



The Schuman farm in Columbia County, Pa. (page 52)

BEST PLACES TO LIVE IN RURAL AMERICA

**Special
Report**



A country road in Wexford County, Mich. (page 54)



The Albrights on their farm in Obion County, Tenn. (page 50)

Since we've done four of these lists now, we can anticipate the reaction locals have when they hear their county is on it. They smile and tell us, "No surprise. This is a great place to live, work and farm."

And then the mood almost immediately darkens: "But why do you have to tell everybody about it?"

It's a fair question, and one that we've struggled with a great deal at *The Progressive Farmer*. We knew from the start that the purpose of our Best Places To Live In Rural America report isn't to encourage people to move to these counties. We've come to know that the list isn't even meant to shine a light on some tucked-away place that's our idea of a little heaven on earth.

Rather, we want to celebrate the people that make the places special. We want to show what they're doing to keep their rural counties rural, whether it be protecting farmland, controlling growth pressure from urban and suburban areas, or striking the right economic balance between agriculture, manufacturing and modern conveniences.

The counties on our list this year faced those challenges and more, and still maintained their high rankings among the typical statistics you'd expect with one of these lists: quality schools, access to health care, low crime and affordable farmland—with the idea in mind that "affordability" is somewhat relative based on location and proximity to cities and towns.

What we've come up with is a list of great counties with a tighter focus than ever before. We hope you'll agree, and hope the ideas these counties had for staring down their challenges will inspire you. —*Jamie Cole*



PHOTO: BERNADETTE VAN PELT

1 KENT COUNTY MARYLAND

If you're like most readers of this magazine, you feel the pressure. It's all those people moving out into your pristine countryside to build their dream home—or park their trailer. We know because you've told us many times over.

Now imagine what it must be like to live in Kent County, Md. Washington D.C. is just a two-hour drive away. So is Baltimore. Philadelphia too. New York is a mere four hours away.

By all reasoning, Kent County should be covered with homes, strip malls and “farmettes.” But it's not. Not anywhere close.

Instead, Kent County is a rare holdout in the sprawl and development in this country that clearly is out of control. Kent County maintains a culture of farming, wildlife, and small towns and villages that are relatively untouched.

For a county to be in our Best Places list, we hold them to the usual standards—good schools, health care, safety and other desirable qualities. But what makes Kent County stand out is its residents' resolve to maintain a solid rural heritage. At the foundation of that effort is farmland preservation,

something that started decades ago with foresight, cooperation and some farsighted planning.

Located on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay, the county is home to some of the most historic farms in the U.S. It's not unusual for a family here to trace its lineage back to the Revolutionary War. Stately farmhouses still grace the landscape, but only because Union soldiers never had reason to come here, and so the old homes were spared.

The county is small in land mass and in population. It has just 20,000 people. But the county is growing, and the way it's doing so is well worth examining.

To explain Kent County's expanses of farmland, it's easy to give credit to the county's relative isolation. The bridge across the Chesapeake Bay is about 35 miles south of the county line. There's always the possibility that could change, however.

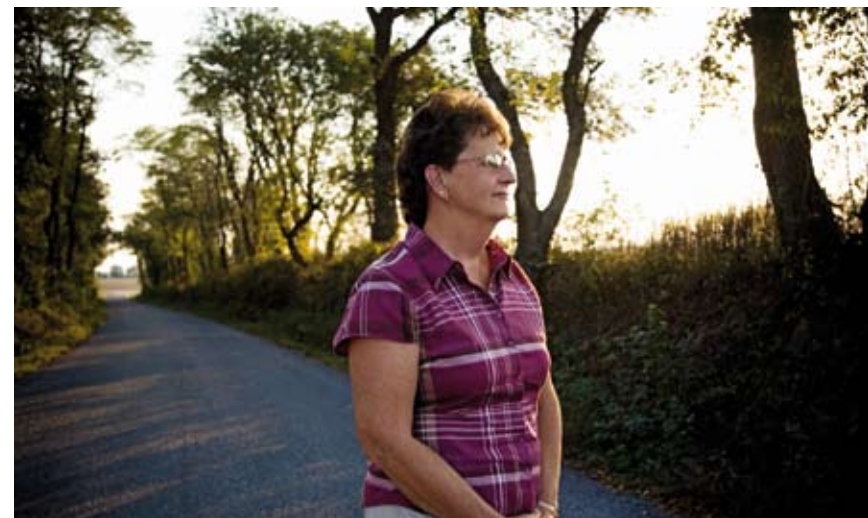
For many years, state lawmakers have proposed building a new bridge just to the north, linking the area directly with Baltimore. Residents here vehemently oppose the idea.

But the real story here is smart growth and farmland preservation.



(Above) Stately farmhouses dot the countryside, many dating to before the Civil War.

(Below) There's a reason it's named Washington College. Our first president helped found it, then received a doctor of laws degree there in 1789.



Pat Langenfelder and her husband moved to Kent County to farm after urban sprawl forced them from their previous farm.

As for growth, the county long ago planned where development should and should not occur. It all made sense: encourage growth where the infrastructure is—the schools, the roads, the water and other utilities—and it lowers costs for taxpayers.

As for farmland preservation, it's mainly the result of farmers selling the development rights of their land to the state.

“It's important to start it early, before developers start waving their money around,” advises Pat Langenfelder, first vice president of Maryland's Farm Bureau. She and her husband, Conrad, moved to Kent County 20 years ago after urban sprawl between Baltimore and Washington made farming there too difficult. They now have 538 acres of their farm on the waiting list for conservation easements.

Here's how the plan works: If a farmer decides he wants to keep his land and continue farming it, he can sell his right—and the right of future owners—to develop that property. Thus, the land will always be farmed.

Then the farmer tells the county how much he'd like to receive for those development rights, and his name goes on a list of like-minded farmers. The county then prioritizes its purchases by several criteria: How close is the land in danger of being developed? How good are the soils? How close is it to other farms already in the program?

The county can tap into several funds for this, the main one being

the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF). The state program is funded, in a sense, by developers themselves. Whenever development occurs in the state, Maryland takes 5% of the real estate transfer taxes and puts it into the program. Last year, the state poured out \$80 million for preserving land. Kent County received \$12 million of that.

The county relies on other sources for preservation. County commissioners usually set aside \$100,000 a year for purchases. Other sources are easement donations from landowners, funds through the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy and others—but MALPF is by far the main source.

So far, the county has about 28,500 acres of land in permanent easements—about 16% of the total land mass. Last year alone, landowners put 2,800 acres into easements.

The program is so popular there is a waiting list. Last year, 24 landowners applied to have their development rights purchased, but funds limited acceptance to just 14. The state paid a range of \$2,500 to \$8,000 an acre in 2006, but the average price has been about \$4,100.

