

# *The* PROGRESSIVE FARMER®

[www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces](http://www.progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces) | \$2.95

## **Best Places** **TO LIVE IN RURAL AMERICA**

*There are more than 3,500 counties in America.  
About 2,000 of them are rural. Only 10 made the cut  
for our third annual list of the country's best.*

# Great PLACES, Great PEOPLE



Dawn Atkinson

PHOTO: MARTHA COOPER/TAINY ARCHIVES

“When we get together, the Spirit soars.”

This year our annual issue on the Best Places to Live in Rural America took us to Kentucky, Texas, New York, California, South Dakota, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, North Carolina and Iowa. But our travels turned up more than just best places to live; we also found some of the best people.

Take Bob Klemme of Garfield County, Oklahoma. Back in 1939, Bob's ninth-grade teacher showed the class where ruts from the Chisolm Trail cut through Garfield County.

That bit of local history made such an impression on the young man that as an adult he spent parts of seven years of his life marking the trail across the entire state.

He started at the Red River on the state's southern border and placed markers at each section line all the way to the Kansas border. The job took 400 cast concrete posts, which weigh 200 pounds each and are 7 feet tall. Bob made 104 of those posts himself.

Our visit to Amador County, California, (No. 9 on the list) turned up Ken and Jeanie Deaver, who still harvest grapes from

vines planted by their gold rush ancestors. Longtime farmers like the Deavers are at the epicenter of trying to keep their land zoned for agricultural use as population grows in Amador County.

“The county felt it wasn't really agriculture,” Ken says. But he and Jeanie got the public behind them. They convinced county officials that demonstration gardens at their Amador Flower Farm, their vineyard and their Halloween activities with hayrides, a pumpkin patch and a corn maze still make their place a working farm.

And then there's Dawn Atkinson from St. Lawrence County (No. 6 on our list) in Upstate New York. Dawn is the glue that holds her rural community together. On the third Wednesday of every month, her neighbors—three of them are 93 years old—come to her home to sing, tell stories and have a bowl of soup. “We get together, pray, get an update on everyone's medical reports,” says Dawn.

Then Dawn brings out her guitar, and the singing begins. These days it's rare to find someone familiar with “Red Wing,” an old fiddle piece from long ago, or “Prisoner Song,” the No. 1 country record from 1924. But Dawn's neighbors love her for sharing these songs again and again. “They never get tired of them,” Dawn says.

“There are a lot of spiritual people in the room.” Dawn pauses a moment, then smiles. “And when we get together, the Spirit soars.”

**ON THE COVER:** Tidioute is an idyllic small town in Warren County, Penn., No. 2 on our list of Best Places To Live in Rural America. Photo by Jamie Cole.



Ken Deaver

PHOTO: JAMIE COLE

*Jack Odle*

Jack Odle, Editor

P.O. Box 2581

Birmingham, AL 35202

(205) 445-6419

jodle@progressivefarmer.com

PHOTO: JAMIE COLE

# Take a trip

with us across the country—the *real* country. We've been to the four corners of America looking for the best rural counties. First we looked at the numbers (education, crime, health care, etc.) and then at what the numbers can't tell us. These 10 counties, spread throughout every region of the country, have more than just great statistics going for them. They're scenic, peaceful, and in their own way are all perfect for living the American dream. These 10 counties are the

## **BEST PLACES TO LIVE IN RURAL America**

**NO 1**  
**BARREN**  
**COUNTY**  
**Kentucky**

*Story and Photos by* **JOE LINK**



**B**ARREN COUNTY is the kind of place where people come, like what they see, then decide to call it home. Scottish immigrants did it in the late 1700s—thus a county seat named Glasgow—and people are still coming today.

With its rolling farmland and friendly residents, there's little reason to wonder why. "We probably send out six relocation packages a week," notes Ann Stewart with the county Chamber of Commerce. That wouldn't be so unusual except that Barren County is somewhat off the beaten track—not really famous for much other than its proximity to Mammoth Cave.

But once you discover this land, it's not hard to see why people say, "This would be a nice little place to live."

History is rich in these parts. People honor those who have fought in wars, so you'll find memorials of one sort or the other scattered throughout the countryside. Portraits of native soldiers who have died hang in county offices. They range from recent wars all the way back to the Civil War—five Confederate soldiers, two Union and one unknown.

While many rural areas have struggled to attract commerce, businesses here are thriving. Three industrial parks have filled and a fourth is in the works.

