

Idealizing an Organic Landscape: J. I. Rodale, the Rodale Press, and the Pennsylvania Countryside

THE COVER OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE* on June 6, 1971, featured a photo of a seventy-two-year-old man in a dark suit and tie walking along the edge of the rich red-brown soils of a freshly plowed Pennsylvania farm field. Chronicling the growing popularity of organic food, the article's author described this gray-haired man with a bushy beard and dark glasses as the "guru" of a movement to transform the production and consumption of food in the United States. However, this organic "prophet" cut a peculiar figure against the pastoral Pennsylvania landscape. Neither a farmer nor a scientist, he was a layman who had operated a manufacturing firm while also devoting his energy to convincing Americans that their health was bound to the soil and the quality of the food it produced. A publisher who had made millions on his contentious health claims, he had rarely worked with his own hands in the fertile soils that surrounded him.¹

The man on the cover was Jerome Irving (J. I.) Rodale, a writer and publisher who by the early 1970s had been promoting natural health and organic farming for close to thirty years. In turn, his publishing company, the Rodale Press—publishers of *Organic Gardening and Farming* and *Prevention* magazines and a slew of books and pamphlets devoted to gardening and health—helped make "organic food" and "natural health" household terms in the postwar United States. Also synonymous with the Rodale name would be Emmaus, the small town in southeastern Pennsylvania

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¹Wade Greene, "Guru of the Organic Food Cult," *New York Times Magazine*, June 6, 1971.

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that the company called home. Surrounded by fields and farms, Emmaus was part of the rural fringe of Allentown when it became Rodale's adopted home in the 1930s. The area's agricultural landscape provided Rodale with more than just a place for attractive photo opportunities, however; it also lent the company a piece of Pennsylvania's well-known agricultural history. By attaching his organic ideas to Emmaus and the Pennsylvania countryside, Rodale was able to make his controversial claims in a most uncontroversial place.

That J. I. Rodale attached his ideas about organic farming to a small town in southeastern Pennsylvania should come as no surprise. The area's fields, farms, and small towns form the commonwealth's, if not the nation's, most iconic agricultural landscapes. Settled by German immigrants just beyond the outer reaches of Philadelphia in the late seventeenth century, the region inscribes a rough arc from Allentown to the north and Lancaster to the south and west, with the lower lip of the Appalachian ridge creating a border to the north. This area, often colloquially referred to as "Pennsylvania Dutch Country," claimed some of the most fertile and productive farmlands in the early United States.² In contrast to New England, where farmers started abandoning rocky, thin soils and harsh winters in the nineteenth century, farmers of southeastern Pennsylvania kept their land productive well into the twentieth century, even as mining and manufacturing transformed nearby towns and cities. With its old stone farmhouses, winding roads, covered bridges, and big barns decorated with hex signs, scholars and the public alike have celebrated and worked to preserve the region's pastoral quality for the better part of a century.

Indeed, few regions of America have so neatly defined the ideal of an agrarian "middle" landscape as southeastern Pennsylvania. The vision of a productive ground lying between the city and wilderness has deep cultural antecedents and was bound up in democratic agrarian ideals in the United States.³ Like a sturdily built barn on a hillside, the image of a landscape composed of small farms often provided an anchor in a rapidly changing

² Michael P. Conzen, "Ethnicity on the Land," in *The Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Michael P. Conzen (New York, 1990), 224–26. For an introduction to the historical geography of the region, see James Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972); see also Joseph W. Glass, *The Pennsylvania Culture Region: A View from the Barn* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1986).

³ On the history of the pastoral and "middle landscape," see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 31–53; and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, 35th anniversary ed. (New York, 2000).



Jerome Irving (J. I.) Rodale (1898–1971), photo courtesy of the Rodale Press.

world. For J. I. Rodale, southeastern Pennsylvania was a site to reclaim what was being lost and stake out ground for something new. The Pennsylvania countryside provided soils, fields, and farms to test and prove the merits of organic practices. In a less material sense, the scene provided a familiar frame of a romantic middle landscape where Rodale could locate his unfamiliar claims about modern farming and human health. Contrasting the region's renowned agricultural past with the farming trends of the mid-twentieth century, Rodale, like many reformers before and after him, found a "usable past" in the remnants in the region's bucolic and historic landscape that helped him critique changes in his own times.⁴

⁴On the concept of the "usable past," see "On Creating a Usable Past," in *Van Wyck Brooks, the Early Years: A Selection from His Works, 1908–1925*, ed. Claire Sprague, rev. ed. (Boston, 1993), 219–26; Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York, 1967); see also Casey Nelson Blake, "The Usable Past, the Comfortable Past, and the Civic Past: Memory in Contemporary America," *Cultural Anthropology* 14 (1999): 423–35.

Placing the story of J. I. Rodale and the Rodale Press in the context of southeastern Pennsylvania's twentieth-century agricultural history adds a new layer to both our understanding of Rodale and the history of rural life in Pennsylvania. Historians of alternative agriculture and natural health movements are well aware of the role that J. I. Rodale played in popularizing organic agriculture in postwar America.⁵ Less well known is the role that *place*—as both a physical and symbolic category—played in the efforts of Rodale and many others to reform alternative agricultural practices.⁶ Amid the myriad changes affecting how Americans produced and consumed their food in the twentieth century, places like southeastern Pennsylvania in many ways came to stand for an alternative to the industrial ideal. Likewise, focusing on Rodale and the organic movement also offers a new perspective on Pennsylvania's agricultural landscapes in the twentieth century. Historians and landscape architects have thoroughly examined the vernacular landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania as well as the folk agricultural practices of German, Mennonite, and Amish farmers that defined Pennsylvania Dutch Country.⁷ What has been missing is the story of this region as part of twentieth-century agricultural history. Southeastern Pennsylvania's farms and fields were not simply vanishing or being preserved for study and scenic drives; they were also home to new visions for agriculture. Placing the story of Rodale and the organic farming movement in the context of the region's twentieth-century history thus adds a new chapter to the history of Pennsylvania's storied landscape.⁸

⁵ Works that discuss Rodale's contribution to sustainable agriculture include Philip Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (Edinburgh, 2001); Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence, KS, 2001); G. Vogt, "Origins of Organic Farming," in *Organic Farming: An International History*, ed. William Lockertetz (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 9–29; Warren James Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry, 1966–1988* (New York, 1989), 71–73; Samuel Fromartz, *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Orlando, FL, 2007), 19–27; Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York, 1991), 68–70; Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York, 2006), 142–45.

⁶ The literature on the "geographic turn" in the humanities in recent years is immense. Excellent examples of historians exploring place as a both a symbolic and material category are William Turkel, *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau* (Vancouver, 2011); and Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (Seattle, 2007).

⁷ Robert F. Ensminger, *The Pennsylvania Barn: Its Origin, Evolution, and Distribution in North America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, 2003); Glass, *Pennsylvania Culture Region*; Amos Long, *The Pennsylvania German Family Farm* (Breinigsville, PA, 1972); Charles H. Dornbusch, *Pennsylvania German Barns* (Allentown, PA, 1958); Alfred L. Shoemaker, ed., *The Pennsylvania Barn* (Kutztown, PA, 1955).

