

# The Countryside Initiative at Cuyahoga Valley National Park

..... *Darwin Kelsey*

America's (and the world's) first national park—Yellowstone—was established by Congress in 1872 as a “public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” But across the continent in Northeast Ohio, 1870s Clevelanders and Akronites were seeking out the more accessible pleasures of the Cuyahoga Valley stretching between their rapidly industrializing cities. These new urbanites were already venturing into the Valley for carriage rides down country lanes, pleasure-boat rides on the Ohio & Erie Canal, and (by the 1880s) scenic excursions on the Valley Railway. They came for picnicking, hiking, and nature study. They came to enjoy the beauty of the open countryside and to buy fresh produce from farmers.

By the 1920s park planners in both Cleveland and Akron were seriously pondering how to protect those portions of the Cuyahoga Valley nearest their cities. Yet, another half century would pass before development threats led to a

concerned citizens' movement sufficiently powerful to force disparate public and private agencies to act in a coordinated way to protect the Valley's resources and character. Ultimately though, in 1974, roughly a century after establishing Yellowstone, Congress acted to create Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (renamed Cuyahoga Valley National Park in 2000).

## An Urban Park with Rural Character

CVNRA's (CVNP's) enabling legislation defined its purpose as “preserving and protecting for public use and enjoyment the historic, scenic, natural, and recreational values of the Cuyahoga River and adjacent lands of the Cuyahoga Valley, and for the purpose of providing for the maintenance of needed recreational open space necessary to the urban environment...” CVNP was the third of five national recreation areas created by the National Park Service (NPS) in the 1970s—partly in



*A circa 1908 photo depicts the small village of Boston, Ohio, nestled amid small-scale diversified farming. Photo courtesy of Cuyahoga Valley National Park.*

response to criticism in the 1960s that the NPS was “remote” and unconcerned with the needs of urban populations. Collectively this initiative to establish “urban parks” became known as Parks to the People. As Interior Secretary Roger Morton said at the time, “We can no longer accept the premise that parks are where you find them, we must identify—and create—parks where people need them.”

Once CVNP was established in 1974, the question for the NPS became “what kind of park is it?” In retrospect, it is apparent that the

park’s multiple resources and multiple purposes caused considerable uncertainty. The park’s first administrators, steeped in the NPS’s traditional approaches to natural resource management, set out to acquire land, remove people, and let the area return to “natural” or “wilderness” conditions. Within a few years this approach ran afoul of some awkward realities.

One such reality at CVNP was (and is) the fact that most of the land within CVNP boundaries is simultaneously a natural and a cultural resource since it has

been farmed until very recently, some of it for nearly a thousand years. Euro-American settlement of the Valley in the 19th century resulted in 60 to 90 percent of the landscape in most townships being “improved” for agriculture. This landscape of small, diversified farms was a key aspect of the Valley’s appeal to Clevelanders and Akronites from the 1870s through the 1970s. Testimony by Congressman John Seiberling, and other sponsors/supporters of CVNP’s enabling legislation, document a deep concern for preserving and protecting the Valley’s few remaining farms, and its so-called “rural character.”

Hence, even CVNP’s first General Management Plan (1977) acknowledged the importance of preserving and interpreting “the agricultural landscapes that have survived to the present day.” As a practical matter, however, not a great deal was undertaken to accomplish that end before the 1980s. In the early 1980s, the need to inventory and manage the park’s extensive cultural resources became increasingly apparent and urgent. And by 1987, a Cultural Landscape Report had been prepared, identifying six cultural resources themes

of primary importance to the park resource managers: pre-history, transportation, settlement, industry, agriculture, and recreation.

Subsequently all major CVNP management documents have acknowledged the centrality of farming and agriculture to the park’s purpose. Indeed the NPS’s official index of national parks says matter-of-factly that CVNP “preserves rural landscapes along the Cuyahoga River between Cleveland and Akron, Ohio.” In fact, rural landscapes have become one of the park’s most “endangered species”—mainly because the activity (farming) most responsible for creating and maintaining them has largely disappeared from the Valley.