For added measure, the county also has zoning that makes random development difficult. The county is zoned to a variety of uses—housing development, industrial, agricultural. If the land is zoned agricultural, only two new lots can front a public road. You also can only put one housing unit per

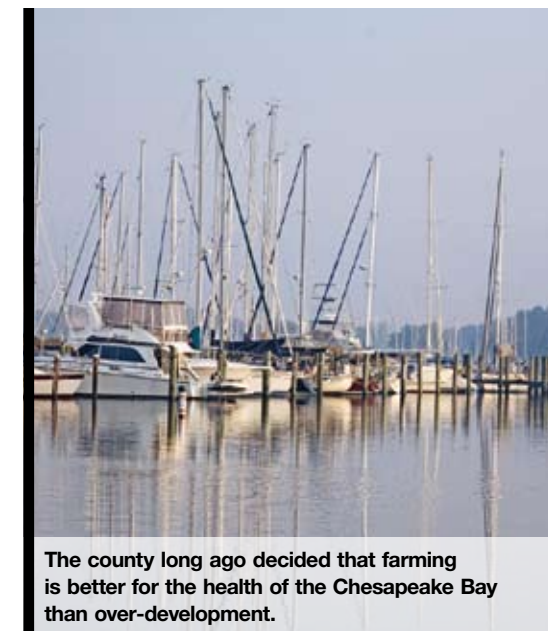
Complete stats and more:
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every 30 acres. And only 10% of any one property can be in development

If this sounds harsh, consider that farmers have a large say in the planning. For several decades now, the county commission has been appointing farmers to an agricultural advisory committee to help the commissioners understand the farm perspective of planning and zoning.

The results might not make everyone perfectly happy, but residents here have long acknowledged there's never a perfect solution to a complex problem like property rights and land-use issues. “We are gaining farmers, not losing them,” notes Langenfelder. “They're coming here because they see that farming here has a future.”

—Story and photos by Joe Link



The county long ago decided that farming is better for the health of the Chesapeake Bay than over-development.

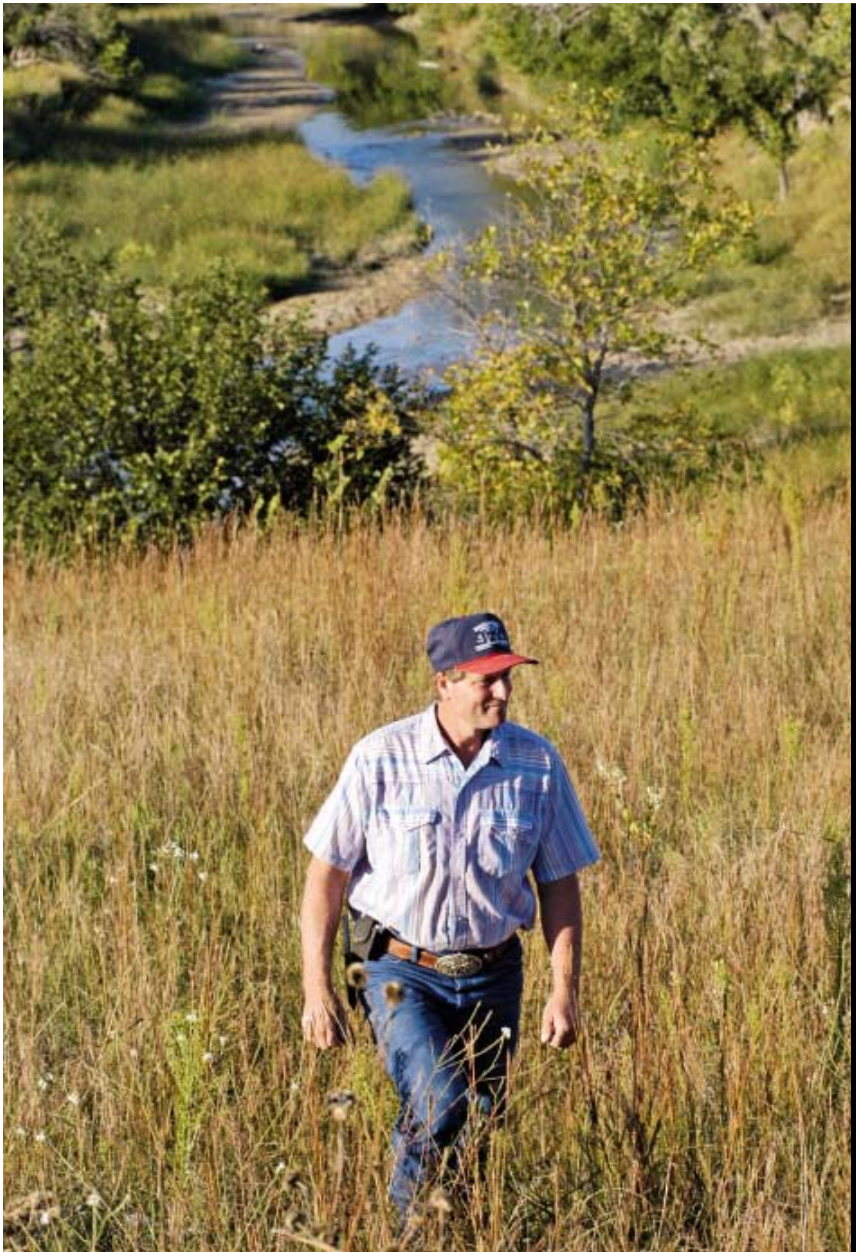
LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Kent County:

462 acres mostly tillable and new irrigation system; \$5,950,000 or \$12,879 per acre

34 acres waterfront with limited river access; \$995,000 or \$29,265 per acre

77 acres rolling land, 50 acres tillable; \$640,000 or \$8,312 per acre



Kirk Dickinson and his family have been stewards of this land for six generations.

2 ELLIS COUNTY KANSAS

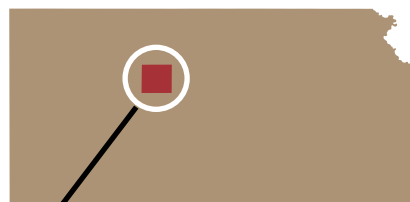
LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Ellis County:

157 acres all grass with water well;
\$234,900 or \$1,496 per acre

80 acres all tillable; \$192,000 or
\$2,400 per acre

160 acres with 42 acres grass;
\$256,000 or \$1,600 per acre



Population Density: 29.88 per sq. mi.
Average Tract Size: 40.84 acres

The early days of what is now Hays—the county seat of Ellis County, Kan.—read like a page from a Western novel. Founded in 1867, Hays was a wild frontier town where legendary lawmen like Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok and Bat Masterson kept the peace.