⁸ A great deal of work has explored the history of agriculture in Pennsylvania, although much less has centered on the twentieth century and even less on the post-1945 era. See George Fiske Johnson, *Agriculture in Pennsylvania: A Study of Trends, County and State, since 1840* (Harrisburg, PA, 1929);

From New York Accountant to Pennsylvania Publisher

Before considering the relationship that the Rodale Press forged with the Pennsylvania landscape, it is worth outlining some broader strokes of Rodale's story. What originally brought J. I. Rodale to the Pennsylvania countryside in the 1930s was neither its fertile fields nor its agricultural legacy, but the opportunity to grow a different type of business. Rodale and his older brother ran a small firm in New York City that manufactured electrical parts. In the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, the brothers sought a new location to run their business. The town of Emmaus, which had fallen on its own hard times with the closure of a silk mill, promised the Rodale firm cheap rent on a vacant manufacturing space in return for creating jobs.⁹ Although new to Emmaus, Rodale had passing familiarity with Pennsylvania by the time his firm and his family settled there in the 1930s. Rodale was born in 1898 on New York's Lower East Side, and in the 1920s he had worked as an accountant in the Pittsburgh area, making frequent trips across the state for work as well as to return to New York.¹⁰ In 1927, Rodale married Anna Andrews, who had grown up not far from Allentown in Mahanoy City, and the couple took frequent excursions away from New York to explore the countryside. Nonetheless, the small town of Emmaus in the 1930s was certainly a peculiar fit for the city-born Rodale.

Regardless of his company's fortunes, Rodale found the electrical business to be enjoyable but rather boring. He would later write that although his heart was in the business for the first three or four years, he had never felt 100 percent committed. But being in business, he reasoned, allowed him to keep his feet "firmly planted on the ground."¹¹ Indeed, Rodale constantly searched for ways to be more than just successful in business and hoped to make a name for himself in the world beyond electrical manufacturing. Despite a lack of education beyond high school, Rodale soon aspired to become a writer and publisher. He approached publishing the

Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1640–1840* (Harrisburg, PA, 1950); John G. Gagliardo, "Germans and Agriculture in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (1959): 192–218; Anne E. Krulikowski, "Farms Don't Pay': The Transformation of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Landscape, 1880–1930," *Pennsylvania History* 72 (2005): 193–227; H. Winslow Fegley and Schwenkfelder Library, *Farming, Always Farming: A Photographic Essay of Rural Pennsylvania German Land and Life* (Birdsboro, PA, 1987).

⁹ Carlton Jackson, *J. I. Rodale: Apostle of Nonconformity* (New York, 1974), 26–27; Daniel Gross, *Our Roots Grow Deep: The Story of Rodale* (Emmaus, PA, 2009), 34–35.

¹⁰ Gross, *Our Roots Grow Deep*, 28–30.

¹¹ J. I. Rodale, *Autobiography* (Emmaus, PA, 1965), 37.

way he learned most everything else in his life: by studying an existing method, making a few changes, and then creating an approach of his own. One of Rodale's first ventures was a system he created to help writers (and himself) improve verbal dexterity through the use of different words. The first book of his "word-finder" system, published in 1937, collected thousands of verbs and grouped them with particular nouns. Rodale's first magazine, the *Humorous Scrapbook*, appeared in 1931 and collected previously published stories in an easy-to-read digest format. The digest magazine was an extremely popular genre in the publishing world in the 1930s as the mass-market success of *Reader's Digest* spawned countless imitators. Moreover, a digest magazine was not burdened with paying writers to create original content, limiting the overhead for a novice publisher like Rodale.¹² Over the course of the 1930s, he started and stopped several short, digest-style magazines centered on various themes such as news, health, and stories of the weird.¹³

Rodale's publishing and writing would likely have had little attachment to the Pennsylvania landscape had he not stumbled into debates about agriculture and soil fertility in the 1940s. Reading a British health journal in 1940, Rodale came across a story about Sir Albert Howard, an agricultural reformer in England whose research investigated a link between soil management and the health of foods. Rodale was intrigued by Howard's claim that fertilizers—in particular industrially produced artificial varieties—were reducing the amounts of nutrients in plants and animals and affecting human health in turn. By contrast, Howard argued that *biologic* methods of fertilizing, which restored nutrients to soils through the application of plant and animal wastes, maintained health and prevented disease in both soils and people.¹⁴

Rather than a problem of lost nutrients, the challenge that most Americans were concerned about in the early twentieth century was simply keeping soils in place. Southeastern Pennsylvania had not experienced the severe

¹² On the popularity of digest magazines, see John William Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741–1990* (New York, 1991), 182–85.

¹³ Jackson, *J. I. Rodale*, 62.

¹⁴ Albert Howard, *An Agricultural Testament* (London, 1940); Albert Howard, *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture* (New York, 1947); Albert Howard, *Farming and Gardening for Health or Disease* (London, 1945); Albert Howard, *The War in the Soil* (Emmaus, PA, 1946). For a larger discussion of Howard and the history of the organic movement, see Lockeretz, *Organic Farming*; and Gregory Barton, "Sir Albert Howard and the Forestry Roots of the Organic Farming Movement," *Agricultural History* 75 (2001): 168–87.

erosion that plagued farms of the Midwest and the American South in the early twentieth century, but Rodale could not help but view the national crisis of soils through the lens of his local landscape.¹⁵ In his first book on agriculture, *Pay Dirt* (1945), Rodale argued that restoring organic matter in topsoil would be key to maintaining soils that resisted erosion. Suggesting that the use of chemical fertilizers contributed to erosion, Rodale claimed: “Anyone can see that soil erosion is retarded by the many organic practices described in this book. On the other hand, rain rolls off the slopes of hard-surfaced fields where chemicals have been used, gathering momentum as it goes, very little of it seeping into the ground.” Applying agricultural wastes through composting, he argued, created “tiny sponges” of decaying matter in soil that could hold both water and the earth in place.¹⁶

Describing Howard’s ideas in his 1965 *Autobiography*, Rodale reminisced: “The impact on me was terrific! It changed my whole way of life. I decided that we must get a farm at once and raise as much as of our family’s food by the organic method as possible.”¹⁷ In addition to shaping his decision to purchase a farm—a sixty-acre piece of land between Allentown and Emmaus—Rodale’s newfound infatuation with soils and health led him to found a magazine devoted to the subject. First published in May 1942 as *Organic Farming and Gardening*, the periodical consisted of sixteen pages of newsprint that hewed closely to the digest model he used in his previous publications. The magazine, later rechristened *Organic Gardening*, became the flagship of the Rodale Press, which published books, magazines, and pamphlets devoted to gardening, agriculture, and health.¹⁸ While there were many adherents of Sir Albert Howard and several schools of thought that promoted “biologic” methods to fertilize soils, Rodale became the first

¹⁵ While not as dramatic as the dust storms of Great Plains in the 1930s, Pennsylvania’s farms had their share of soil issues that needed to be addressed. On the history of soil conservation in Pennsylvania, see P. Alston Waring, *The Story of Honey Hollow and the Origins of the Conservation Movement in Pennsylvania* (Honey Hollow, PA, 1973); and Joseph M. Speakman, *At Work in Penn’s Woods: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA, 2006).

