

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON RURAL AMERICA

A TOOLKIT FOR STORYTELLERS





“ I had an early impression of how welcoming, interesting, and layered rural life was, even in the 60s, when I was a kid visiting the small towns and farms where my parents grew up in Oklahoma and Kansas. There has long been a tendency to oversimplify rural America, and I look forward to storytellers using the context and practical guidance in this new resource to seeing more stories that portray these communities with the depth, energy, and authenticity they deserve. ”

- RON HOWARD, FILMMAKER & CO-FOUNDER OF IMAGINE ENTERTAINMENT

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

A great story knows no bounds. Whether in the form of books, films, or TV shows, stories have the power to cross physical and cultural boundaries to connect us in exciting, surprising, and fulfilling ways. Stories can help us understand parts of our world, our communities, and ourselves that we may not otherwise appreciate. To put it simply, stories allow us to discover how much we have in common with one another, even when our differences may seem more apparent at first glance.

Given the tremendous potential of stories to connect us, there is a lot of power in which stories we choose to tell – and how we tell them. This toolkit focuses specifically on storytelling about rural America, which comprises a broad swath of the American landscape and population. Interest in rural America has picked up in recent years in part due to the popularity of shows like *Yellowstone*, *The Conners*, and *Reservation Dogs*, which embrace their rural American settings and attempt to portray those places accurately.

However, as we'll explore in the following pages, rural representation on screen is limited and often stereotypical, which ultimately leaves many rural dwellers feeling misunderstood or completely unseen. Therefore, there is a major opportunity to tell more stories that explore the depth of rural America in order to help people better understand the vibrant culture and character of those regions and communities. To that end, this toolkit aims to provide storytellers with background knowledge and key insights into how to improve rural representation in film and television.

BUT FIRST:

WHAT IS RURAL AMERICA?

Though it may seem like a simple question, rural America is surprisingly difficult to define. From a geographic perspective, rural areas comprise a large part of the country and can take on a variety of forms, from ex-urban communities on the outskirts of metropolitan areas to remote, isolated communities with no nearby metro anchor.¹

In terms of population, 20% of the U.S. residents live in these areas, but demographic background varies widely and diversity has been on the rise in recent years.² As for industry, rural areas offer more than just farmland and crops; they provide access to key natural resources and energy.³

Simply put, rural America is not just the opposite of urban. It is a multifaceted, evolving spectrum of regions and communities across the country. Many rural Americans “typically define rurality through personal experiences like **community ties, connection to the land, and a slower pace of life**—regardless of how their region or population is classified by official metrics.”⁴

However, it only takes a quick survey of media portrayals of rural America from the past few years to see that this nuance and diversity is rarely reflected on screen, and the representation issue is one of both quantity and quality.

In fact, not only is rural America less likely to be depicted, but it is less likely to be depicted accurately.



According to research conducted by Getty Images, a mere 5% of popular US visuals are set in rural locations.⁵



On top of that, a study conducted by YouGov found 66% of rural dwellers think Hollywood presents a stereotyped view of rural America.⁶

Representation Matters

Rural representation often trends towards one of two diverging extremes. In some cases, rural is shown as a highly romanticized, idyllic alternative to the hustle and bustle of city life, with hashtags like #slowlife gaining popularity online. On the other hand, rural communities also appear as regressive, angry, and in decline. **Both of these portrayals oversimplify rural by reinforcing harmful stereotypes and overlooking the richness of rural communities.**



And this is not a new issue. As we'll see in the next section, rural America has been systematically ignored by the media for decades, which has created a representation gap that leaves little chance for rural Americans to feel seen on screen, let alone understood. Without meaningful, authentic representation in media and entertainment, rural audiences may not feel a sense of belonging in larger American culture, which creates a risk of catalyzing division

Only 4% of rural Americans believe they are portrayed accurately in media...

4%

2x

...while those not from rural areas are more than twice as likely to accept those portrayals as accurate.⁷

SO, HOW DID WE GET HERE?



MASS MEDIA'S MOVEMENT AWAY FROM RURAL

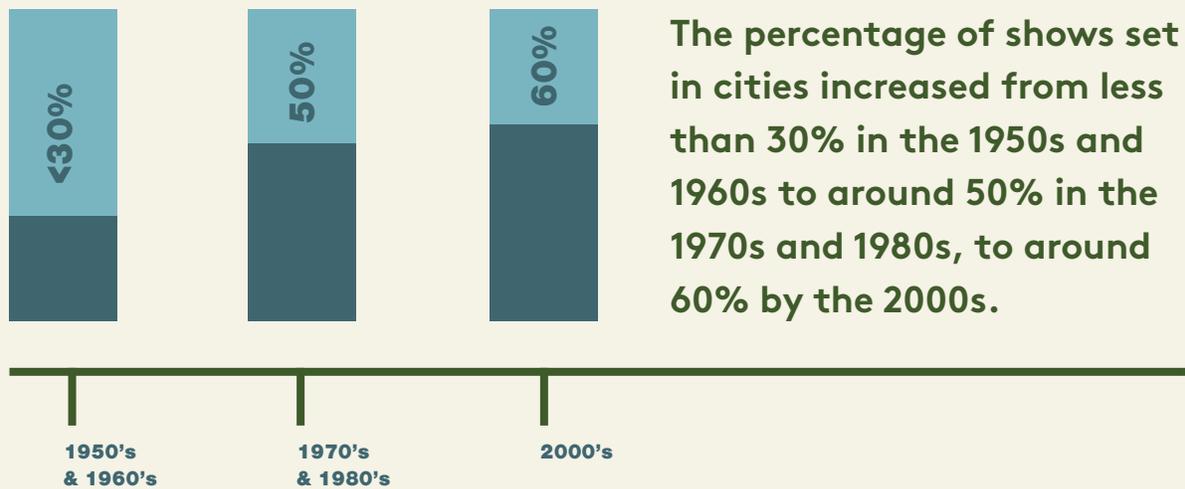
While there are many factors in America's cultural and economic history that contributed to the way that coastal urban centers eclipsed rural areas as drivers of cultural currency, we'll focus here on more recent developments around rural media, specifically television.

In the mid-20th century, the TV medium was becoming increasingly prevalent in homes across the country, reaching millions of people with both entertainment and advertisements. As the audience size grew, the landscape of TV shows began to change – literally.

In the early 1970s, CBS took all of its top performing shows off the air in a move that became known as the “Rural Purge.” Shows like *Lassie* and *Green Acres* were pulled, despite consistently strong ratings.⁸ As Pat Buttram of the axed *Green Acres* put it: “They cancelled everything with a tree.”⁹ The purported rationale behind this decision was that the network needed to focus on shows that targeted young, educated, urban audiences, since those viewers were more appealing to advertisers.

THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM RURAL SHOWS HAS CONTINUED IN MORE RECENT YEARS, TOO.

In fact, as one study from the Brookings Institution found, “TV shows have become consistently more urban over time,” noting that:



The percentage of shows set in cities increased from less than 30% in the 1950s and 1960s to around 50% in the 1970s and 1980s, to around 60% by the 2000s.

Suburban shows consistently comprised about 25% of shows over that time frame.¹⁰



What's more, that same study found that “almost all urban shows and about 78 percent of suburban shows are set in real, identifiable U.S. metropolitan areas. By contrast, more than half of small town and rural shows are set in fictional locations.”¹¹ There may be a number of reasons for why shows opted for urban centers or fictional towns instead of rural areas, but the bottom line here is that real rural communities are just not appearing on screen.

Even the infrastructure of the media landscape often excludes rural areas. As USC Professor of Communication Geoffrey Cowan describes, large radio stations are typically located in or near urban areas, while rural areas are more dependent on local public radio, a resource that has been increasingly under threat in recent years. Coupled with the decline of local newspapers and sometimes limited access to broadband internet, many of these rural communities are unable to see themselves on screen – and no one else is seeing them either.



STORYTELLING AS A SOLUTION

With so much diversity, innovation, and energy in rural areas, so little of which appears on screen, there is a distinct opportunity to harness the power of storytelling to reflect a rich, often unseen side of American life. **We are in a moment where audiences are hungry for fresh stories that can immerse them in vibrant communities full of rich characters, and that’s exactly what rural America offers – engaging stories that allow viewers to redefine success, realize their potential, and come together over the American experience.**

This toolkit offers ideas of how to use **theme, character, and visuals** to better represent the incredible richness of rural America and the stories it contains. Designed for screenwriters and producers, this toolkit distills research, expert narrative change guidance, and perspectives from rural residents including some Land O’Lakes member-owners. They shared many valuable insights on how to get rural America right – what matters, what doesn’t, and where the biggest opportunities and challenges lie.

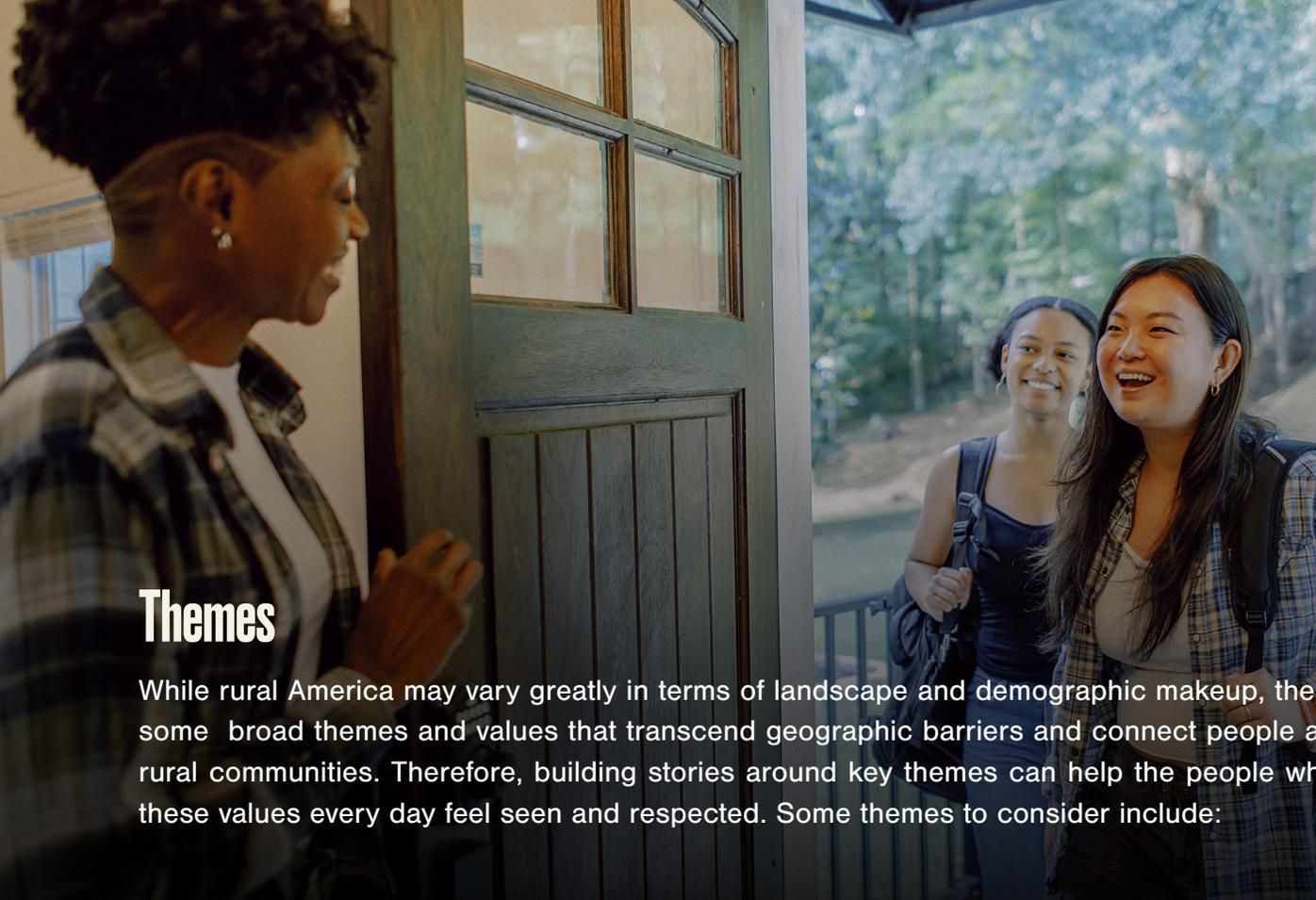
The ultimate goal of this toolkit is to help raise awareness to the multifaceted nature of rural America and to inspire more authentic portrayals and stories about those communities. **As storytellers and marketers, we have the power to communicate with large audiences and bring a vision to life, whether it’s a new TV show or a global brand campaign.** This toolkit offers a starting point to provide background and inspiration with the goal of making it easier to identify, develop and champion rural stories.