Those who challenged their authority ended up in the original Boot Hill Cemetery. Lt. Col. George Custer encamped near Fort Hays on the outskirts of town and led the 7th U.S. Cavalry on successful campaigns against the Indians.

The largest herd of buffalo in North America, estimated to be in the millions, once roamed the area's plains. Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill Cody also called Hays home.

That frontier spirit remains today. It fuels the passion and enthusiasm the people who live and work here have for the area.

Located in northwest Kansas, Ellis County is conveniently located midway between Denver and Kansas City.

Agriculture fuels the region's economy. The flat to rolling landscape is ideal for grazing cattle and growing wheat and grain sorghum. Gorgeous sunrises and sunsets saturate the Blue Hills of the Saline River or the valleys carved out by the Smoky Hill River.

Millions of years ago the area was at the bottom of a huge, warm Cretaceous Sea. It left behind large oil reserves, which helped make the area the top oil-producing county in the state. "We need the revenue from oil so we can afford to farm," jokes Leo Dorzweiler, who has several wells on his farm northeast of Hays.

Like many residents of Ellis County, Dorzweiler is a descendant of Germans who emigrated from the Volga River region of Russia. The immigrants settled in communities such as Catherine, Munor and Schoenchen and brought with them a strong work ethic and pride of heritage that survives today.

These villages look much like the ones those immigrants left behind; small, tidy homes were built around a massive church cut from native limestone—its soaring steeple rising above the trees.

"We work hard here, but we have genuine fun too," says Dorzweiler. "We like to get together for food, dancing and entertainment," notes the originator of the Midwest Deutsche Oktoberfest held the third weekend in September. It's little wonder that Ellis County has been proclaimed the German capital of Kansas.

With a population of 20,000, Hays is the retail, educational, cultural and medical hub of Ellis County,

Complete stats and more:
www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/ellis

as well as much of northwest Kansas. But times weren't always so smooth-sailing.

In the 1980s the county lost its largest employer at the same time agriculture and the oil industry were mired in an economic slump. "It was the perfect storm of bad news," says Mike Michaelis, executive director for the Ellis County Coalition for Economic Development.

Community leaders did what their German ancestors would have done: They rolled up their sleeves and went to work. That led to the coalition Michaelis now oversees to ensure economic vitality for the county as well as to enhance the region's quality of life.

Today the area boasts several manufacturers and businesses. Unemployment is less than 3%. Billboards along I-70 advertise hayshasjobs.com, a campaign to attract more employees. Construction north of the interstate in Hays is bringing big-box retailers, hotels and chain restaurants.

Meanwhile, an aggressive Downtown Hays Development Corporation is attracting new businesses to the town's historic Chestnut Street District. The district's streets are lined with boutiques, galleries, restaurants, coffeehouses, salons and other shops you'd expect to find in much larger cities.

"We're a micropolitan, not a metropolitan," explains Michaelis. "We have all the benefits [of a city] without the problems."

Those benefits include a thriving cultural scene. Hays has the oldest arts council in the state, while the Hays Symphony Orchestra is in its eighth decade of continuous performance.

You can catch a wide variety of performances at Fort Hays State University, the only four-year state institution in the western two-thirds of Kansas.

And the Sternberg Museum of Natural History exhibits many of the fossils collected in the region by the renowned Sternberg family.

Exceptional medical care can be found at the Hays Medical Center. The complex is anchored by the Michael E. DeBakey Heart Institute, created with help from the namesake's guiding hand. DeBakey is known around the world as the father of heart surgery.

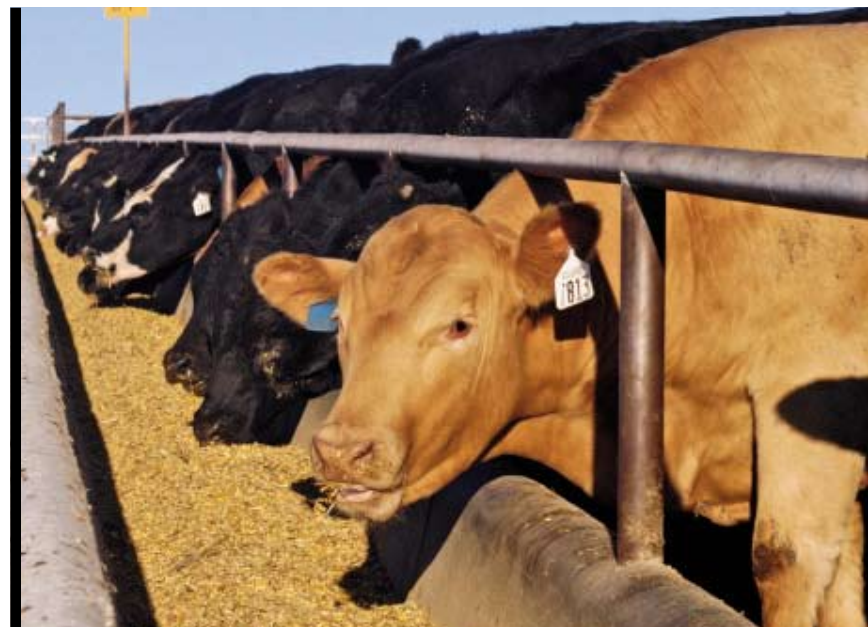
It's amenities like these that reinforce Kirk Dickinson's opinion that Ellis County is a great place to live.

"We have beautiful scenic views and open spaces," notes the sixth-generation rancher and farmer. "We have everything we need."

—Story and photos by Gregg Hillyer



Schoenchen is one of many Ellis County communities settled by Volga Germans.



Hays Feeders LLC is one of the oldest continuously operating commercial feedlots in the area and has a capacity of 25,000 head.





The Beetsma family enjoys a tailgate dinner during a harvest break.

3 LIVINGSTON COUNTY MISSOURI



Chillicothe brags on the first commercial bread-slicing machine.

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Livingston County:

300 acres with CRP, timber, hunting; \$600,000 or \$2,000 per acre

538 acres with timber, cattle ranch; \$888,525 or \$1,651 per acre

45 acres, excellent hunting; \$78,500 or \$1,744 per acre

In 1928 itinerant inventor Otto Rohwedder was really glad to find Livingston County, Mo. Before arriving in county seat Chillicothe, he'd had a devil of a time trying to sell his greatest invention. But once there, he met bakery owner Frank Bench, who found merit in Rohwedder's idea—a machine that sliced bread—and bought it.

Bench had the vision to see it was the wave of the future. In a matter of weeks, his business had grown 2,000%. Today Chillicothe calls itself “The Home of Sliced Bread,” and thinks of itself as “the best thing since . . .”