¹⁶ J. I. Rodale, *Pay Dirt: Farming and Gardening with Composts* (New York, 1945), 206.

¹⁷ Rodale, *Autobiography*, 41. While Rodale certainly purchased a farm with the intention of testing the organic method, he had also owned a small Connecticut farm before moving to Pennsylvania. Rodale was acutely interested in the investment value of land, and he and his wife spent much of the 1930s looking for land as investment properties.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42. In 1949, Rodale created the *Organic Farmer*, which existed for five years before being folded into *Organic Gardening* to form *Organic Gardening and Farming*. In 1979 the magazine dropped “Farming” for a second time to again become *Organic Gardening*.

in the United States to adopt the word “organic” to describe an agricultural method.¹⁹

In creating his magazine, Rodale felt he also created a movement based on the ideas he inherited from Sir Albert Howard and others. Describing the start of his involvement with the organic movement, Rodale claimed, “Little did I realize what I was touching off—that I would be the one to introduce this great movement into the United States.”²⁰ By 1949, Rodale viewed what he called “organiculture” as

a vigorous and growing movement, one that is destined to alter our conceptions of the farm and the garden and to revolutionize our methods of operating them in order to secure for ourselves and others more abundant and more perfect food. . . . Composters by the hundreds are telling their neighboring countrymen of the wonders of this “new,” yet age-old method, and the latter are listening by the thousands.²¹

Although Rodale was certainly hyperbolic about the extent of the impact of his magazine in a few short years, his publication bound together a diffuse movement of organic gardeners in the decades after 1945. Rodale Press publications such as *Organic Gardening* and its many books devoted to the organic method provided a common cultural currency for those seeking to produce food without the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.²² As garden writer Eleanor Perényi recalled, under the guidance of Rodale’s magazine, gardeners like her in the 1940s “threw out our poisons we had been using in our Victory gardens, sent for earthworms, praying mantises and ladybugs to kill our aphids, all to choruses of laughter, and some irritation from our families and assistants.”²³

In 1950 the Rodale Press launched *Prevention*, a magazine that espoused the virtues of natural foods and health methods. With the creation of *Prevention*, the press set about building a popular group of magazines and books devoted to topics of natural health and organic practices. The modest numbers that sustained the press through the 1940s and 1950s expanded exponentially in the 1960s, particularly after the 1962 publica-

¹⁹ Suzanne Peters, *The Land in Trust: A Social History of the Organic Farming Movement* (Ottawa, 1982), 104–36.

²⁰ Rodale, *Autobiography*, 42.

²¹ J. I. Rodale, *The Organic Front* (Emmaus, PA, 1948), 63.

²² David M. Tucker, *Kitchen Gardening in America: A History* (Ames, IA, 1993), 140–54.

²³ Eleanor Perényi, “Apostle of the Compost Heap,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 30, 1966, 33.

tion of Rachel Carson's landmark book, *Silent Spring*.²⁴ By the 1970s, the company's books and magazines were prominent guides for the emerging environmental movement, as young people discovered gardening, farming, and organic food as a means of responding to the environmental crisis. In decades to come, the little firm that Rodale started in the backroom of his manufacturing facility in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, established itself as a heavyweight in health and wellness titles in the mainstream of the publishing world.²⁵ No longer just a publisher of quaint health pamphlets and digests, by the end of the century Rodale Press publications had a global audience that numbered in the tens of millions.

The Organic Ideal

Given the popularity of natural health and organic food in the early twenty-first century, it can be easy to forget that J. I. Rodale's ideas reflected his own time and not our own. In the 1940s and 1950s, Rodale faced an uphill climb in popularizing the "new, yet age-old" farming and gardening practices he supported. Although he had a surfeit of enthusiasm for growing food without chemicals, Rodale lacked the evidence to prove his claims. Seeking proof in many places, Rodale relied on the agricultural landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania as an example of what a sustained relationship with the soil looked like. On his own farm and in his magazines, Pennsylvania's agrarian countryside came to provide a literal and figurative ideal for the organic movement.²⁶

In April 1940, Rodale and his wife, Anna, set out in search of a farm in the countryside just outside of Emmaus. After finding a sixty-three-acre lot on the edge of town, the Rodales purchased it for \$7,000 and moved

²⁴ On the public impact of *Silent Spring*, see Priscilla Coit Murphy, *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of "Silent Spring"* (Amherst, MA, 2005); and Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York, 1989), 174–77.

²⁵ The Rodale Press expanded its magazine offerings considerably beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s. Titles such as *Men's Health*, *Women's Health*, *Bicycling*, and *Runner's World* formed the core of these new offerings that built on themes of diet, fitness, and wellness. In book publishing, the Rodale Press had a number of successes in the 1970s with its cookbooks and encyclopedias, but it was the *Doctor's Book of Home Remedies* in the 1980s that changed the degree of Rodale's book business. In 2005 the firm published the popular *South Beach Diet* series. The press currently conducts around \$600 million in sales yearly.

²⁶ Rodale idealized both health and the preindustrial agricultural practices of a remote tribe in South Asia in J. I. Rodale, *The Healthy Hunzas* (Emmaus, PA, 1948).

into the old farmhouse on the property. However, the land they acquired was far from a vision of pastoral beauty. Indeed, the farm was cheap due to the dilapidated state of its soil and its outbuildings. In his 1965 autobiography, Rodale called the farm “a most miserable piece of land,” chosen primarily for its location rather than its quality. Rodale explained the condition of the farm as the result of the poverty of the tenant farmer who had been working the land and the bad farming practices he followed.²⁷ Farm tenancy, Rodale would argue in *Pay Dirt*, was “responsible for many evils in agriculture.” As tenant farmers worked land they did not own, Rodale felt they had no reason to invest the time, energy, or capital in farm practices that improved soil fertility: “The average tenant is here today and gone tomorrow. He doesn’t build up his land. Many tenants actually sell their manure. They violate all the rules of good farming.”²⁸ The poor quality of the soil extended to the quality of the buildings and animal life on the farm as well. In a number of his writings, Rodale refers to the dead chickens, which the tenant farmer had no energy to bury, that had been thrown under the dilapidated corncrib. As for the corn left stored inside the crib, the kernels were “small, gnarled, disease-ridden specimens.”²⁹ The cows on the farm were sallow and sickly; even the barn rats were “the mangiest lot of barn rats that ever had the ill-fortune to infest a barn.”³⁰

In contrast to the sorry state of his own farm, Rodale viewed the countryside of the surrounding region as evidence of what an ideal long-term relationship produced. Farmers in the area, Rodale believed, had developed practices that built the soils up over time rather than wore them down. Describing Lancaster County’s “famous farmers,” Rodale claimed that Pennsylvania Dutch manuring practices had kept many fields fertile even after more than two centuries of constant plowing. Pennsylvania Dutch farmers, Rodale claimed, “are old-fashioned farmers. They do not believe in a one-sided monoculture, single type crops without rotations, which eventually destroy the fertility of the land. . . . That is why their land is about the most fertile in the nation.”³¹ The labor-intensive practice of applying manures, in particular, struck Rodale as emblematic of the wisdom of the methods of the region’s farmers. Responding to the call of agricultural

²⁷ Rodale, *Autobiography*, 41.