THREE PILLARS: THEMES, CHARACTERS, VISUALS

“ [Appalachia is] a region that’s a little hard to pin down on a map because it includes parts of a lot of states, starting from north Georgia, eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina and Virginia, up into the coal country of Kentucky and West Virginia, and then up into the Ridge Country of Pennsylvania. So that sounds complicated. But to us, it is a whole place. We’re more connected with each other, culturally and geographically, than we are with the far ends of our own states. It’s a place, and it’s a mind-set.”

- PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AND NATIVE KENTUCKIAN AUTHOR BARBARA KINGSOLVER





Themes

While rural America may vary greatly in terms of landscape and demographic makeup, there are some broad themes and values that transcend geographic barriers and connect people across rural communities. Therefore, building stories around key themes can help the people who live these values every day feel seen and respected. Some themes to consider include:

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND HELPING NEIGHBORS.

In a world of togetherness deficit, rural communities have cracked the code on cooperation and collaboration. **52% of rural dwellers reported being active in solving problems in their local community, with younger adults reporting higher levels of participation.**¹³

Telling stories around people cooperating and taking initiative to get involved in local organizations can showcase how community is a superpower that makes rural communities so vibrant and multifaceted.

As fifth-generation farmer and Frontier Cooperative CEO, Jeremy Wilhelm, put it: **“We don’t have Wall Street investors to worry about. We don’t have foreign investors to worry about. We have our local communities to worry about,”** which is why profits from Frontier Cooperative stay 100% local. In fact, many Frontier Cooperative farmer-owners are involved with local youth sports teams, churches, and their local volunteer fire department.

As much as community is something that rural dwellers actively opt into, cooperation and teamwork are also often borne out of necessity. Dairy farmer and Land O’Lakes board member Steve Harnish highlighted this reality with the example of farm auctions. **“During a farm auction,”** he said, **“farmers can be aggressive as they try to outbid one another. But outside of the auctions, if one farmer is short a tractor or is sick and unable to work, those same competitors will step up to loan their equipment or cover the labor in order to make sure that no one member of the community falls behind.”** He continued: **“There’s a deep sense of responsibility to care for others and protect our shared industry, which is what makes rural places so special.”**



FOUND FAMILY.

Finding people with similar interests and passions is an important experience in adult life no matter where in the country you live. As described above, rural communities are dynamic and energetic, but finding your people in rural areas looks different than in urban centers for various reasons, including, simply, that there are fewer people in rural locales. However, that doesn't mean the exercise of looking for your group is futile or impossible. Showrunners Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen, who created *Somebody Somewhere*, describe their visit to Kansas to prepare for the show: **“We found out they don't have a gay bar, but there's gay night at some venues. It reminded us of our [rural] high school theater days where you find your people and make something,”** says Thureen. **“If you don't see a place for yourself, you make the place for yourself.”**¹⁴ Developing storylines around finding family can allow for viewers to relate to and engage more deeply with the characters, and it may also just inspire them to make their own places in their lives.



SPIRIT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION.

For those not in the agricultural industry, it may not be apparent how tech-savvy and future-thinking that work is. But in response to recent issues of trade, interest rates, commodity prices, insufficient labor, and natural disasters, farmers have figured out how to adapt by optimizing systems to keep food sustainable and affordable for generations to come. Highlighting how people work together, embrace technology, and develop unique solutions to unique problems can go a long way in advancing narratives around farming.

“ [Farmers are] innovators. They have to bring their own solutions to the table. They’re entrepreneurs. They’re self-made, self-starters, independent workers. They were environmentalists before that word was even invented. Their goal is to pass the land on to the next generation in a better scenario and with a better outcome and in better health than how they received it. And they aren’t just thinking about the transactional year-to-year farming. They are farming for the generations that came before them and the next generation. ”

- JEREMY WILHELM

In addition, stories of rural entrepreneurship outside of agriculture offer several distinct benefits to representation. First, they can shine a light on how small businesses drive the rural economy, providing a chance to tell unique stories of industries outside of farming or ranching. Second, they can showcase how these industries are as advanced and tech-driven as any city business, which can help rural portrayals evolve beyond stereotypes that show towns and communities that are stuck in the past.

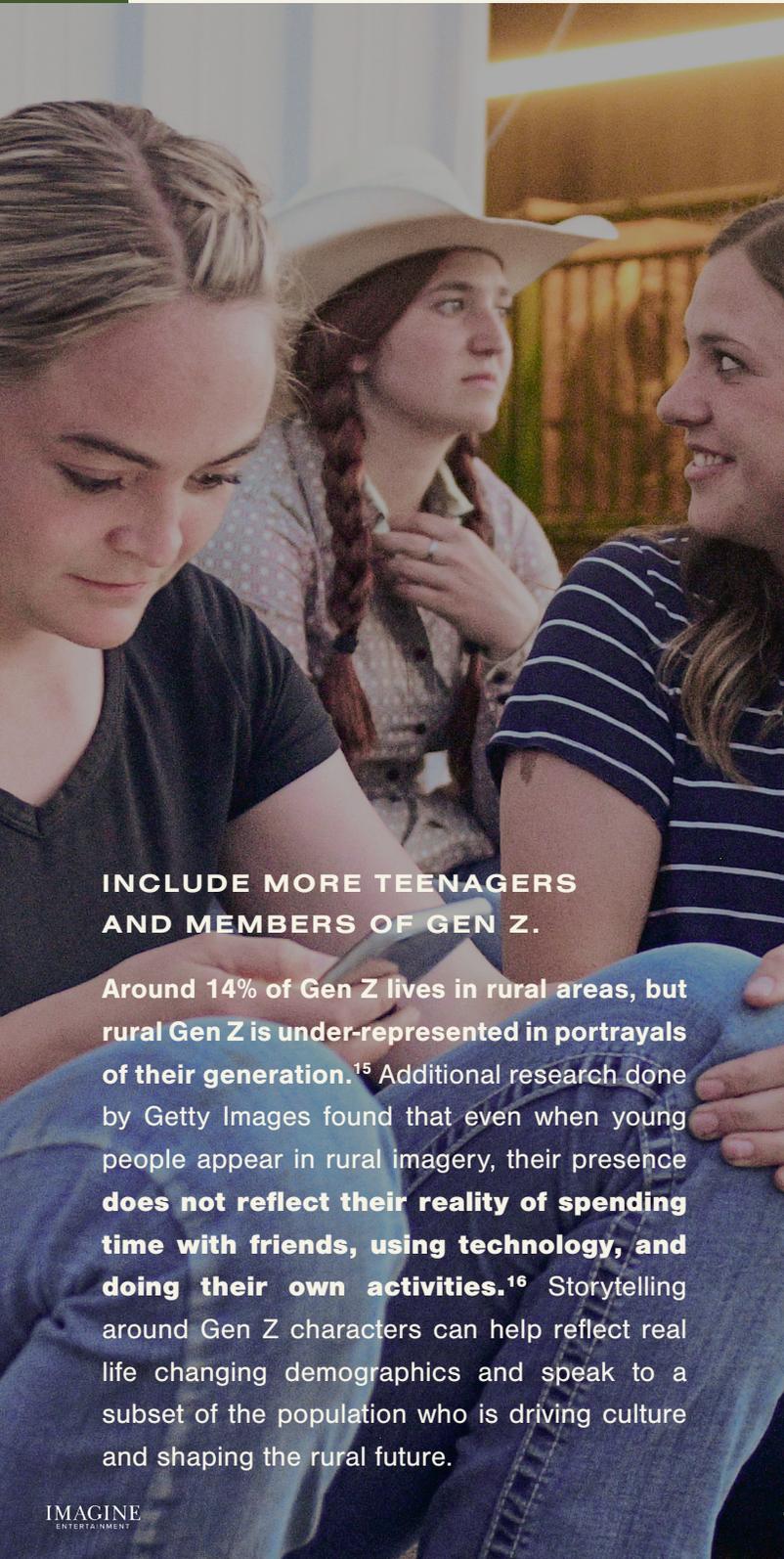
Finally, they show that dreams can be anywhere. One of the cliché narratives around rural America is that you have to leave and go to a big city to pursue, or even have, dreams. But many people are able to realize their dreams in rural areas, with some people even moving to rural areas to achieve their goals. Telling stories about people who live their dreams in rural spaces can help break down the cliché and inspire future generations.