If you ever tour Chillicothe and Livingston County, you will see that Bench's descendants have continued his vision. These folks are inventive, industrious and not afraid to take the road less traveled.

How many rural communities do you know that own their own railroad (a short line that serves the city's business park)? Or run their own electric utility? Or have a municipal airport with a new runway exactly long enough to accommodate private jets, just in case business executives might want to stop by to visit the town as a potential new site? Chillicothe—population 8,968—has all that.

This can-do attitude extends beyond the city limits to ►

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the countryside where farming is the foundation upon which Chillicothe and Livingston County were built.

Ron Beetsma is a second-generation Livingston County farmer. He and his brother Buddy farm about 6,500 acres with Ron's sons Brad and Ben. Beetsma will tell you that farming in the rich Grand River bottoms can be challenging: The river is out of its banks two or three times a year. While levees protect his farmland most years, in 1993 and 2007 floods devastated corn crops. Fortunately, last year's flooding occurred early enough that the Beetsmas could replant their corn ground with milo and salvage their season.

"This really is a good place to farm," Beetsma says. "It's centrally located, the markets in Kansas City are close, and weather patterns are usually good."

During the 1980s farm depression, the farm foundation was a little shaky, so the county made a concerted effort to diversify its economic base. Its leaders developed a regional marketing plan to attract employers and residents to the area. It also sought to combine services to make the whole area more livable.

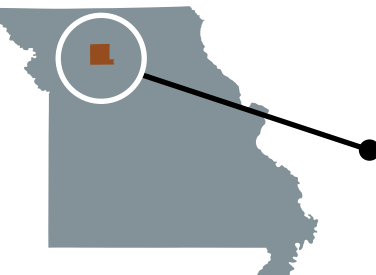
The strategy worked. A regional hospital, Chillicothe's business park and several senior living complexes have helped unify the area.

Also in the 1980s, county government switched its revenue base from property taxes to a ½-cent sales tax. That may have helped farmers who were struggling at the time. It certainly created a steady source of income that grows as the county's businesses grow.

—Story and photos by Jim Patrico



Harvey Harrington and his cattle on his land near Dawn, Mo.



Population Density:
 26.28 per sq. mi.
 Average Tract Size:
 33.74 acres



4 OBION COUNTY TENNESSEE

Population Density: 58.42 per sq. mi.
 Average Tract Size: 19.89 acres

Well, we have it made here," says Jay Ray Hobbs. You can take his word for it. Hobbs has lived in Obion County, Tenn., his whole life. Ask him where he grew up, and he can point to it from the house he lives in now. Hobbs farms 2,500 acres of Obion County in corn, beans and wheat. And he's a 30-year veteran of the school board.

Now his son Lee Jay is back on the farm and making management decisions in business with his dad. "I told him it's gonna be hard," says Hobbs. "But he knows that. He knows how he was brought up."

There are lots of reasons to come back, live, stay and farm. The economy is robust, particularly for a rural county where sprawl isn't an issue and population growth is slow. "Agriculture and industry in this county go hand in hand," says Extension agent Tim Smith. That's an understatement, really. Tyson Foods employs 1,100 people at its Obion plant and uses local farm products. Many of the tires manufactured here by Goodyear end up on farm equipment.

A new ethanol plant in the county will use 36 million bushels of corn each year and produce 100 million gallons of ethanol when it comes online this year, making it the largest plant by output this far south.

Obion County produces more corn than any county in Tennessee at 12 million bushels. "We won't get all of that,"

says James K. Patterson, CEO of Ethanol Grain Processors. But the exceptional rail access in the county will keep the corn pipeline full. "For rural northwest Tennessee, the economic impact of this plant is going to be enormous," he adds.

It's not all work in Obion County. Reelfoot Lake forms the western border. Wildlife lovers here can watch one of the largest wintering populations of eagles in America. And the fishing and duck hunting are legendary.

Judging from the walls in his trophy room, resident Paul Albright knows all about the hunting here. But he also knows about what makes Obion County special. He and his wife, Kellye, grew up here. And like his friend Lee Jay Hobbs, he came back here after college to farm and raise a family. His two daughters (above) are growing up on the same land he did.

Albright is impressed with the new, modern schools. "You'd have to look far and wide to find better ones," he says. At 34, Albright is a county commissioner and a corn, soybean, wheat and cattle farmer along with his father and grandfather.

"I can safely say I know everybody that farms in Obion County," he says. "We're not just neighbors, we're friends." Maybe that's why, five generations after his great-great grandfather first worked the land here, it's still home—for Albright and thousands of others who just can't stay away. "All these people we went to school with, they wanted to move to the big city," he says. "But they keep coming back."

—Story and photos by Jamie Cole



Parker Albright, 9, and sister Kyndall, 5, reap the education opportunities along with the benefits of being farm kids.



Reelfoot Lake on Obion's western border

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Obion County:

- 200 acres** with 40 acres cropland, remainder marketable timber; \$250,000 or \$1,250 per acre
- 700 acres** prime bottomland for crops; \$1,890,000 or \$2,700 per acre
- 157 acres** farmland; \$471,900 or \$3,006 per acre
- 63 acres** flat farmland with frontage; \$270,000 or \$4,286 per acre



5 COLUMBIA COUNTY PENNSYLVANIA



Cathy and Ron Rohrbach

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Columbia County:

- 203 rolling acres** with views; \$1,300,000 or \$6,404 per acre
- 94 rolling acres** with 90% tillable; \$700,000 or \$7,447 per acre
- 91 acres** with frontage and wildlife; \$410,000 or \$4,505 per acre



Richard Schuman drives his pickup to the top of a rise on his family’s land and stops, pointing out the windows. “That’s Mifflinville over there. And that little town over there is Mainville, and there’s Catawissa,” he says. From here you can also see the Schumans’ family dairy and fields of corn that make up only a part of their sprawling row-crop operation. (You can see the family place on page 41, top photo, at the beginning of this section.) It’s quite a view. Schuman stretches out his arms. “Look at this. See where I get to work?” Schuman, 35, wants to offer his 10-year-old son Steven the same opportunity. Families all over Columbia County, Penn., share Schuman’s connection with the land. The Pennsylvania Farmland Preservation Association helps families who want to preserve farmland for future generations by helping purchase conservation easements and create agricultural security areas. These ag security areas place limitations on local governments who might seek to

pass nuisance ordinances or use the land for public development such as schools or highways. It’s important for landowners to reach these kinds of agreements with municipalities, since township governments are very strong in Pennsylvania and each township can have its own zoning laws. Being only a couple of hours from the Philadelphia-New York-New Jersey megalopolis on the Eastern Seaboard, the county has its fair share of development pressure, particularly from newcomers who want a 15-acre slice of the good life. Ron Rohrbach and his wife, Cathy—who run a family orchard and row-crop business outside Catawissa—see it happening here, and it’s putting pressure on land prices. “I don’t envy someone like my son Mark who wants to farm but faces high prices when he’s ready to purchase land,” says Ron. There’s hope for Mark Rohrbach and Steven Schuman, though, in a place where agriculture is still very much the heart of the county. That’s evident in Bloomsburg—the county seat—where each year the Bloomsburg Fair draws a half-million people