²⁸ Rodale, *Pay Dirt*, 204.

²⁹ Rodale, *Autobiography*, 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ J. I. Rodale, “The Church and the Farmer—A Plan!,” *Organic Gardening*, Oct. 1948, 14.

reformer Edward Faulkner to reduce the amount of plowing in agriculture, Rodale wrote in *Pay Dirt*:

Try to tell the Pennsylvania Dutch farmer of the Lancaster area not to plow. These famous farmers have plowed for two hundred and fifty years and not on the contour either. Their farms today are in such wonderful condition of fertility that they command fabulous prices, even though the principal crop is tobacco which “pulls” hard on the soil. What is the magic they employ? Nothing more than that they have always engaged in mixed farming with a strong accent on livestock and its by-product manure. . . . I have noticed also that they get all the manure at the Lancaster stock-yards and put thousands of tons of it on their farms each year.³²

Pennsylvania’s landscape provided visible proof of how farming practices could sustain a relationship with the land.

Rodale’s admiration for the soil management of Pennsylvania Germans echoed a long history of praise for the southeastern region’s farmers and their landscape. European settlement of the region had been led by farmers from the Upper Rhine Valley of Germany known for their frugality as well as their efficient farming methods. As regional historian Amos Long argues, “In addition to constructing sturdy and convenient buildings to house the family and the livestock, the farmers tilled the soil intensively, rotated crops, manured, and strove continually to maintain and increase the fertility of the soil.”³³ These farming methods certainly helped, but the soil itself bolstered the region’s agricultural development. Settling in the rich bottomland of the limestone valleys that define much of the area, settlers cleared and developed farms with soils that could stand up to repeated and intensive agricultural production. After being settled in the early 1700s, the region’s productive agricultural economy became the envy of many states in the early republic. Well before the age of automobile tourism, claims historian Steven Stoll, travelers came from near and far “just to look at” the Pennsylvania countryside and its agricultural abundance.³⁴

Rodale’s praise for the work ethic of the region’s farmers and their landscape also echoed an idealized vision that focused on the “character” of the groups that farmed the area as much as on their specific farming practices.

³² Rodale, *Pay Dirt*, 212.

³³ Long, *Pennsylvania German Family Farm*, 1.

³⁴ Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2002), 78.

In his extensive 1950 work, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life, 1640–1840*, historian Stevenson Whitcomb Fletcher argued that it was not only a predilection for limestone soils that led Germans to intensively farm the area but a natural affinity for their land as well. This bond with the land, in his estimation, led the region's farmers to build larger and sturdier barns and to husband their resources, including the soils they farmed. Even as industrialization and modernization changed farming in the twentieth century, Fletcher claimed: "As a whole, Pennsylvania Germans have remained more devoted to the land than any other group in America."³⁵ Furthermore, what Fletcher described as a "marked conservatism" toward markets, education, and politics led these frugal farmers to maintain farms that were small enough to be managed by a single family. Unlike farmers driven to endlessly increase profits, Fletcher described the region's farmers as scrambling to accrue as much capital as they needed to pass a farm on to their heirs, and little more.

The notion that both the landscape and the region were insulated from change was reinforced by the distinct presence of Mennonite and Amish communities in southeastern Pennsylvania. In his landmark study of Amish society, John Hostetler notes that although close communion with the soil was not one of the animating issues that gave rise to the Anabaptist movement, as a persecuted group in Europe that had survived in the "hinterlands," the Amish developed "unique skills for crop production and livestock raising."³⁶ Once settled in areas such as Berks and Lancaster Counties, those skills and close-knit agrarian communities flourished. Farm buildings, tools, and methods remained largely unchanged through the early twentieth century in many Amish and Mennonite communities in Pennsylvania, a fact that would have been hard to miss for even a Sunday driver like J. I. Rodale as he passed by farms in the southeastern region in the 1930s and 1940s.

Rodale and many other supporters of alternative agriculture in the twentieth century would come to view the Amish and Mennonites as exemplars of how traditional farming practices could compete with the chemicals and technology of modern agriculture. Indeed, the organic ideal often bore an uncanny resemblance to the Pennsylvania landscape that filled Amish country tourist brochures. In an influential 1935 book on the problems of

³⁵ Fletcher, *Pennsylvania Agriculture and Country Life*, 50.

³⁶ John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Baltimore, 1993), 88.

modern agriculture, ecologist Paul Sears identified Amish and Mennonite communities as places that “have done reasonably well in establishing a permanent relationship with the land” as a result of their combination of “ancient peasant traditions of stewardship with common religious bonds.”³⁷ Such praise was echoed by author and agricultural reformer Louis Bromfield in his 1940 book *Pleasant Valley*, which described the Amish as lifelong stewards of the land.³⁸ As Amish communities spread beyond the “hearth” of southeastern Pennsylvania, their age-old farming practices provided a model for those seeking ecological alternatives to the scale and methods of industrial farming.³⁹ Of course, organic enthusiasts routinely overessentialized both the Amish and the Pennsylvania countryside as a premodern “folk society” and often failed to see both the struggles and the changes in life and work that Amish and Mennonite communities encountered.⁴⁰

For J. I. Rodale, the proximity to Amish communities meant that he and his team of editors at *Organic Gardening and Farming* had near-at-hand examples of how to farm without chemicals. In 1959, the magazine’s editor M. C. Goldman and photographer Don Heintzelman traveled to Lancaster County and profiled the farmers there who had made the county “the Garden Spot of America.” Describing the rolling farmlands on the trip from Emmaus as “almost unbelievably rich and picturesque,” Goldman discussed how Amish farmers relied on sheep manure and ladybugs rather than chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Goldman similarly highlighted the Amish devotion to the soil as the key to how the area maintained its agricultural wealth.⁴¹ Such stories were common in the pages of *Organic Gardening and Farming*, as were pastoral cover photos and paintings from local artists that drew from the surrounding landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania.

³⁷ Paul B. Sears, *Deserts on the March* (Norman, OK, 1937), 169.

³⁸ David Kline, “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living,” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore, 2000), 63.

³⁹ For a valuable discussion of Amish resettlement in the 1960s and 1970s in Wisconsin and its influence on the landscape, see Lynne Heasley, *A Thousand Pieces of Paradise: Landscape and Property in the Kickapoo Valley* (Madison, WI, 2012), 104–29. For another example of elevating Amish farming practices, see Wendell Berry, “Seven Amish Farms,” in *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 105–18.