Of course, many of these themes are universal, so while they may be especially apparent in and important to rural communities, they have the potential to resonate with audiences everywhere.

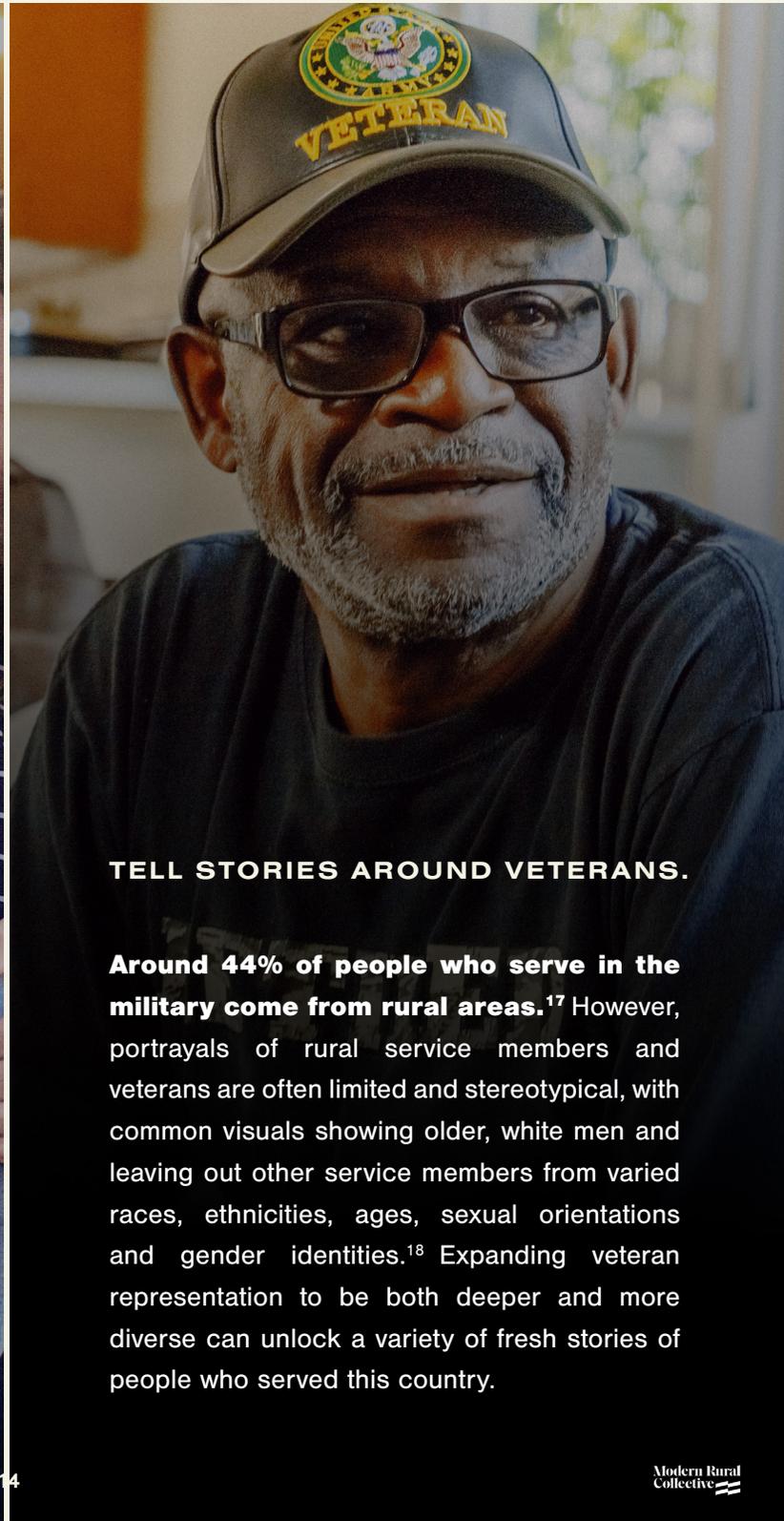
Characters

Characters bring themes to life through their actions and allow people to see themselves; therefore, who we put on screen matters. To avoid cliches or stereotypes for rural characters, below are some portrayals that could expand the tapestry of rural America on screen.



INCLUDE MORE TEENAGERS AND MEMBERS OF GEN Z.

Around 14% of Gen Z lives in rural areas, but rural Gen Z is under-represented in portrayals of their generation.¹⁵ Additional research done by Getty Images found that even when young people appear in rural imagery, their presence **does not reflect their reality of spending time with friends, using technology, and doing their own activities.**¹⁶ Storytelling around Gen Z characters can help reflect real life changing demographics and speak to a subset of the population who is driving culture and shaping the rural future.



TELL STORIES AROUND VETERANS.