Steven Schuman is the sixth generation on family land.

to 250 acres of attractions. “All 250 of those acres are dedicated to the promotion of agriculture here,” says Fred Trump, who’s in his 25th year as president. “That’s our mission.” The fair and other events at the grounds pump as much as \$40 million into the local economy, along with arranging scholarships for farm kids in the fair’s livestock program. Marie Giger Williams has been involved with the fair for more than 50 years, and has spent the past six years running the livestock program. She watches as the county grows, in good ways and bad. The economy is well-balanced, aided by factory jobs at Wise Snacks—the potato chip pioneer—and a nearby power plant. Schools are excellent and have low student-teacher ratios, and Bloomsburg University boasts an enrollment of 8,000 students. The world-class Geisinger Medical Center, a staple on national lists of best hospitals, is one county over. And there are two hospitals within Columbia County borders. Williams sees all this, and knows that might attract more people to Columbia County. Strip malls now stand on an old horse farm near Interstate 80; Williams remembers when it was sold. “It broke my heart. And some people still think about selling farms,” she says. “When you’re getting a dollar a gallon for milk and some developer offers you a million dollars, what would you do?” Still, she says those who leave the farm and move on to other jobs aren’t thinking ahead. “You’re cooped up all day. Your boss is telling you every minute what to do. When you’re farming, you’re working for God, and you can kind of get along with him.” A survey of the landscape in Columbia County proves there are an awful lot of people here who agree with her. —Story and photos by Jamie Cole Complete stats and more: www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/columbia

REGIONAL TOP 20 LISTS

SOUTHEAST	MIDWEST	SOUTHWEST
1 Kent County, Maryland	Ellis County, Kansas	Fayette County, Texas
2 Obion County, Tennessee	Livingston County, Missouri	Kingfisher County, Oklahoma
3 Coffee County, Alabama	Wexford County, Michigan	Gillespie County, Texas
4 Gilchrist County, Florida	Randolph County, Illinois	Garfield County, Oklahoma
5 Barren County, Kentucky	Delta County, Michigan	Somervell County, Texas
6 Gilmer County, Georgia	Clinton County, Iowa	Leon County, Texas
7 Hardin County, Kentucky	Marquette County, Michigan	Washington County, Oklahoma
8 Wythe County, Virginia	Bremer County, Iowa	Victoria County, Texas
9 Camden County, Georgia	Dickinson County, Michigan	Kerr County, Texas
10 Boyle County, Kentucky	Red Willow County, Nebraska	Pawnee County, Oklahoma
11 Hopkins County, Kentucky	Jefferson County, Indiana	Kay County, Oklahoma
12 Lancaster County, Virginia	Adams County, Nebraska	Wharton County, Texas
13 Rankin County, Mississippi	Fayette County, Iowa	Ector County, Texas
14 Jones County, North Carolina	Dubois County, Indiana	Burnet County, Texas
15 Hart County, Georgia	Boone County, Indiana	Angelina County, Texas
16 Banks County, Georgia	Van Buren County, Iowa	Grady County, Oklahoma
17 Ballard County, Kentucky	Allamakee County, Iowa	Kendall County, Texas
18 Bryan County, Georgia	Wayne County, Nebraska	Grayson County, Texas
19 Putnam County, Tennessee	DeKalb County, Indiana	Santa Fe County, New Mexico
20 Webster County, Kentucky	Lee County, Iowa	Llano County, Texas

NORTHEAST	WEST
1 Columbia County, Pennsylvania	La Plata County, Colorado
2 Montgomery County, New York	San Juan County, Washington
3 Madison County, New York	Washington County, Utah
4 St. Lawrence County, New York	Silver Bow County, Montana
5 Fulton County, New York	Hood River County, Oregon
6 Cayuga County, New York	Chaffee County, Colorado
7 Herkimer County, New York	Cache County, Utah
8 Otsego County, New York	Summit County, Utah
9 Livingston County, New York	Amador County, California
10 Orleans County, New York	Fremont County, Colorado
11 Warren County, Pennsylvania	Nez Perce County, Idaho
12 Cortland County, New York	Summit County, Colorado
13 Clinton County, New York	Pitkin County, Colorado
14 Genesee County, New York	Garfield County, Colorado
15 Lewis County, New York	Morgan County, Colorado
16 Ontario County, New York	Gallatin County, Montana
17 Steuben County, New York	Lincoln County, Oregon
18 McKean County, Pennsylvania	Laramie County, Wyoming
19 Wyoming County, New York	Lake County, Colorado
20 Jefferson County, Pennsylvania	Hawaii County, Hawaii

Coming in June: **The Healthiest Places To Live In Rural America:** An exclusive report on the five healthiest counties in rural America, and how medical technology is changing the way farmers get health care.

HOW WE DID IT

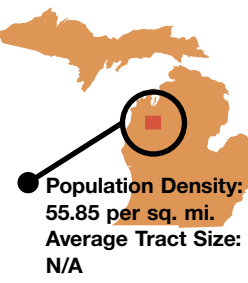
All statistics—including the population density and tract size numbers here and the full stat sheets on our web site—are researched and provided by OnBoard LLC, a real estate research firm. *The Progressive Farmer* compiles a list of rural counties based on certain criteria: home and land prices, crime rates, environment, education, economic factors, access to health care and others. Counties are first ranked using a proprietary formula based on these statistics, then arranged again based on editorial opinion after the magazine staff travels to selected counties.



Ron Cochrane has grown Christmas trees near Mesick for more than 30 years.

6 WEXFORD COUNTY MICHIGAN





Population Density:
55.85 per sq. mi.
Average Tract Size:
N/A

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Wexford County:

80 acres woods, prime recreational;
\$199,900 or \$2,499 per acre

168 acres prime hunting land; \$285,000
or \$1,696 per acre

294 acres with mature timber surrounded
by wetlands; \$564,000 or \$1,918 per acre

Complete stats and more:
www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/wexford

Our northernmost county this year is a land of forests, rolling meadows, red barns and adaptable people. Wexford County, Mich., was settled in the 1840s because it was perfect for small farms and lumber companies. With its abundant wildlife and fish, it also was perfect for professional hunters and trappers.