⁴⁰ Marc Olshan, “Modernity, the Folk Society, and the Old Order Amish,” in *The Amish Struggle with Modernity*, ed. Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (Hanover, NH, 1994), 185–98.

⁴¹ M. C. Goldman, “Inside Lancaster County,” *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Dec. 1959, 29–32.

The reluctance of farmers in the region to change their methods could also be a mixed blessing for Rodale. Rodale sent the initial version of his magazine primarily to nearby farmers, and the response was tepid at best. Sending out fourteen thousand trial issues, Rodale received twelve subscriptions.⁴² After several issues with few subscribers, Rodale dropped “farming” from the title and renamed the magazine *Organic Gardening* in 1943 to draw gardeners and small-scale producers to organic methods. The local response to his magazine and his ideas about agriculture reflected what Rodale characterized as the ambivalence of the area’s farmers to new ideas. It was not just any farmers, he claimed, but the Pennsylvania Dutch in particular who were slow to change their practices. Testifying before a congressional committee investigating chemicals in food products in 1950, Rodale opined that the Pennsylvania Dutch “follow the methods of their predecessors and fight off the new methods, as well as the organic idea.” Rodale testified that many farmers held him in contempt and considered him a “carpetbagger” because he came from outside the area and had no experience as a farmer.⁴³

At the same time, Rodale praised the industry and hard work of Pennsylvania Dutch farmers. Such a work ethic was required to make his organic idea viable. On his own farm in Emmaus, Rodale began making the large piles of hay, manure, and other farm wastes that Howard’s composting method required. Rodale himself did little of the work of farming and gardening with composts. Manuring, weeding, and applying composts to fields were time- and labor-intensive practices, and after initially struggling to find a farm laborer to help during the war years, Rodale found an experienced local farm hand in the early 1940s to run the farm without the use of chemicals. Describing his farm to the congressional committee in 1950, Rodale mentioned that his farmer was a “very good one, an old Pennsylvania Dutch,” who was “not afraid to work” and “knows when to come out into the field and to cultivate to get the weeds back down.”⁴⁴ With the venerable knowledge of this farmer and application of the organic method, Rodale felt that his land had been transformed.

⁴² J. I. Rodale, “Looking Back,” *Organic Gardening*, May 1952, 13.

⁴³ House Select Committee to Investigate the Use of Chemicals in Food Products, *Chemicals in Food Products: Hearings before the House Select Committee to Investigate the Use of Chemicals in Food Products*, 81st. Cong., 2nd sess., 1951, 855.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 859.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Rodale pulled together every scrap of evidence he could find from scientific literature and news stories from around the globe as proof that organic methods were a viable competitor with chemicals. But his most reliable evidence often came from his own farm in Pennsylvania. The results of growing without chemicals on the farm in Emmaus, according to Rodale, were immediate. Without using any commercial fertilizers or insecticides, he found both the land and its crops returned to health. After a single season of fertilizing with organic methods: "At harvest time wagonload upon wagonload of long, golden, healthy corn came into our cribs." With each season the land's productivity increased, as organically produced nutrients softened and restored the farm's tough clay soils. Describing the process, Rodale wrote: "We fertilized our soil with compost. We raised its organic matter and humus content appreciably. We treated the good earth with reverence and kindness. We did not apply poisonous insecticides of any kind. We used no chemical fertilizers. The land became healed. . . . In these three years the regeneration of the soil showed itself in our wonderfully healthy crops."⁴⁵ The health that the organic method returned to soils, Rodale believed, extended to his own body and those of his family. "After about a year on the farm, eating the food raised organically, we could see a definite improvement in the general health of the family," he declared.⁴⁶ Headaches, colds, and other common ailments became more infrequent; even the barn rats that had once subsisted on the shriveled spoils of the old farm appeared to Rodale to be fat, healthy, and happy creatures after a few years of eating organically grown grain. The farm and the bodies of the creatures it sustained were literal proof to Rodale of the organic method's effectiveness at reforming the health of the land and the body.⁴⁷

Seeking to turn his own experience into scientific evidence that fertilization methods shaped the health of soils and people, Rodale endeavored to also make his Pennsylvania farm into a laboratory that definitely proved what the organic ideal intuited. In small test plots and experimental bins, Rodale and his staff tested different composting methods and recorded the results. In 1943, he renamed the site the "Organic Gardening Experimental

⁴⁵ Rodale, *Autobiography*, 59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁷ Rodale made this claim countless times in his writings. Indeed, the improved health of both his body and his farm was a key part of Rodale's "conversion narrative." See Jerome Irving Rodale, *The Organic Method on the Farm* (Emmaus, PA, 1950).

Farm,” and the magazine frequently profiled the work that Rodale’s staff conducted there. In 1947, Rodale launched the nonprofit Soil and Health Foundation, which sought to raise money to build a lab on the farm and support research in organic methods. In order to demonstrate what could be accomplished with organic methods, the magazine encouraged visitors to stop by Emmaus and see for themselves. He frequently told readers about the various visitors—particularly celebrities—who came calling. In 1952, *Organic Gardening* invited readers to visit the farm, as well as its Organic Country Store. On their visit, readers could see the stone-mulched garden, the Howard experimental plots, the odorless chicken house, and the earthworm pits; they could also purchase compost activators, soil testing kits, seedlings, and other gardening equipment.⁴⁸ By 1957, the magazine claimed that two to three thousand travelers stopped at Rodale’s farm in Emmaus each summer, a number that only increased as *Organic Gardening and Farming*’s circulation expanded in the decades to come.⁴⁹

An Organic Alternative in a Changing Landscape

The efforts of J. I. Rodale and the Rodale Press to reform farming and gardening practices came at a time when the agricultural landscapes of Pennsylvania—and, indeed, those across the country—were changing rapidly. The type of small, diversified, and family-run farms that shaped southeastern Pennsylvania’s landscape would face two important challenges in the decades after 1945: the economies of scale achieved through industrial agricultural methods and the steadily rising pressures of suburban land development.⁵⁰ While the Rodale Press promoted organic agriculture anywhere it could, its efforts took on a distinct valence in the region it called home. Pennsylvania’s historic landscape, and the threats it faced, became central to both the company’s identity and advocacy in the 1970s and 1980s. Under the leadership of J. I. Rodale’s son Robert Rodale,

⁴⁸ “Soil and Health Foundation,” *Organic Gardening*, Nov. 1947, 5; “Soil and Health Foundation,” *Organic Gardening*, Nov. 1947, 14; “Soil and Health Foundation,” *Organic Gardening*, Mar. 1949, 17; “Proof!” *Organic Gardening*, Jan. 1948, 32; “Organic Country Store,” *Organic Gardening*, Apr. 1952, 5.

⁴⁹ “Organic World,” *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Dec. 1957, 3.