Around 44% of people who serve in the military come from rural areas.¹⁷ However, portrayals of rural service members and veterans are often limited and stereotypical, with common visuals showing older, white men and leaving out other service members from varied races, ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations and gender identities.¹⁸ Expanding veteran representation to be both deeper and more diverse can unlock a variety of fresh stories of people who served this country.



REPRESENT PEOPLE OF COLOR.

Rural America is portrayed as overwhelmingly white, despite the fact that **nearly a quarter of rural Americans are people of color.**¹⁹ Rural America includes Native Americans living on reservations, African Americans in the South, and immigrants. Including characters with these backgrounds creates a meaningful opportunity for storytellers to bring the full diversity of rural America to the screen.

Diversity in Farming.

The 2022 Census of Agriculture, shows that “**white people – who make up only 61.6% of the population – are 95.4% of farmers,**”²⁰ a reflection of long-standing barriers to land access for many communities. As the same time, US Department of Labor statistics show that **Hispanic workers make up 77% of all farmworkers,**²¹ highlighting how essential their labor is to the industry. **There is an opportunity to spotlight the full range of people who sustain our food system, by telling their stories and bringing their leadership, experiences and contributions within the broader cultural conversation.**

INCLUDE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

Statistics show that there is a higher prevalence of people with disabilities in rural America as compared to urban areas – **17.7% in rural regions compared to 11.7% in urban counties** – yet few visuals include them.²² By creating characters with a physical or mental impairment, who are neighbors or family members and who work in mainstream professions (e.g. teachers, first responders, bankers), we can strengthen understanding and connection with people who share these lived experiences.



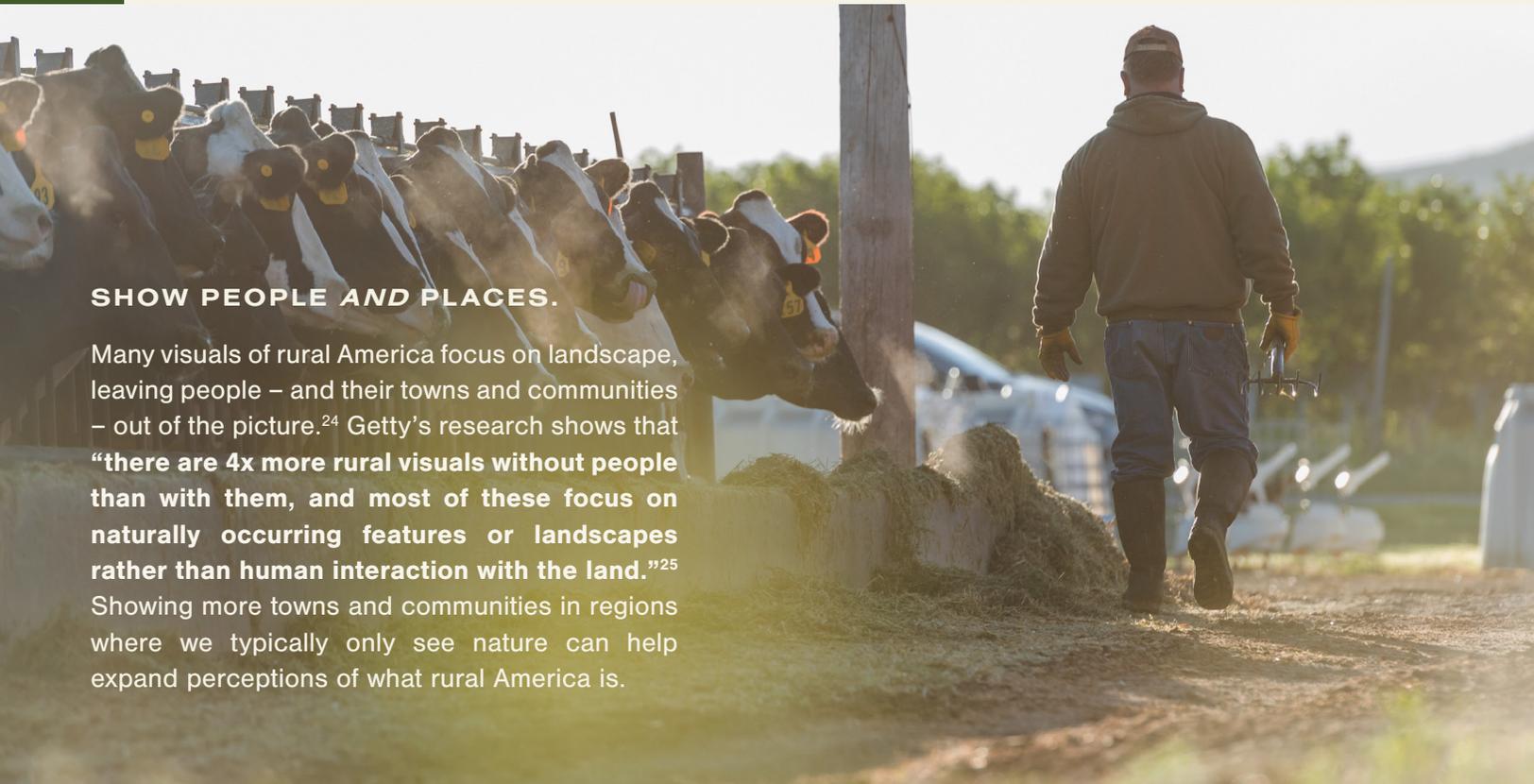
SHOW WORKING WOMEN.

Women in rural settings are typically portrayed in a leisurely fashion, rather than as active members of society.²³ Showing women taking agency by portraying them as economic contributors, leaders, caregivers, environmental stewards and community members, can help showcase their role and contributions more accurately.

