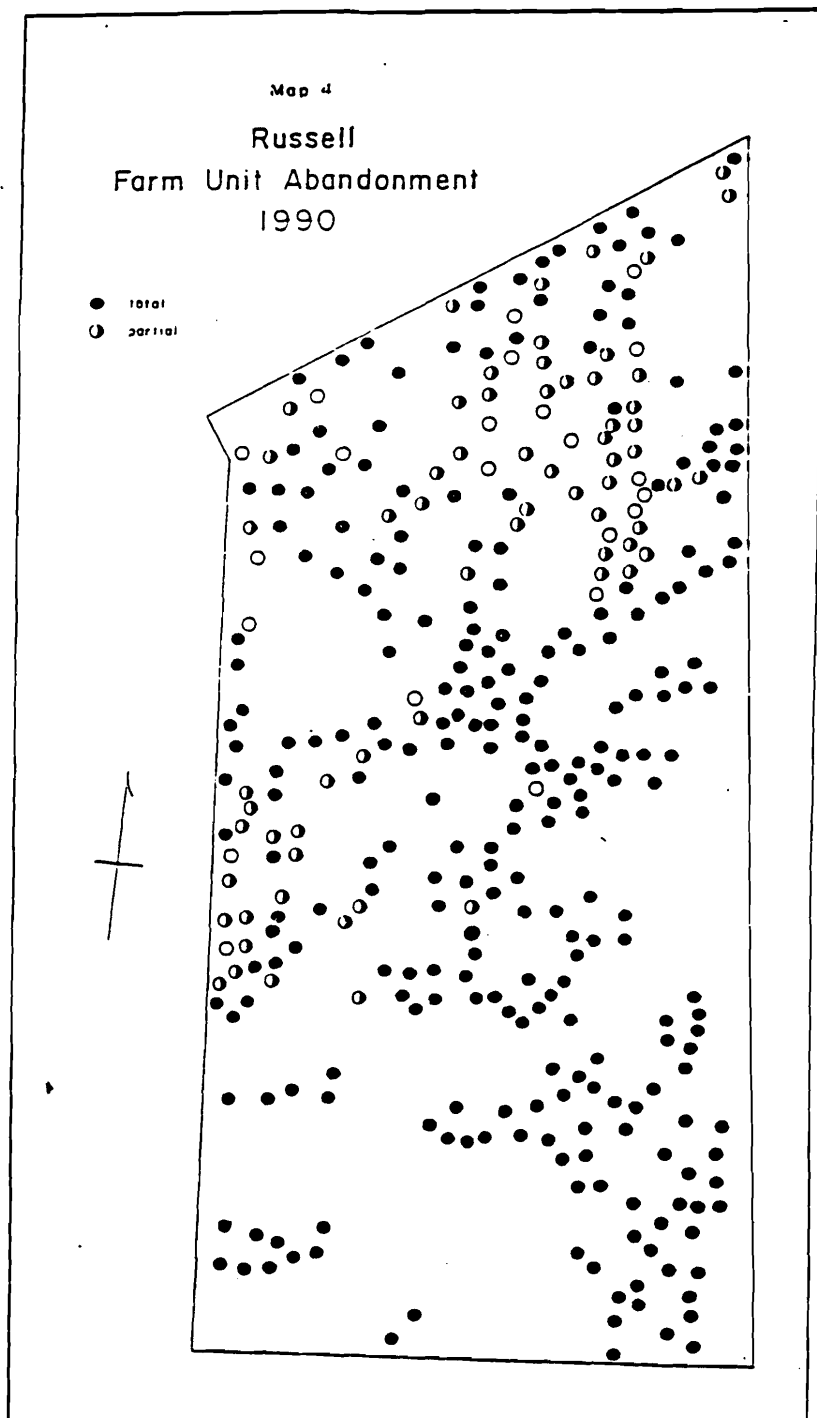
the underemployed. Housing reflects to a large degree these mixed incomes. Some old farm houses stand refurbished as single-family homes while nearly all new construction reflects middle-income purchasing power of external employment. On the other hand, many farmhouses decline as owners or renters of lesser income struggle to exist. The occasional mobile home provides housing for residents of modest income who are retired or who commute beyond the town.

