

SNG-Yeoman class-1-29-18

The loss of the American yeoman class

By Jim Nowlan

[I should probably be writing another column about Illinois politics. I think that is what good friend Len (Rob) Small (the Small Newspaper Group) and I had in mind when he invited me to start this column, now almost a decade ago.

Yet] Politics is played out on the surface of life. It reacts slowly to the tectonic shifts of culture, economics and behavior that roil the vast deep below, sometimes forcing fissures to the surface.

I travel in remarkably wide circles. From “workingmen’s” pubs and diners in my rural area (between the once-booming, metal-bending Quad-Cities and Peoria), to the cloistered settings of the Union League Club of Chicago and manor houses on the glittering North Shore of Lake Michigan above the city.

This past week, for illustration, I dropped in at a diner near my hometown. I couldn’t help but be struck by the couple dozen customers who, rather languidly or so it seemed, downed their gargantuan breakfasts of eggs, cakes, sausages, biscuits and gravy.

All middle age, men and some wives, the customers had a grey cast, overweight, sloppy of dress; they appeared dejected, down on themselves, defeated, in little hurry to move on. It was depressing to be among them. On the North Shore, you see the exact opposite.

I thought to myself: The parents of these woebegone folks were probably part of “the yeoman class,” and that these woebegones expected to be part of that class. But the yeoman class has largely vanished, or so I think. Let me explain.

Yeomen in 18th Century England were small freehold farmers, the equivalent of the middle class, you might say. They were organized to serve, under gentlemen, in fighting the country's wars.

Our Thomas Jefferson had them in mind when he idealized the small independent American farmer as the backbone of his new American Republic. The industrial revolution and commercial urbanization frustrated Jefferson's dream [(though my Farm Bureau friends, relatively tiny in numbers now, still consider themselves that backbone)].

I think that, from Henry Ford's \$5-a-day-workers in the early 1900s to about 1970 (with a hiatus for the Depression), the decently paid metal-bending workers of America became our "yeoman class."

They fought our wars, became the heart of our middle class, coached Little League and became members of small town Lions Clubs. They bought American-made cars and pickups; their descendants in the diner still do—just try to find a Ford or GM car on the North Shore.

But that world of working with your hands is largely gone. Leaders of distressed rural and urban areas clamor for jobs. They are not, however, talking about the jobs now in demand, but instead jobs their people can actually do, mostly with their hands.

This week's Crain's Chicago Business reports on today's 10 hottest jobs. They are in finance, tech, science, analysis—not jobs my rural dispossessed can generally do.

Maybe some of us are simply not smart enough to do the jobs that are coming on line. Indeed, I think my brain is dominated by its touchy-feely right hemisphere, when today's world is dominated by the engineering logic of the left hemisphere.

The old yeoman class is little needed now, withered, scared.

The fundamental struggle in society, through history, has been that of labor versus capital. During the metal-bending era of most of the 20th Century, organized labor held its own against capital, especially after World War II, when the rest of the world lay prostrate. Those days are over.

Today labor can rarely mount an effective strike, so workers take what they are offered. It is obvious from reports on the distribution of wealth since about 1970 that capital has been winning consistently.

[One result is these dispossessed in my diner. They work at whatever jobs are available, and for much less than their parents—and they resent it.]

[They voted for Trump; two out of three in my rural county did, above the historic GOP vote here.]

The divide between traditional labor and capital has become a chasm. There was always the “right side” and the “wrong side” of the tracks. But the sides were in the same community. There is no wrong side in the enclaves on the North Shore, nor much right side left in my rural communities.

What to do? This is where I—and everyone else from what I can tell—hit a wall. We don’t know what to do.

Maybe bring back strong, but let’s hope incorruptible, unions. This time for service workers rather than factory workers. There may be other ways to reforge a yeoman class; I would love to hear them.

More yeomen would actually be in the best interests of capital; if the wealth distribution becomes too lopsided, “labor” won’t have the money to buy what capital generates.