⁵⁰ Beeman and Pritchard, *Green and Permanent Land*, 78–79; For an overview of technological changes in agriculture, see R. Douglas Hurt, *Agricultural Technology in the Twentieth Century* (Manhattan, KS, 1991); Judith Fabry, “Agricultural Science and Technology in the West,” in *The Rural West since World War II*, ed. R. Douglas Hurt (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 169–89; On the role of policy, see Thomas R. Wessel, “Agricultural Policy since 1945,” in *ibid.*, 76–98.

the company fought to make southeastern Pennsylvania a place where the ideals of the organic movement could be realized.

Agriculture, like many aspects of American life, changed dramatically in the years after 1945. New substances, new methods, and new pressures rapidly transformed how farmers went about growing food and how they made a living doing so. Of course, farming in Pennsylvania had been undergoing longer-term transformations as well. Agriculture started to languish in the commonwealth in the mid-nineteenth century as mining and manufacturing became more prominent portions of the economy. The state, which had led the country in wheat production in 1840, had dropped to thirteenth a century later.⁵¹ The number of farms peaked in Pennsylvania in 1900, although the average acreage of farms continued to grow. Smaller farms consolidated into larger units, and new farm equipment did the work that had once been done by human and animal labor. Even as the number of farms and farmers decreased in Pennsylvania between 1900 and 1945, the value of farm implements and machinery grew three times over, a trend that would only increase in decades to come.⁵²

Pennsylvania's farmers became increasingly specialized and capitalized as they sought to take advantage of the economies of scale afforded by new technologies and demanded by market realities. Where farms once produced a mix of meat, commodity crops, dairy, fresh produce, and other products, many now invested in equipment and facilities for producing just one type of product—and to cover the costs of those machines, farmers needed to grow more and more.⁵³ Chronicling the story of a family farm in York County that was emblematic of the changes happening in American agriculture in the postwar era, historian Paul Conkin describes how the farm grew from a mixed farming operation in the 1940s into a large dairy operation in the borough of Seven Valleys. As the farm grew from 260 to 400 acres between the 1940s and the 1970s, the Hunt family relied more on machines and less on manual labor. The farm grew to include “a large truck, three or four tractors, a chopper for silage, elevators, manure spreaders, several wagons, special mowing machines . . . special balers, various plows and disks, a special corn planter for no-till corn, and, most expensive,

⁵¹ Wayland F. Dunaway, *A History of Pennsylvania* (New York, 1948), 546.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 544.

⁵³ Rising land and equipment costs made farmers ever more reliant on both private and public sources of capital to sustain their operations. This “debt spiral” exacerbated tenuous ecological and economic relationships in many agricultural communities.

a combine with heads for both corn and small grains.”⁵⁴ Even on farms that paled in size compared to those in the middle of the country, Pennsylvania’s farmers grew more reliant on machines than ever before.

Aiding the growth and specialization of farming in Pennsylvania were not only artificial fertilizers but also new substances that reduced the labor of cultivation. Synthetic fertilizers became increasingly inexpensive after 1945, and their use skyrocketed on American farms. From 1945 to 1980, fertilizer use grew at a rate of 4.5 percent each year. In 1960, 2.7 million tons of nitrogen was applied to American farm fields each year, and twenty years later, nearly 11.5 million tons went onto soils annually.⁵⁵ Farmers also embraced synthetic chemicals that had been formulated for wartime uses and then repurposed for agricultural and domestic use.⁵⁶

New technologies and the pressure to specialize certainly changed the agricultural landscape of southeastern Pennsylvania in important ways, but changing patterns of land use were most visible. Although cities like Allentown, Reading, and Lancaster had expanded into the surrounding countryside in the early twentieth century, it was in the decades after 1945 that many agricultural towns in the southeastern region began to feel the pressure of population growth and suburban development.⁵⁷ Tracts of farm fields gave way to tracts of matching homes, and southeastern Pennsylvania—like its counterparts in Long Island, northern New Jersey, and any number of places across the country—increasingly watched farming landscapes vanish behind the paths of bulldozers.⁵⁸

As farm fields sprouted houses, residents of new suburbs often came closer to farming than ever before. The fertilizers, pesticides, and other substances that farmers used on their fields would once have been of little concern to many Americans, but after nearly two decades of rapid subur-

⁵⁴ Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929* (Lexington, KY, 2008), 91–94.

⁵⁵ Bruce L. Gardner, *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How It Flourished and What It Cost* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 22.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of agricultural and domestic adoption of chemicals produced for wartime uses, see Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to “Silent Spring”* (New York, 2001), 165–83.

⁵⁷ Although not centered on land-use patterns, a work that highlights shifting racial and economic dynamics between city and countryside in the southern region in the post-1945 era is David Schuyler, *A City Transformed: Redevelopment, Race, and Suburbanization in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1940–1980* (University Park, PA, 2002), 1–8.

⁵⁸ Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2001), 119–27.

ban expansion, that story had changed. In the fall of 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, opening the eyes of many Americans about risks from the unrestrained applications of chemicals to control insects. Historian Christopher Sellers has charted how suburban development gave rise to environmental concerns, particularly about aerial spraying, in the suburban landscapes in the 1950s and 1960s. Residents protested not only the sprays of farmers that drifted onto their lawns and homes but also the actions of state and county agencies spraying for gypsy moths and fire ants. Organic gardeners were especially vocal in protesting sprays that violated the chemical-free environments they had created in their backyards.⁵⁹

In southeastern Pennsylvania, such concerns were amplified by the presence of the Rodale Press, which had been drawing attention to the unknown hazards of new chemicals for nearly twenty years. The Rodale Press's modest readership began to steadily expand in the 1960s, due in no small part to popularity of *Silent Spring*, as more gardeners and an increasing number of farmers sought out information about how to grow foods and flowers without relying on synthetic chemicals. After hearing from numerous readers and organic gardening clubs about their local battles against aerial spraying, the press declared as early as 1959 its intention to become a national "clearing house" to help battle aerial spraying. In 1959, when a state bill was introduced in Pennsylvania that would have authorized spraying on public as well as private lands, the press directly contacted both *Prevention* and *Organic Gardening and Farming* subscribers across the state asking them to contact their representatives. At the same time, the press contacted organic food growers and asked them to tell their customers. From this experience with its own "spray emergency," the press advised readers to create a community plan for when the spray issue might arise in their own area. Offering the services of its editorial staff to anyone in the country "wanting to prevent passage of spray legislation or mass spray campaigns," editor Jerome Goldstein announced: "Whenever such a situation arises, write us at once and we'll do what we can to be of some help."⁶⁰ Just as it collected and distributed gardening advice, the press could use its information gathering skills to aid local residents in their fights against aerial spraying. A number of popular magazines, such

⁵⁹ Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 1–68.