Visuals

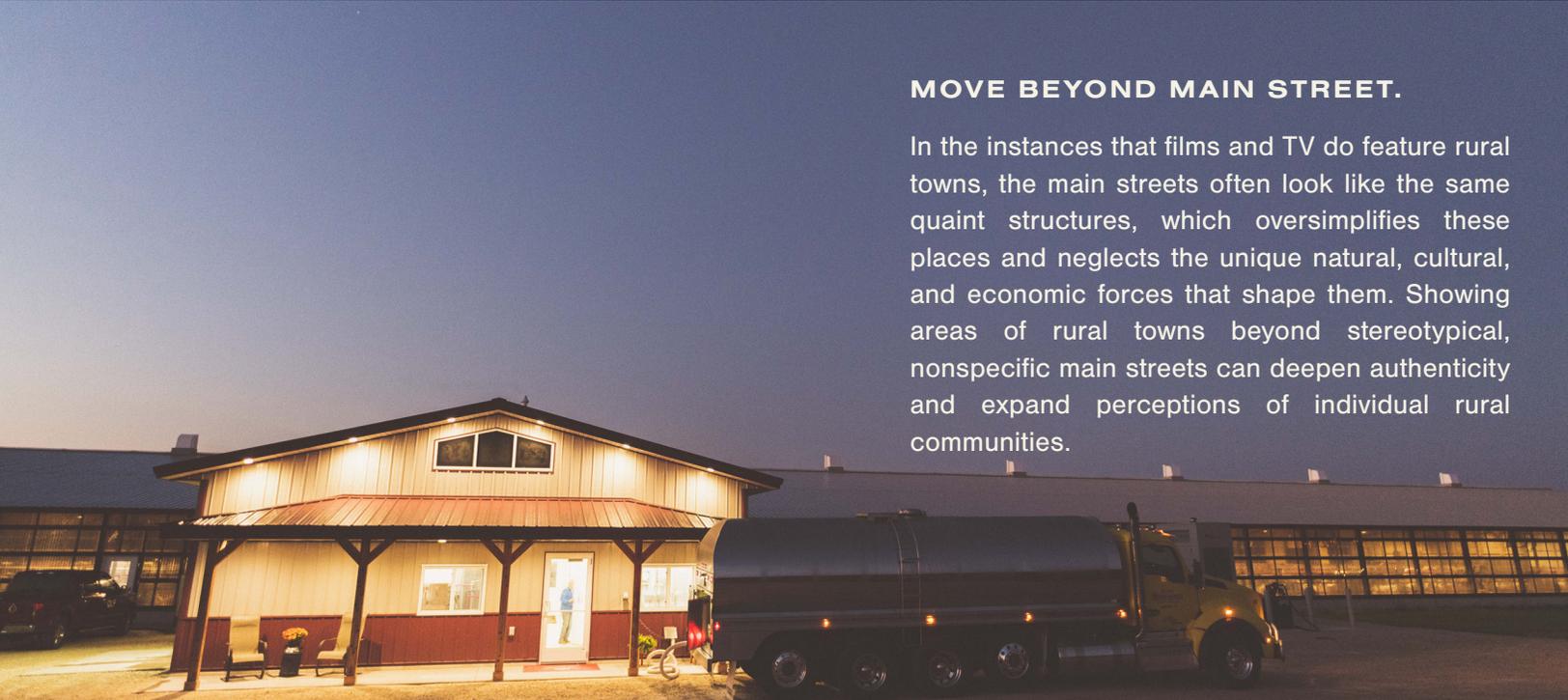
A story's setting offers another opportunity to reflect accurate and diverse representation. Research from Getty Images offers some suggestions on how to expand visuals of rural America.

SHOW PEOPLE AND PLACES.

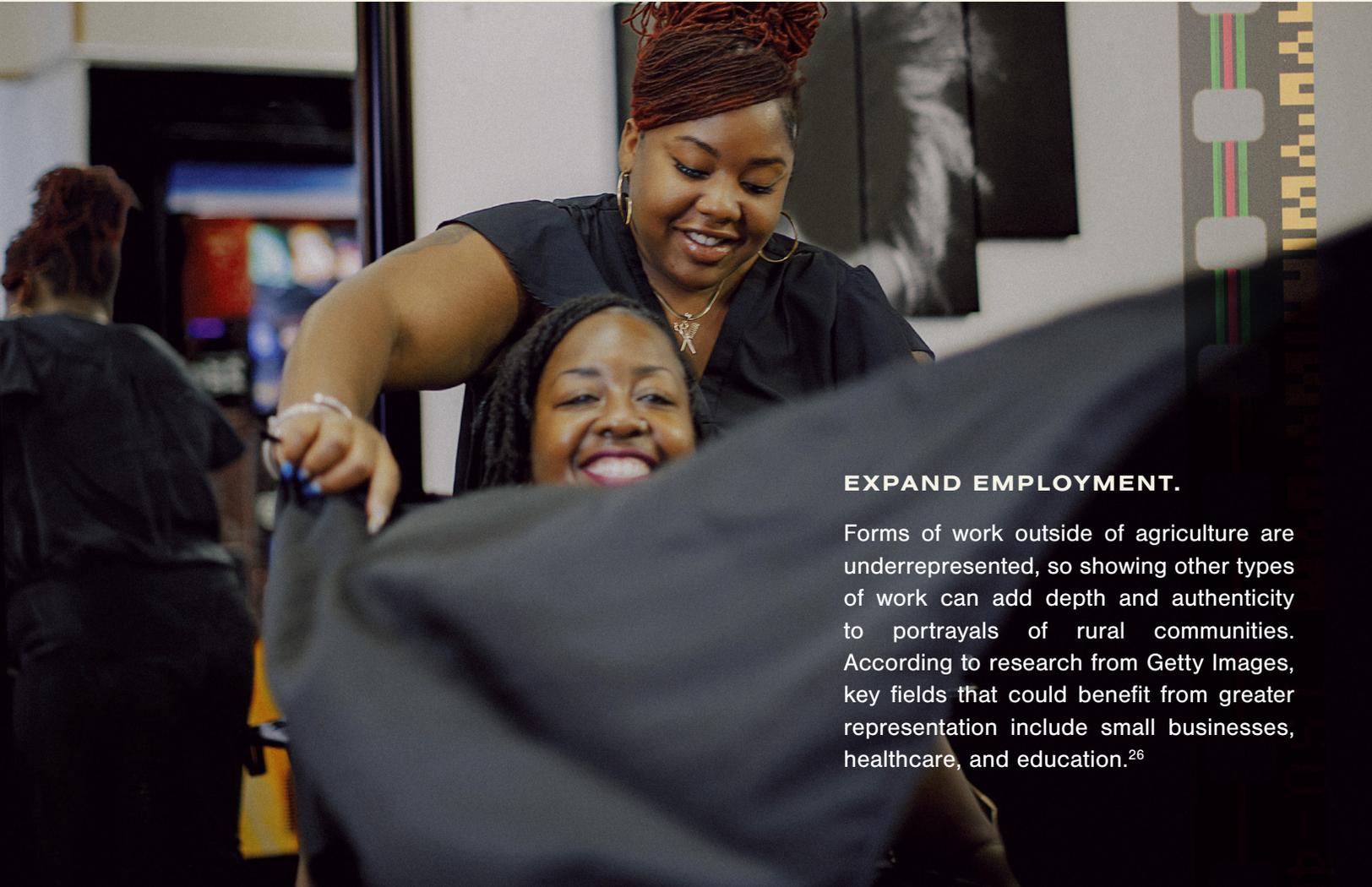


Many visuals of rural America focus on landscape, leaving people – and their towns and communities – out of the picture.²⁴ Getty's research shows that **“there are 4x more rural visuals without people than with them, and most of these focus on naturally occurring features or landscapes rather than human interaction with the land.”**²⁵ Showing more towns and communities in regions where we typically only see nature can help expand perceptions of what rural America is.