The county's number of small farms has dwindled over the years, and lumbering is only a tiny part of the local scene now. But Wexford County has adapted and prospered. It is now a tourist haven where dozens of resorts cater to weekend fishermen, hunters and hikers. Here, road signs advise drivers to beware of bears, and taverns adorn their walls with trophy northern pike.

Wexford also has become a leader in Christmas tree production, with thousands of acres planted to Scotch pines, Fraser firs and blue spruce.

And the adaptive people of Wexford have found other economic niches. For instance, the county is home to the largest trout farm in the state, Harrietta Hills Trout Farm, which hatches more than a half-million rainbow trout a year.

The trout farm's co-owner, Dan Vogler, moved his family here six years ago from one of the ritzy areas on Michigan's west coast. Wexford County, he says, is a down-to-earth place where keeping up with the Joneses is not a priority and where hard work pays, in part, because you get to do it in one of the prettiest places in the state. "People come here from all over to vacation," Vogler says. "We get to live here."

Like most of Michigan, Wexford County has long loved the auto industry and long profited through local manufacturing firms that supplied parts to the Detroit factories. But over the past few years, those firms and the county suffered as Detroit's V8 economy has been hitting on only three cylinders.

Fortunately, Wexford's economic driver—county seat Cadillac—has managed to partially insulate itself from the Detroit wreck with a diversified small manufacturing base. Cadillac now boasts more than 4,000 manufacturing jobs at companies that build boats, make military shelters and produce gas masks.

Cadillac is a pretty town of 10,000, which sits beside a brilliant lake and buzzes with commerce and society. The city and county's master plan calls for "an economy built on renewable natural resources."

In the northwest part of the county near the village of Mesick, Ron Cochrane long ago took that plan to heart. For more than 30 years, he has grown Christmas trees for shipment all over the country.

Through its ups and downs, the Christmas tree industry has been good to Ron and his wife, Ella. It has allowed them to raise their children and to build a beautiful house overlooking the Manistee River Valley. Today they own about 700 acres, but face the challenge of changing consumer preferences. Scotch pine used to be the hot ticket. Now it's Fraser fir.

When it takes six to seven years for a crop to mature, you have to be able to see far down the road, Ron says, and "you have to be able to adapt."

—Story and photos by Jim Patrico

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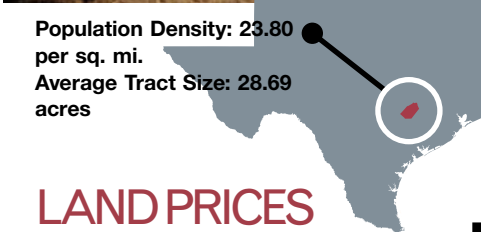
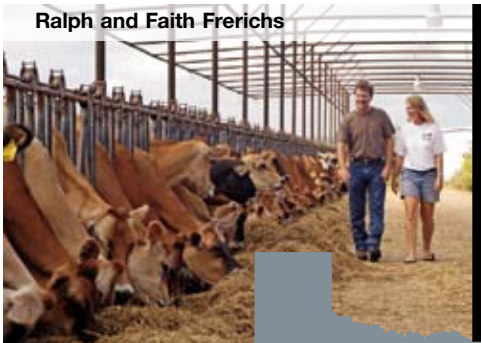
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7 FAYETTE COUNTY TEXAS



LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Fayette County:

- 266 rolling acres** with lake, pond, wildlife; \$1,200,000 or \$4,511 per acre
- 160-acre** ranch with home, hills and ponds; \$600,000 or \$3,750 per acre
- 160 acres**, partially wooded with two barns, pond; \$410,188 or \$2,564 per acre

Complete stats and more:
www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/fayette



to shop in the Frerichs' country store that includes homemade cheese and to see how a real dairy farm operates.

"People leave with a better appreciation for agriculture and for the cost of a gallon of milk, which was our ultimate goal in the first place," says Faith.

This is prime cattle country. The county ranks near the top in the state in beef cow numbers and beef cow herds. In the spring, the fields and hills are a carpet of color from blooming wildflowers. Sure it's hot in the summer; it is Texas, after all. But the winters are mild.

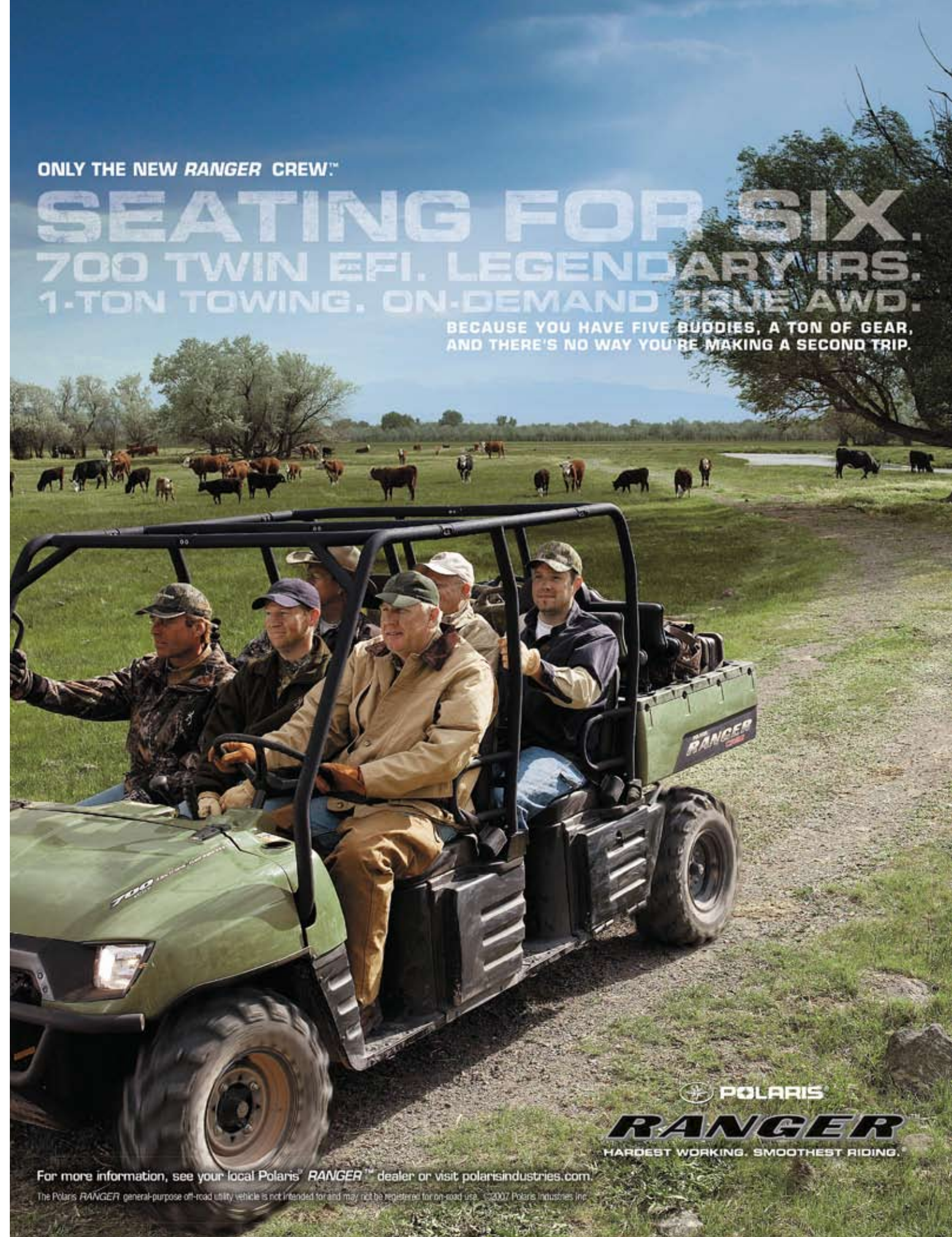
La Grange, with a population of 4,500, is the largest town and also the county seat. The infamous Chicken Ranch brothel once operated on its outskirts. The town is nestled along the Colorado River and provides many of the area's commercial, civic and exceptional medical services.