⁶⁰ Jerome Olds, "What to Do in a Spray Emergency," *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Nov. 1959, 44.

as *Harper's*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Life*, profiled the organic movement, as well as J. I. Rodale and his press, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These profiles invariably depicted Rodale as a quirky outsider who succeeded despite opposition to his ideas. At the same time, no profile of Rodale could neglect the company's unconventional location in a rural town in Pennsylvania Dutch Country. If J. I. Rodale was the prophet of a new movement back to the soil, then Emmaus was its unlikely Mecca.⁶¹

While some residents cheered the Rodale Press's presence, others were wary of its growing influence both locally and nationally. Allentown psychologist Dr. Stephen Barrett made battling with the Rodale Press over its health claims and business practices both a personal and professional priority. Barrett formed the Lehigh Valley Committee Against Health Fraud (LVCAHF) in response to the Rodale Press's efforts to halt the fluoridation of Allentown's water, a fight that Barrett extended to numerous investigations into Rodale and many other popular health figures he deemed "quacks." The American Medical Association's (AMA) Historical Health Fraud Collection is filled with letters from Barrett to the AMA's Investigative Bureau regarding the Rodale Press and its founder in the 1970s. In a report to the Pennsylvania Medical Society in 1974, the LVCAHF described J. I. Rodale as sincere in his convictions, but pointed out that his company both promoted and profited from a variety of controversial health ideas.⁶²

Increased public attention to pollution in the 1960s and 1970s also came at a time when many were beginning to recognize that the threat to Pennsylvania's agricultural landscape came from more than just chemicals. The rolling, patchworked landscape of farm, field, and forest—the pastoral landscape for which the southeastern region was famous—was rapidly disappearing in the middle of the twentieth century. This transformation was caused not only by the decrease in family farms and new cultivation methods but by changing land-use patterns in the decades after 1945. The suburban transformation of the Pennsylvania countryside in the postwar years incited appeals for the study and preservation of the southeastern region's agricultural landscapes. In 1972, the Pennsylvania German Society of Breinigsville published Amos Long Jr.'s decade-long study of

⁶¹ See Gay Bryant, "J. I. Rodale: Pollution Prophet," *Penthouse*, June 1971.

⁶² See Pennsylvania Medical Society, "Committee on Quackery Report," July 18, 1974, box 673, folder 0673-14 "Prevention Magazine Correspondence 1970-74," Historical Health Fraud Collection, American Medical Association, Chicago, IL.

farming and folk culture of the commonwealth's southeastern region, *The Pennsylvania German Family Farm*. Pastor Frederick S. Weiser, in his introduction to Long's book, called it "an eleventh hour study," as the family farm had "all but disappeared" as a result of "urbanization and industrialization of farming and the farmer." Weiser hoped that such a detailed study of the Pennsylvania farm would inspire Americans to make a "sober estimation of the world around them and . . . the care needed to preserve those resources."⁶³

Beginning in the early 1970s, the Rodale Press used its national prominence to advocate for practices that sustained Pennsylvania's agricultural economy and its landscape of family farms. The company's profits allowed it to expand into new areas such as films and product development and to put resources toward efforts to preserve farmland and open space in the surrounding Lehigh Valley. In particular, Robert Rodale, who took over the press following J. I. Rodale's sudden death in 1971, became a leading advocate of land conservation in the region.⁶⁴ Born in 1930, Robert Rodale grew up in Allentown and Emmaus and spent much of his time as a young man helping around the Organic Gardening Experimental Farm. After attending Lehigh University for journalism, he joined his father at the press in 1949 and in 1956 built a home for his own family on the Emmaus farm.

In 1972, just a year after his father passed away, Robert Rodale purchased a three-hundred-acre farm in the agricultural village of Maxatawny, about ten miles away from Emmaus in Berks County. Originally called the "New Farm," the site became home to the Rodale Research Center, a nonprofit organization devoted to researching and developing organic agricultural practices. Later rechristened the Rodale Institute, the farm represented Robert Rodale's attempt to prove that organic farming could be a viable alternative to industrial agriculture in both Pennsylvania and

⁶³ Long, *Pennsylvania German Family Farm*, viii. Long's research was part of a broader revival of interest in Pennsylvania Dutch and Amish folk culture in the years after 1945. Scholarly research, folk festivals, a Broadway play, and no small amount of tourism celebrated the region's folk culture and agricultural past. See John A. Hostetler, "Why Is Everybody Interested in the Pennsylvania Dutch? (1955)," in *Writing the Amish: The Worlds of John A. Hostetler*, ed. David L. Weaver-Zercher (University Park, PA, 2005).

⁶⁴ For his philanthropic and environmental efforts, the local paper of the Allentown region would name Robert Rodale its "Person of the Century" in 2000. See Bob Whitman, "The Person of the Century: Robert Rodale," *Allentown Morning Call*, Jan. 1, 2000. J. I. Rodale famously died during a taping of the Dick Cavett show in June 1971, just a few days after he appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*.

across the nation. Pennsylvania's agricultural past was inseparable from Robert Rodale's vision for organic agriculture's future, even more so than it had been to his father. Rodale described to his readers how "the new farm is in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country, and has three homes, two large barns and other buildings that will be ideal for development of an organic learning center."⁶⁵ Similarly, "from the tops of its hills you can see some of the finest of all Eastern farm country, still being husbanded by Pennsylvania Dutch families whose lives revolve entirely around the land and its blessings."⁶⁶ Whereas the original farm operated as a project of the magazine, Robert Rodale planned for the new farm to be staffed by experienced agricultural scientists. In the next decade, the farm began the first controlled experiments of conversion to organic methods and the first long-term trials to compare organic practices side-by-side with conventional methods.

Rodale's new research site was a historic Pennsylvania farmstead that had been operated as a family farm for nine generations. However, Robert Rodale's ambitions for the new farm extended well beyond southeastern Pennsylvania. Influenced by critiques of postwar technology and the modern economy popularized by the works of philosopher Jacques Ellul and economist E. F. Schumacher, Robert Rodale and his staff used the farm as a place to experiment with a range of both old and new food production technologies.⁶⁷ To accompany articles and books on home food production, the firm's research group tested products such as electric food dryers and ice cream makers for the home and experimented with designs for homemade smokehouses, aquaculture ponds, and root cellars.⁶⁸ Although the press had long tested gardening methods on the original Organic Gardening Experimental Farm, the research group, according to Robert Rodale, was created "to speed the development of better techniques that you can use" to grow food and to "live organically."⁶⁹ Describing the New Farm, Robert

⁶⁵ Robert Rodale, "An Organic Science: A Goal for the Future," *Organic Gardening and Farming*, May 1972, 42.

⁶⁶ Robert Rodale, "The New Organic Gardening Experimental Farm," *Organic Gardening and Farming*, June 1972, 28.

⁶⁷ Rodale mentions Ellul with great frequency in his editorials in *Organic Gardening and Farming* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These editorials are collected in Robert Rodale, *Sane Living in a Mad World: A Guide to the Organic Way of Life* (Emmaus, PA, 1972), 43–44; see also Robert Rodale, "Small Is Necessary," *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Feb. 1976, 58–62.

⁶⁸ Carol Hupping Stoner, ed., *Stocking Up: How to Preserve the Foods You Grow, Naturally* (Emmaus, PA, 1973), 101, 146, 321.

⁶⁹ Robert Rodale, "Seeking a Better Way," *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Apr. 1975, 47.