This article explores CVNP’s ambitious new program called the Countryside Initiative—a program to revitalize the park’s rural landscape. A much fuller discussion of the Initiative has been published as *Countryside Initiative Leasing Opportunities for 2001: Request for Proposals*, and a version of that document is available on CVNP’s website: [www.nps.gov/cuva/management/countryside/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/cuva/management/countryside/index.htm)

## Assumptions About Agriculture and National Parks

To understand the Country-side Initiative, it is necessary to understand the context and circumstances under which it came into being. It was (and is) a context of hostile paradigms—assumptions, beliefs, and conventional ways of thinking about how things work—which make the Initiative’s objectives seem nearly impossible to some, and even undesirable to a few. The Initiative challenges the common (American) assumption that people don’t live in parks (let alone farm there). It denies the assertion that agriculture can’t be environmentally friendly, simply because it often isn’t. It debunks conventional wisdom that small farms can’t be profitable, that farmers must “get big or get out.” And, in addition to such broad societal paradigms, the Initiative has had to challenge many smaller NPS-specific paradigms such as, that short-term use permits/leases somehow protect park resources better than long-term arrangements.

Not surprisingly, these relatively recent paradigms have all contributed to the continuing decline of farming in the Cuyahoga Valley. But decline

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was underway long before the coming of either the paradigms or CVNP. Indeed decline began in the 19th century, as U.S. agriculture as a whole moved toward production systems based on ever larger scale, extensive mechanization, and monocultures. This kind of farming, which is ill-suited to the Valley, intensified greatly in the late 20th century. As a result mainline agriculture—now commonly called “agribusiness,”—has all but abandoned the Valley and the counties in which CVNP is located. Against the tide of fleeing agribusiness and hostile environmentalists, CVNP has tried (with marginal success) to

encourage farmers to use parts of the park’s small old farms.

Neither the larger societal paradigms nor the smaller NPS paradigms (a.k.a. management tools) are CVNP’s fault—just its problem. CVNP is, after all, part of a larger system with agency-wide rules and regulations—and the NPS is an organization with great ambivalence about the place, the role, and the legitimacy of agriculture in its parks. Such equivocation exists despite the fact that recent studies indicate 90 or so of NPS’s 383 units “have agricultural landscapes that comprise a significant component of the greater park cultural landscape.” (Marla McEnaney, “Working the Land: Understanding and Managing Our Nation’s Agricultural Legacy,” *Cultural Resource Management*, Vol. 24, No. 7 (2001), 41-43, citing information from an unpublished NPS draft report.)

News that nearly one out of every four parks in the NPS system has significant agricultural assets comes as a shock to most people inside and outside the agency. Needless to say, this is a reality as complex as it is obscure. And, needful to say, NPS as an organization doesn’t have a very well developed or nuanced set of concepts for

managing agricultural parklands. Why? Robert Page, author/editor of the NPS report referenced by McEnaney, put it rather well: “It is important to recognize that a significant agricultural landscape is a unique combination of nature and culture, and a farm is simultaneously an ecosystem, social system, and economic system.” Finding—building—a new NPS paradigm to deal with that kind of reality will not be easy. Probably, it will have to begin a bit at a time, here and there—out in individual NPS units like CVNP. Out here overgrown farm fields and rotting barns are painful daily irritants and embarrassments. Out here, the need to find a better paradigm seems reasonable, necessary—even urgent.

## Maintaining CVNP’s Rural Landscape

Although 60 to 90 percent of most areas now within CVNP’s boundaries were used for farming, only about 3.6 percent of the land within park boundaries is farmed today (around 1,180 of CVNP’s nearly 33,000 acres). Half of the area now actively farmed is located on some 19,000 acres owned and directly managed by CVNP;



the other half occurs on the remaining 14,000 acres owned by a great variety of public agencies and private individuals. Hay and sweet corn are the main crops on both NPS and private lands, accounting for more than 75 percent of all park acreage now in farming. Recent inventories of CVNP’s agricultural resources indicate that NPS-owned land in active farming could be increased from fewer than 600 acres to roughly 1,345 acres (about 7 percent of federal property, and 4 percent of the total park). While the once dominant presence of agriculture in the Valley can never return, sufficient farms remain to allow a small but meaningful continuation of the Valley’s agricultural heritage.