In the southern corner of Fayette County is Schulenburg, home to a satellite campus of Blinn College. Its strategic location to I-10 and State Highway 77 attracts various industries and manufacturing plants. The town is also the starting point for touring the "painted churches," with their interiors of traditional fresco and stenciling.

For newcomers like Beatrice Schulze, Fayette County is a dream come true. After Beatrice left the restaurant business near Houston, she and her husband retired to La Grange. Retired is a relative word because they started Rosemary's Vineyard and Winery. "It's such a world of difference here," she says. "I'm living my dream."

"We know they're [new people] coming," says Clay Rightmer, a third-generation cattle rancher. "We're taking the positive approach. Those with families tend to be very active in the community, and they bring new ideas and skills."

—Story and photos by Gregg Hillyer





Bob Tomberlin, an Enterprise school administrator, stands at the new high school site.

8 COFFEE COUNTY ALABAMA

If you've ever been through Enterprise, Ala., you probably saw one of the strangest statues in the U.S. Smack in the middle of a busy intersection downtown stands a woman holding up a large insect.

The statue is a tribute to the boll weevil, the insect that in the early 1900s all but destroyed cotton, which at the time was Coffee County's big moneymaker.

The arrival of the boll weevil forced the county to look at other ways to make its economy grow, and today you'll find a healthy base of small businesses. The statue was the town's way of saying, "Thank you, boll weevil, for forcing us to become diversified."

Strange statue aside, this county has a lot more going for it. It's called community. If you want an example of just how good it is, ask people here about March 1, 2007.

Storm sirens had been going off all morning in Enterprise that day. Students at Enterprise High School and the connecting Hillcrest Elementary School had spent several hours in the buildings' safest areas—the hallways.

Shortly after 1 p.m., a tornado touched down, destroyed the high school and killed eight of its students. Photos of the aftermath will make you wonder why it didn't kill 100 or more. But the storm isn't the story. The people are.

Before the wind quit blowing, people from all over rushed to the scene. Doctors and nurses from the nearby hospital ran to the schools—driving was impossible with all the cars and lines down—and found more than 200 students injured. Soldiers from nearby military base Fort Rucker flew helicopters to take the wounded to hospitals. One man—and to this day school officials don't know who he was—showed up with a jack and began lifting the heavy debris off students.

A year after the disaster, the community continues to pull together—to grieve, support one another, build and repair houses, and raise money to build new schools. "The eight students became children of the community in a sense," says Gary Daniel, pastor of First United Methodist Church. Daniel is one of the leaders of the Recovery Organization of Coffee County (ROCC), a nonprofit group to help people in the recovery process.

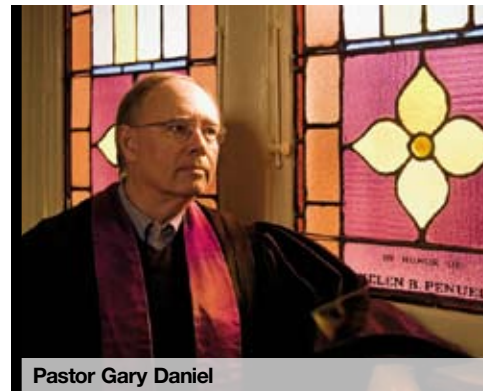
Enterprise is about to build a new elementary school at the same site and a new high school on 132 acres it bought from a nearby landowner, John G. Ralls. Ralls sold the land at fair market value. Then, he donated \$600,000 back to the school.

—Story and photos by Joe Link

Complete stats and more:
[www.progressivefarmer.com/
bestplaces/coffee](http://www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/coffee)



Enterprise's statue shows appreciation for the bug that changed its economy.



Pastor Gary Daniel

The community still needs money to help rebuild. If you want to contact ROCC to learn more, the number is 334-347-1011.

LAND PRICES

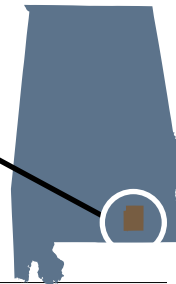
Some recent land sales in Coffee County:

50 acres with home, pond, buildings;
\$225,000 or \$4,500 per acre

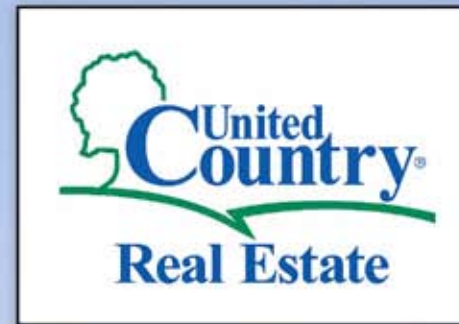
216 acres with ponds and pastures;
\$2,000,000 or \$9,259 per acre

155 acres pasture,
forage, trees; \$527,000
or \$3,400 per acre

Population Density:
67.44 per sq. mi.
Average Tract Size:
25.72 acres



Your Best Path to Rural America...