MOVE BEYOND MAIN STREET.



In the instances that films and TV do feature rural towns, the main streets often look like the same quaint structures, which oversimplifies these places and neglects the unique natural, cultural, and economic forces that shape them. Showing areas of rural towns beyond stereotypical, nonspecific main streets can deepen authenticity and expand perceptions of individual rural communities.



EXPAND EMPLOYMENT.

Forms of work outside of agriculture are underrepresented, so showing other types of work can add depth and authenticity to portrayals of rural communities. According to research from Getty Images, key fields that could benefit from greater representation include small businesses, healthcare, and education.²⁶



LOOK BEYOND LIFESTYLE CLICHES.

Avoid showing rural life as regressive or overly romanticized, as those framings oversimplify rural communities. Instead, highlight fresh and varied aspects of rural areas that reflect diversity, community, self-sufficiency, creativity, and innovation.²⁷ An increased range of visuals can help break down stereotypes and showcase that rural life is a spectrum rather than a monolith.

FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

Friday Night Lights, the Emmy and Peabody Award-winning drama, explores the lives of high school football players, coaches, and residents in the fictional town of Dillon, Texas. At its core, the show uses football as a lens to dive deep into the personal struggles, relationships, and dreams of a small community, presenting an authentic, multidimensional portrayal of rural America.

THEMES

One of the major themes across all five seasons of *Friday Night Lights* is community. High school football unites people across social and economic divides, giving them shared pride, identity, and purpose. Because Dillon is a small town where everyone knows one another, personal successes and failures are public, and what happens on the field can very much have a ripple effect to the rest of the community — and vice versa. That tight-knit dynamic is part of what makes rural towns so vibrant and special, and *Friday Night Lights* emphasizes how powerful that sense of togetherness can be.

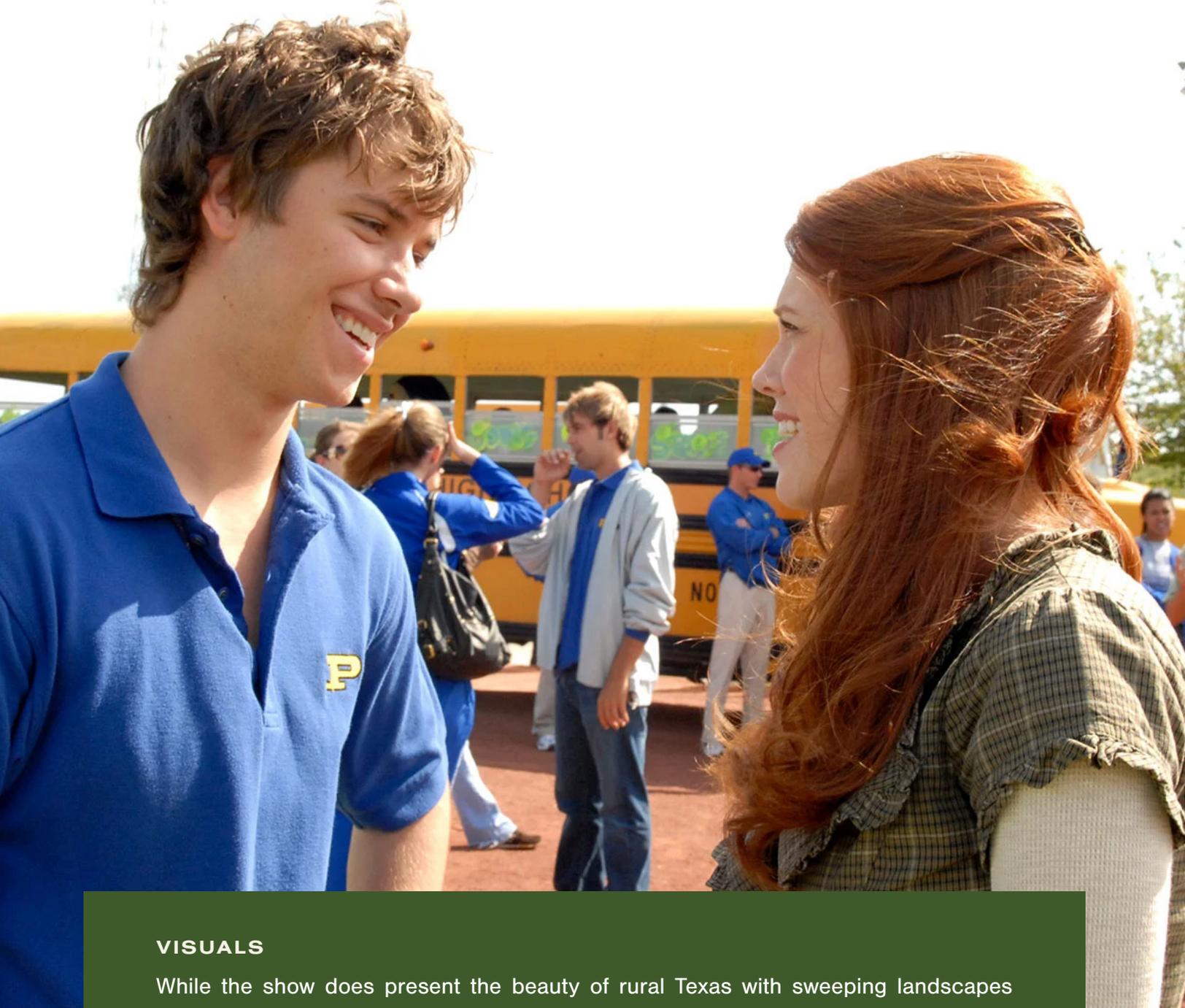


CHARACTERS

The show features a rich tapestry of complex characters who vary in background, economic status, and lifestyle. Many of the characters are high school-aged teenagers, which, as mentioned above, is a group that is often underrepresented or oversimplified in rural portrayals. These characters are relatable in their coming-of-age growth, struggles, and dreams as they try to figure out their role in the community, and each is also nuanced in a way that keeps them from being reduced to a simple stereotype.