Rodale claimed: “Our goal was to create a more complete demonstration of organic techniques in use—not just attractive vegetable gardens and ornamentals, but also other features in organic living and homesteading. We intended to show visitors alternate energy systems, fish-farming by organic methods, homestead-size poultry and animal husbandry methods, beekeeping, tree farming, and similar activities.” To complement these educational efforts, the company restored a one-room schoolhouse that existed on the property for a folk-inspired “Primitive Man Center,” which Rodale described as a “constantly changing museum showing how the life of primitive peoples can offer useful ideas and techniques relevant to our life today.”⁷⁰

The New Farm was also a place to bring together the diverse groups who were trying to find alternative paths to the slow decline of family farming in Pennsylvania. In September 1972, the farm served as the site for the first East Coast Organic Farmers meeting, which brought together Rodale’s staff with a group of five hundred organic farmers, distributors, and consumers from the region. Signaling the growing acceptance of organic practices, Pennsylvania’s secretary of agriculture, Jim McHale, was on hand to discuss the commonwealth’s expanding efforts to assist organic growers. Explicitly pointing to the declining number of small family farms, McHale thought organic production might provide the “shot-in-the-arm” Pennsylvania’s agricultural economy needed. A key goal of the meeting was to organize organic certification standards for the expanding market in the commonwealth. Working with state officials, Rodale’s staff hoped to use *Organic Gardening and Farming* as a tool for setting and evaluating growing practices across the state and country as a whole.⁷¹

The New Farm’s lineage to southeastern Pennsylvania’s storied agricultural past was a clear part of its appeal for Robert Rodale. Rodale used a cemetery on the west side of the property, which held the remains of the Siegfrieds, some of the earliest white settlers of the Kutztown area, to highlight the deep history of the place. Restoring the farm’s soils through organic methods, he claimed, was a process of uncovering its history: “Now that the chemicals are taken away, the soil reveals its heritage quickly.” The act of uncovering that history, moreover, was an argument for the superiority of organic methods: “With the chemicals gone, ours is now a living

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46–49.

⁷¹ “East Coast Meeting: Pennsylvania Develops Program to Aid Organic Farming,” *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Dec. 1972, 43–45.

historical farm in the sense we are discovering the heritage, the history, of our soil. . . . The science of farming takes you only so far. Then you have to become a historian, to try to figure out what happened to your land in the past and why, and how you can rebuild it to its original—or better—condition.”⁷² The New Farm continued to anchor the organic method in southeastern Pennsylvania’s soils and their history.

Further rooting the research of the New Farm was its association with Mennonites in the nearby vicinity. As Pennsylvania prepared for millions of visitors in the bicentennial summer of 1976, Robert Rodale encouraged organic enthusiasts to make Emmaus and the region’s landscape part of their journey. In an article describing local tourist attractions—including the Rodale-built bicycle velodrome in Trexlertown—Robert suggested making a visit to the New Farm to explore the research center and its various projects. At the end of a visit, Rodale encouraged would-be visitors to take a walk up the big hill on the north side of the farm for a view of the valley that stretched between Allentown and Reading. Commenting on the pastoral quality of the area, Rodale could not help but invoke its agrarian past: “There’s no prettier, more peaceful spot anywhere, in my opinion. From the hill, you can see a landscape that looks pretty much as it did 200 years ago. . . . If you watch the road for a while, you’ll see the Mennonites driving their black buggies, perhaps going into Kutztown to market or visiting relatives on nearby farms.”⁷³ The research center also turned to its Mennonite neighbors to generate evidence of the effectiveness of organic methods. Beginning in 1973, the center rented 170 acres to a neighboring farm family to operate as a mixed-crop and livestock operation, without the use of agricultural chemicals. By the 1980s, the “Kutztown farm” had grown to become more than a home for Rodale’s research teams; it was also a site for agricultural scientists to explore the economics and ecological impacts of alternative farming methods. A 1989 National Research Council report called the Kutztown Farm “probably the most thoroughly studied alternative farming operation in the country.”⁷⁴

To address land use changes and the decline of small farms, the Rodale Research Center also housed an extensive study of the growing insecurity of farms and food systems in Pennsylvania in the 1980s. Known as the

⁷² “More about the New Organic Gardening Farm,” *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Dec. 1972, 41–42.

⁷³ Robert Rodale, “Bicentennial Visit Suggestions,” *Organic Gardening and Farming*, Apr. 1976, 96–101.

⁷⁴ National Research Council (US), *Alternative Agriculture* (Washington, DC, 1989), 286.

“Cornucopia Project,” Rodale’s researchers worked with the state Department of Agriculture, the Department of Environmental Resources, county extension agents, and farming groups to highlight the challenges facing agriculture in Pennsylvania. The study catalogued the growing debt crisis and loss of family farms the commonwealth experienced in the 1970s and early 1980s and argued for strengthening farmland preservation laws.⁷⁵ Likewise, the Rodale Press and its allies used evidence from the extensive trials at the New Farm to press for legislation that supported low-impact and small-scale agricultural practices and national organic production standards. Robert Rodale became a prominent defender of Pennsylvania’s agricultural landscape and similar landscapes across the globe in the 1980s. When he died in 1990 in a tragic automobile accident in Russia, he was working to spread the organic philosophy that he and his father and many others had honed in the fields of eastern Pennsylvania.⁷⁶

J. I. Rodale came to eastern Pennsylvania in the 1930s in search of a place to locate his business, but it was there that he also discovered a place to root the ideals of the organic movement in the United States. In the fields and farms of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, Rodale saw a landscape created by long-term relationships with the soil, and in the Amish, Mennonite, and Pennsylvania German farmers of the area he found farming practices to idealize. Rodale’s claims about organic methods of farming and gardening were well outside of the mainstream of agricultural science and horticulture in the decades after 1945, and yet eastern Pennsylvania’s landscape gave him a place thick with agrarian history to make his unorthodox claims. The association that his company, the Rodale Press, built with Pennsylvania’s landscape could be as simple as describing a recipe for Pennsylvania Dutch corn pone or using a nearby example to promote national farmland preservation. While places such as the San Francisco Bay Area and the co-ops and communes scattered across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s certainly have their place in the history of the organic movement, the story of J. I. Rodale and the Rodale Press reminds us that we also need to include a place better known for horses and buggies, hex signs, and shoofly pies. Indeed, this reminds

⁷⁵ Cornucopia Project of the Rodale Press, *The Pennsylvania Food System: Planning for Regeneration* (Emmaus, PA, 1972); A national survey of these studies was published as Cornucopia Project, *Empty Breadbasket? The Coming Challenge to America’s Food Supply and What We Can Do about It: A Study of the U.S. Food System* (Emmaus, PA, 1981).

⁷⁶ See Robert Rodale, *Save Three Lives: A Plan for Famine Prevention* (San Francisco, 1991), 1–19.

us that although southeastern Pennsylvania's agricultural landscape is frequently remembered as a vanishing object in the twentieth century, it was also a landscape that could take on new meanings for new groups of people. The Pennsylvania countryside could at once be both a thing of the past and a natural place to create a new story for the future.

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