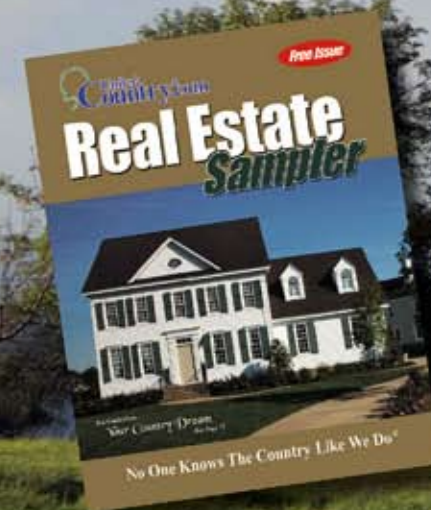


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60 beautiful Coffee County, AL. acres
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338+ MO heavily wooded acres in Liv-
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LA PLATA COUNTY TREASURE

Apple orchard & 2 homes provide the
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for. 75 trees with a creek running right
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On 10 CO acres for \$749,000.



SIT ON THE FRONT PORCH

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4 BR, 3 ½ BA home, designer kitchen,
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acres with pond and barn. \$499,000.

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With more than 2,000 acres, John Thomas feels pressured. PHOTOS: ANNA MAZUREK

9 GILCHRIST COUNTY FLORIDA



Gilchrist County is home to half of Florida's freshwater springs.

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in Gilchrist County:

480 acres of pastures and trees with home; \$8,640,000 or \$18,000 per acre
400 acres with pastures, ponds and buildings; \$7,200,000 or \$18,000 per acre
80 acres of pasture and trees; \$800,000 or \$10,000 per acre

Population Density:
46.87 per sq. mi.
Average Tract Size:
18.04 acres



Complete stats and more:
www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/gilchrist

It isn't hard to pin Mark Langford down on his opinion of the quickening pace of residential development spreading across Gilchrist County, Fla. He wouldn't vote for it, given the choice.

Because of the high value of those 5- and 10-acre lots carved out of many of the county's 400 farms, Langford's property taxes have risen \$3,000 a year.

Langford's dad bought land for \$1,000 an acre in the early 1980s. That same land now goes for \$10,000 to \$15,000, and in some instances \$20,000 an acre. "If it's not handed down to you, you don't have a chance," Langford says. "Development is only a matter of time."

The University of Florida and Shands Hospital are the biggest employers in the next county over. With the majority of Gilchrist County unincorporated, it's tempting frontier for those with well-paying jobs.

New residents are attracted to Gilchrist by its natural amenities and access to modern convenience. The Suwannee River is here; along its length are half of Florida's clean water springs that attract swimmers and cave divers from all around the world. The Sante Fe River boasts prime fishing.

While Gilchrist County isn't turning away development, it is attempting to protect its rural areas. The center of the county is home to the Waccasassa Flats. These are environmentally prized farming areas, including about a third of the county in total. There and along the flanks of the flats the county requires residents to own between 40 and 160 acres for every homesite. Across the rest of the county, rural residences must be surrounded by at least 5 acres of land.

John Thomas runs a 2,000-acre operation on a fourth-generation farm that was first homesteaded in the early 1900s. In this neighborhood it is not hard to find the expensive mini-farms found all over the county.

Thomas Farms does include a piece of highly desirable, highly valuable ground. The land borders a scenic, half-mile of the Suwannee River. Draining out of Georgia, the river's hardwood hammocks support turkey and deer. But the land also could support a handful of high-end river homes. Doesn't matter to Thomas; he won't sell.

In the late 1800s, William Roberts' family carved a farm out of ground that would later be part of Gilchrist County. Today it supports cows and slash pines. Roberts sells 1,000 round bales of hay a year off his land.

"This is a good place to live," he says. OK, but would he sell any of his land? "I would when the price gets so high I can't stand it anymore."

It's a day he doesn't want to see. Roberts is quiet for a time, looking out over a field that last year grew watermelons, then sorghum and now is planted to pines. Then he adds, "I wish we could farm like we used to. Oh Lord, I wish we could. But times do change."
—Story by Dan Miller



Here are few reasons why La Plata County, Colo., belongs on anyone's list of best places to live.

First is the gorgeous scenery: The San Juan Mountains—snowy peaks, red rock cliffs, sun-splattered valleys—and the Animas River's crystalline white water rolling over round rocks. Next is the mild climate. Sure, there is snow and cold in the winter. But you couldn't have skiing in the town of Purgatory without that. Next is the abundant wildlife. Elk bugle and mate in the valleys. Brown bear are bold enough to wander into towns. Rainbow trout flash in rivers and lakes.

Then there are the people. The natives are friendly; they welcome anyone. Tourists bring boatloads of money into the county, and part of the county sits on bulging reserves of natural gas. As pipelines pump it out of the county, cash flows in.

So what could possibly be wrong with a place this fortunate? You probably know the answer: It's so nice, everyone wants to live here. The population grew 9% from 2000 to 2006 and is now around 48,000. Housing and tourist development threaten to marginalize farms and ranches and to replace natural scenery with man-made clutter.

But La Plata County is working to meet the challenge. An organization called Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado aims to protect area agriculture by educating locals to buy locally grown food. And the county commissioners recently established a program called La Plata County Compass to chart future directions and policies.

To control growth, the county currently is divided into several areas for zoning purposes. Each area has its own zoning commissioners who make recommendations for land use to the county board.



Kay and Dave James' son Dan and his sons Grady, 6, and Mason, 4, try their luck fishing on the James Ranch near Durango.

10 LA PLATA COUNTY COLORADO

Area farmers have long felt pressure from population expansion. With remarkable foresight, Kay and Dave James actually used that pressure to launch their multiple family businesses. Forty-six years ago, the couple bought a beautiful piece of Animas River Valley land just north of Durango. They decided to make the most of their resources and developed 100 acres into a housing community.

The Jameses did it first class with elaborate landscaping, ponds and streams. The Ranch, as they called the development, now holds 100 residences. The James family used the income it produced as seed money for the elegant mix of agricultural ventures it now runs on 450 acres.

The James Ranch is on the west side of the county. On the dry eastern side, wheat farmer Trent Taylor has had to cope with near-drought conditions for about 10 years. To make up for lost yields on his 3,000 acres, he re-opened his long-dormant family flour mill and began marketing whole-grain hard white wheat flour. He also grew commercial vegetables for four years, and now grows alfalfa and custom farms wheat for neighbors.

It's been a grind. Still, he is trying to adapt and find a niche that will help him stay in what he calls "a great place to live."
—Story and photos by Jim Patrico

LAND PRICES

Some recent land sales in La Plata County:

70 acres, home and barn; \$2,350,000 or \$33,571 per acre
80 acres, mountain views; \$275,000 or \$3,437 per acre
305 acres; \$510,000 or \$1,672 per acre

Population Density:
28.15 per sq. mi.
Average Tract Size:
41.79 acres

Complete stats and more:
www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces/laplata