While these specific numbers are now known with greater clarity and assurance, as a result of recent documen-

*The Vaughan farmstead, one of several CVNP properties listed in the National Register, was leased for Countryside Initiative farming in 2002. Photo courtesy of Cuyahoga Valley National Park.*

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tary and field research, they do not differ greatly from several earlier park studies and estimates. CVNP managers have long understood that they were losing the battle to protect farm fields from natural succession, and unoccupied farm buildings from rapid deterioration. But none of the NPS's conventional strategies for managing agricultural parkland (which were all seriously considered by CVNP during the 1980s and early '90s) really measured up to the park's needs. The museum or "living historical farm" model, for example, is enormously expensive for a single unit. Even if two or three could somehow be afforded, what of the other 25 or 30 deteriorating old farms in the park? And, at the other extreme, few of the remaining farmers in and around the Valley have shown much interest in using parkland given the impediments presented by NPS management practices (such as short-term tenure and uncontrolled wildlife predation).

That was the bleak reality CVNP Superintendent John Debo carried in the back of his mind in 1996 while on sabbatical studying the operation of British national parks. He was surprised to discover that more than 10 percent of

the English landscape falls within the boundaries of national parks, 90 percent of land within parks is privately (not government) owned, and much of that is in farming. What's going on here? Well, the Brits, who are passionate about their "countryside," understand their landscape has been shaped more by farming than by any other human factor. And they view active farming as the most effective way to maintain a countryside, whether inside a park or out. Debo came back to CVNP asking himself, "why not here?" But how?

How, indeed? How do you develop a pragmatic and just set of management tools for defining and balancing farmers' private interests (permanence, income, equity, non-interference) with the park's public interests (protecting scenic/historic assets, air and water quality, wildlife habitat, and recreational access)?

In 1998, I became a CVNP consultant/collaborator to help develop some tentative answers. Our search examined the relevance of the English model for an American context. More importantly, perhaps, it looked at a profound paradigm shift emerging in American agriculture during the 1990s. And the

resulting vision and strategy for revitalizing a working agricultural landscape within CVNP came to be called the Countryside Initiative.

## The Countryside Initiative

The Countryside Initiative draws its name and inspiration from the popular image of “the countryside” deeply embedded in Western culture. Recent English writers sometimes speak of the “middle landscape”—a place poised midway between the city and the wild, between civilization and wilderness. It is an evocative and appealing term, but the older word “countryside” is more familiar and comfortable for most of us. The word countryside evokes an image of working in harmony with one another and with nature. It conjures up a sense not of wild nature but of tended, cared for, cultivated nature. And it offers an appealing vision of what farming could and should be like in the Valley again—especially if it is to be part of a national park.

It is a vision made possible by the recent emergence of a “new” agricultural paradigm—which actually harkens back to a much older “agrarian” worldview. It represents a

middle way, perhaps, for the middle landscape. First, it rejects the environmentally, socially, and economically destructive practices of conventional, mainstream agribusiness (whose sins are too numerous to be recounted here). Second, it rejects the equally misguided critiques of environmentalists who regard all forms of agriculture as essentially the same—and inherently evil. This new-old approach to farming is commonly referred to as “sustainable” agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture is an umbrella term which subsumes discrete schools of thought bearing names like organic, biointensive, biodynamic, permaculture, holistic, civic, integrated, and low-impact. Obviously, sustainable agriculture, like conventional agriculture, involves a complex array of values, concepts, and practices. Suffice it to say here, its practitioners subscribe to a common mantra: To be truly sustainable, agriculture must be economically profitable, socially responsible, and ecologically healthy. Nice thoughts to be sure. But, for those of us from Missouri, just how might this play out in ways that help solve CVNP’s rural landscape problem? Briefly, I will focus on things I

hope will interest the readership of *Forum Journal*.

For starters, sustainable agriculture is usually associated with farms that are small in scale and intensively managed. A couple of acres of high quality, specialty veggies require about as much human labor as a couple hundred acres of corn or soybeans managed from inside the air-conditioned cab of a megatractor. Yet bottom-line profit can easily favor the veggies. Hence, the little old farms that still survive in the CVNP landscape offer a natural habitat, so to speak, for sustainable agriculture. And, not incidentally, this usage would functionally reunite the park’s farm buildings with the land that did (and does) give them real context and meaning.

A little more about economics. People curious about the Countryside Initiative often ask, “What *kind* of farming are you going to do?” I’m inclined to answer, “retail.” Sustainable agriculture is almost always about retail—producing high quality, high value, specialty products for direct, local, retail sale. It is never about growing barge-loads of cheap commodities for the global trade. Today American farmers, on average, get about 20 cents from each

consumer's food dollar (half of which goes to cover production costs). The only way for small farmers to survive (and indeed prosper) is to grab a big chunk of the 80 cents that normally goes to middlemen. And this is the route to economic viability and sustainability for Initiative farmers.