Southern Russell

Russell south of the Grass River presents a sharp contrast to its northern counterpart. Here farms began disappearing shortly after the town population peaked. By the 1950s most farms were wholly or partially abandoned. Traces of old farms remain, but

Canton

Urban Centers

Adirondack State
Park Boundary
(The "Blue Line")

Eighteen Minute
Commuting
Perimeter
From Canton

North
Russell

Russell

Map 5

Russell

North and South

South
Russell

DeGrasse

0   5
miles

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most buildings are either gone or lie in wreckage. At first glance many country roads
appear never to have been bordered by farms although rows of old trees once planted
along the roadside belie the touch of people. A search for former pastures often ends
in a wall of underbrush, but the presence of crumbling stone walls or barbed wire sug-
gests the land use of years ago.

Forest cover is the dominant vegetation characteristic but traces of old hayfields oc-
casionally remain. Fields that were harvested by outside operators only forty years ago
now display early stages of natural reforestation.

The population of southern Russell typically traces its ancestry to original settlers.
The residents, including those who inherited their land from previous generations, find

that living in this seemingly inexpensive region can be expensive indeed. Few jobs exist without driving to the outside, and land taxes remain relatively high, even for unused land.

The annual school tax bill is often the largest single house expense after winter heating, and the reaction of taxpayers is conservative and outspoken. Tax increases are bitterly resented and landowners constantly seek ways of reducing the tax bill. One familiar means is to subdivide the farm either for sons and daughters or for open sale if nonfarm outsiders can be persuaded to buy. As a result, most old farms fail to remain single property units.

Other owners enhance their income by cutting pulpwood, or harvesting timber from woodlots. Roadside piles of pulpwood or skidways of hardwood logs are common sights. Because the hardwood stands are mixed, clear cutting is seldom seen and the general landscape appears to be one of continuous, unscarred, second-growth forest.

Problems of Neighboring Towns

To the south and east of Russell lie towns in the Adirondack State Park. Their farmland, too, has been abandoned and their landowners resort to the same desperate procedures to meet their tax bills. Since 1971 those towns have lived under the watchful eye of the Adirondack Park Agency. Most recently park residents, particularly those owning former farm land, have displayed alarm over a state commission report on long range plans (Commission 1990). The report submitted 245 separate proposals, many of which would affect park landowners.

Tact was not a strength of the report which referred to incorporated Adirondack villages as hamlets. Residents of the rural towns, often descendants of farmers like those of Russell, are equally displeased. They are bitter because they feel that this plan, like other acts before it, is imposed upon them by outside forces. Representing less than 1 percent of the population of the state, they dispute assurances that they are not being manipulated from without. They see in the future greater restrictions than they now suffer; restrictions on the management of their own private land.

Residents of Russell might well ignore these new Adirondack proposals but for the fact that the commission report mentions them, too. Article 243 suggests, almost as an afterthought, that a transition zone be created around the park, using a belt of towns presently outside the park border or "blue line" (Commission 1990, 24). Russell would be such a town.

Russell's residents, like their park neighbors, see this as an intrusion from outside. Some fear that a transition role, as yet undefined, would lead to the imposition of planning and zoning by state agencies. They point out that in New York State the population is 84% urban and highly unlikely to understand rural life and economics. Other Russell residents fear that a transition role would be but the first step toward total incorporation into the Adirondack Park with all its restrictions.

Russell-the Future

Whether the new transition zone comes into being, and whether Russell residents would volunteer to participate in it if it does, is impossible to tell. However, by the middle of the twenty-first century farming will be little but a memory in the Town of Russell. Rural, nonfarm construction will increase in the north, and if automobile commuting continues to be viable, middle-income commuters will probably spread into the southern half of the town as well. With or without state interference, the landscape

of this early agricultural town will ultimately become a nearly continuous, privately owned forest with scattered nonfarm housing.

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