For example, Tim Riggins (played by Taylor Kitsch), appears on the surface to be an archetypal bad boy with his partying and drinking, but he ultimately breaks out of this mold by showing compassion and loyalty towards his teammates, which gives him depth and humanity.

In addition, Tami Taylor (played by Connie Britton) is a strong example of a female character who is not only a wife and mother, but is also dedicated to her career in education, both as a guidance counselor and later as the principal of Dillon High. She is multifaceted and dynamic, which not only helps her feel more authentic and human, but also serves to expand viewers' understanding of who exists in rural communities.



VISUALS

While the show does present the beauty of rural Texas with sweeping landscapes and natural lighting, this setting is integrated into the characters' lives—not just as a backdrop, but as a crucial part of their everyday existence. Many scenes take place at local businesses, family homes, and the high school football field, which give Dillon an authentic, lived-in quality and emphasize the show's focus on community.

***Friday Night Lights* stands out for its authentic portrayal of rural America, avoiding stereotypes and offering a nuanced, heartfelt exploration of the complexities of small-town life. The show's emphasis on humanity and connection resonates with audiences and underscores the deep cultural relevance of rural stories.**

CASE STUDY #2:

SOMEBODY SOMEWHERE

Peabody and Emmy award-winning dramedy *Somebody Somewhere* follows 40-something Sam as she returns to her hometown of Manhattan, Kansas and navigates life, friendship, and family after the death of her sister.

The great triumph of the show is its honest, human portrayals of Sam and her community. Actor Jeff Hiller, who plays Sam's best friend Joel, shared about how the show achieves its authenticity through theme, character, and visuals.

THEMES

The show centers around the theme of found family. Hiller explained that the idea of finding your people is universal – it's something we all try to do – but *Somebody Somewhere* explores what that process looks like in a place where there are fewer people in general and therefore fewer people like you. As the show highlights, you often have to look in unexpected places, and for Sam that means being brave and performing at an underground cabaret known as Choir Practice, which is where she meets her group of friends.

CHARACTERS

Somebody Somewhere presents Manhattan, Kansas as a place where many different types of people coexist. The show includes queer people, people of color, and people of varied ages, body types and life stages. With so many varied portrayals, the show captures the diversity that exists in rural America, lending a sense of authentic humanity to the onscreen community.





VISUALS

The show does feature farms, barns, and crops, but they aren't there simply to establish a rural environment; they are integrated into the character's daily lives. For instance, Sam's parents live on a farm, and now that her father is getting older, she and her sister have started helping him out with maintaining the land and the barn.

We also see much more of the town beyond farmland and agriculture. We see small businesses – Sam's sister owns a home goods store downtown – as well as offices, schools, and churches (Choir Practice takes place in a church basement). All of these elements help to show Manhattan, Kansas as a three-dimensional town full of engaged community members.

***Somebody Somewhere* would not exist without the belief and persistence of its creators, Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen, as well as the passion of the entire cast and crew to bring it to life. The success of the Emmy-winning series reflects the cultural impact a show can have when it uplifts rural voices and stories, especially those that are often overlooked.**

CONCLUSION

By increasing the visibility of rural America on screen, creatives have the opportunity to tell powerful, well-crafted stories that reflect the full diversity and complexity of rural life. If you're a producer, think about ways to identify and champion stories from rural creators. Strive to include more people from rural areas both in front of and behind the camera to help bring rural stories to life in an authentic way. If you're a screenwriter, lean on real experiences, themes, and characters to infuse your stories with honesty and avoid tropes. If you do not have a rural background, connect with someone who does and work together to ensure your writing captures the spirit of rural communities.

When narratives are rooted in authentic rural experiences, they expand representation, break down stereotypes and offer audiences an entertaining – and richer – understanding of the country as a whole.

For more information and additional resources, including the Repicturing Rural playbook referenced throughout this toolkit, please visit the **[Modern Rural Collective](#)** website or scan the QR code.



About the Modern Rural Collective

The Modern Rural Collective (MRC) is a network of storytellers, marketers, and brands with a shared mission. Convened by Land O'Lakes, Inc., MRC is working to inspire a new narrative for all Americans – one rooted in mutual aspiration and authentic representation.

Through tools and strategic collaborations with Getty Images and Imagine Entertainment, MRC is helping to shape the portrayal of rural America, reflecting both its value and values. By elevating the truth and potential of rural communities, MRC fosters cultural understanding and connection across geographies.

About Imagine Entertainment

Founded in 1986 by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard, Imagine Entertainment is a multi-award-winning film and television production company with a remarkable track record of creating critically acclaimed and commercially successful content across genres for over 40 years. Imagine's productions have been honored with 90 prestigious awards, including 47 ACADEMY AWARD™ nominations and 296 Emmy® award nominations. Award-winning productions include the ACADEMY AWARD™ Best Picture winner "A Beautiful Mind", as well as Grammy Award Best Film winner "The Beatles: Eight Days A Week – The Touring Years" and the critically acclaimed documentary "Jim Henson Idea Man", a definitive portrait of Jim Henson's life, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and won the Best Documentary EMMY Award following its global premiere on Disney+.

With numerous hit projects including the Peabody Award-winning "Judy Blume Forever," (Prime Video), "Frida" (Amazon/MGM), "Genius: MLK/X" (Disney+); "The Dynasty: New England Patriots" (Apple TV+), "Friday Night Lights" (NBC), "Parenthood" (NBC), "Apollo 13" "Rush", "The Da Vinci Code", "Frost/Nixon", and "How The Grinch Stole Christmas", Imagine Entertainment has consistently redefined the boundaries of storytelling in the entertainment industry.

Recent projects include "The Gringo Hunters," a drama for Netflix based on investigative reporting in the Washington Post, a feature-length Barbara Walters documentary for Hulu, and "After the Hunt," a thriller for Amazon MGM directed by Luca Guadagnino and starring Julia Roberts, Andrew Garfield, Ayo Edebiri, Michael Stuhlbarg and Chloë Sevigny. Upcoming projects include a Ron Howard-directed documentary on renowned photographer Richard Avedon.

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24. Land O'Lakes Inc., and gettyimages, "Repicturing Rural," pp. 20.
25. Land O'Lakes Inc., and gettyimages, "Repicturing Rural," pp. 21.
26. Land O'Lakes Inc., and gettyimages, "Repicturing Rural," pp. 29-31.
27. Land O'Lakes Inc. "Rural American Gen Z," pp. 16. 2024.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON RURAL AMERICA

A TOOLKIT FOR STORYTELLERS