But what will the farms be like tangibly, physically? The Countryside Initiative envisions rehabilitating about 30 farming units over the next decade, on average about three per year. They will range in size from 10 acres or less to 100 acres or more, though most will be in the 30- to 50-acre range. Like sustainable agriculture enterprises across the country, most Initiative farms will produce some combination of vegetables, fruits, flowers, herbs, meat, and dairy and poultry products. Their marketing methods will take forms such as roadside stands, pick-your-own options, community supported (subscription) agriculture, local farmers markets, and direct sales to local individuals, schools, and restaurants. Every farming enterprise will reflect the characteristics and capabilities of a particular farm site, as well as the particular knowledge, skills, and preferences of the farm lessee.

No management tool is

more critical to the success of the Countryside Initiative than the NPS's authority/ability to negotiate long-term leases (up to 60 years) for purposes such as farming. Short-term (1-5 years) special use permits, previously the most widely used tool for allowing use of parkland for agriculture, make it economically irrational for a farmer to contemplate a major capital investment, or significant long-term stewardship. Long-term transferable leases give farmers secure tenure and the potential for building limited equity (see the RFP for further details).

Another key management strategy developed for the Countryside Initiative is a threefold partnership consisting of CVNP, individual farmer-lessees, and a nonprofit organization named the Cuyahoga Valley Countryside Conservancy (CVCC). The Conservancy was created in 1999 to help CVNP conceptualize and manage the Initiative. CVCC provides technical information on sustainable agriculture to both of the Initiative's other partners, and will help prioritize rehabilitation of farm properties, recruit and evaluate prospective farm lessees, evaluate and monitor each farm's annual operating plan, and coordinate market-

ing strategies for the Initiative as a whole. CVCC will work with each farm lessee to align their private goals and operating plans with the public objectives of the Initiative. In effect, CVCC will serve as the Initiative's marriage counselor and midwife.

Finally, some closing thoughts regarding the significance of the Countryside Initiative for the NPS and preservationists generally. The Initiative embraces the *activity* of farming as fully as the *artifacts* (buildings, fences, etc.). Agri-"culture" is seen as a central expression of the historic and scenic "values" which CVNP was created to preserve, protect, and use. Whenever possible, the Initiative prefers to nourish "living offspring" of the park's old farms, rather than find an alternative use for their physical remains. For CVNP and the NPS, this presents an opportunity to rethink the management of resources that are simultaneously natural and cultural—and an opportunity to explore the meaning of a "lived-in park." For other preservationists, the Countryside Initiative models a worthy, and once again, viable "adaptive" use for thousands of small old farms languishing in urban fringe communities

across America. As a practicing marriage counselor, of sorts, I think the historic preservation movement and the sustainable agriculture movement ought to develop an intimate relationship.

## Funding the Best Approach

It is necessary to note here that CVNP is in the process of preparing a full environmental impact statement (EIS) assessing the long-range impacts on park resources that might result from a new initiative “to preserve and protect the park’s rural landscape.” The issue is not whether to preserve and protect things rural, but how. By its very nature, an EIS must analyze and compare all feasible strategies: the previous management tools, the more current initiative concepts, and any other credible alternatives. Eventually the EIS will identify one such approach as CVNP’s preferred approach.

Given the extraordinary recent effort that has gone into conceptualizing the Countryside Initiative, it would not be surprising if it turns out to be the preferred alternative. But even if that occurs, it is important to understand that CVNP’s other rural landscape management tools would not



suddenly be tossed out. Rather they would decrease in relative importance over time, as key features of the Initiative were phased in. Equally important, the Countryside Initiative has always been understood to be a very open-ended, evolving paradigm—always questioning and testing its own assumptions, and hopefully always open to better ideas. Actually, some of those could come from the EIS process itself.

*CVNP prepared a Request for Proposals to explain the Countryside Initiative and to help prospective lessees prepare strong proposals for a farming enterprise. A version of that document is available on CVNP’s website: [www.nps.gov/cvnp/management/countryside/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/cvnp/management/countryside/index.htm).*



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