The county scored well in our health-care statistics, so we weren't surprised to find a residency program for new doctors—a rarity for a community so small. "I can't think of a better place



**Karin and Gary Carroll came from California to run a bed and breakfast and found friendly neighbors.**

to train doctors than in Glasgow," says Dr. Brent Wright, who started his own training here eight years ago. He liked the area so much he stayed, and now he is director of the program.

Education scored well in our statistics, so the three school systems must be doing something right. The county schools are growing quickly, but nevertheless have some of the highest achievement scores in the state.

Bill Walter, assistant superintendent of Barren County schools, came from Ohio 13 years ago and is impressed with the entire community. "It was amazing to me when I got involved how people—all types of people from all walks of life—cooperate with each other to get something done," he says.

Karin and Gary Carroll encountered something similar when they moved here a year ago from California to run the historic Hall Place Bed and Breakfast.

"People here are just different," Karin relates. "When we came, (CONTINUED)



**Brenda Hunt retired from teaching to farm. Today she has one of the county's largest farms.**



Christopher (left) and William Taylor share their good fortune with passersby.



## BARREN AT A GLANCE

Population .....	39,743
Population Density .....	79.53/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income...	\$43,993
Average Home Price.....	\$117,426
Crime Rate .....	21
Pollution Rate .....	96
Student/Teacher Ratio .....	12.7:1

(See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)

we had people coming by with baked bread. Never in California have I ever had that happen."

There's little doubt that a strong farming heritage continues to influence attitudes and tradition. Barren County holds on to its rural roots; each year it ranks at the top of Kentucky's agricultural production. And though so many U.S. farms are becoming "megafarms," most of the county's farms are still small in comparison.

People moving in. Farmers still farming. Rural communities facing change. It's not an uncommon story in many parts of the country. And like so many other areas, Barren County is coming to a crossroads sooner or later.

Davie Greer, the county's judge/executive, has been telling residents for several years that her county is growing fast enough to warrant some kind of plan for the future. And although county residents generally have wanted little part of that, Greer's message is that random growth will eventually cost taxpayers more in infrastructure needs.

Perhaps the message is working. Last fall Greer won a new four-year term even though her opponent criticized her on this very issue.

"I just want to have the right kind of growth and preserve our farmland," Greer says. And the alternative? It would take many years, but with unplanned growth, "Bit by bit, the farm is gone."



Allison Dickinson (above) helps Alex Wood with his reading lesson. Dr. Brent Wright (left) examines X-rays with chief resident Dr. Ray Rowland.



## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Barren County: **10.5 acres** with three-bedroom house: **\$89,500**  
 ★ **13 acres** of gently rolling land overlooking creek: **\$98,500** or \$7,575 per acre ★ **24.4 acres** with pond and fences: **\$80,000** or \$3,280 per acre



**№ 2**

# **WARREN COUNTY**

## **Pennsylvania**

*Story and Photos by* **JAMIE COLE**

**W**ARREN COUNTY is the kind of place that seems custom-made for every season on the calendar. It's tucked underneath the New York-Pennsylvania state line and just an hour or so from the lakeside town of Erie. A river runs through it—the Allegheny—strikingly picturesque at every bend.

But it's the hills that give the county its character. "Our hills are beautiful," says lifelong resident George Miller, who lives in Bear Lake on land that has been in his family since 1833. "In spring, we have the most vivid green in the world; in the fall, reds and yellows that take your breath." The summers aren't unbearably hot, the winters aren't unbearably cold. "Anyone can go out and feel like working," says George.

Or playing. On the east end of the county the Allegheny turns northward, and there the Kinzua Dam and Allegheny Reservoir are renowned spots for fishing and camping. The hills get steeper in the Allegheny National Forest—steep enough for skiing or a breathtaking snowmobile or ATV ride, depending on the season.

George's nephew Brad Miller and his wife, Suzanne, live on the family land now too; they made the transition from city life after living in New Jersey. Their three teenaged daughters—all city kids—suddenly found themselves working on a farm.

"Here, it's a lot more farming, a lot less TV," says Marjorie, who with her sister Miranda attends Eisenhower High School in nearby Russell. The schools here are "excellent, very competitive," says Miranda. Oldest daughter Amelia worked at the local farmers' market to earn college money.

"Here, I've gotten to watch my kids progress and change," says Brad. "There's something different about a kid in the country; they know what's important."

In fact, it seems no one who comes here can stay away for long. Todd and Lori Swanson returned to Todd's family land after living in Columbus, Ohio. "We would come visit his family and I'd say, 'When are we going to move here?'" says Lori.

Both are veterinarians, and their 7-year-old son Preston has an affinity for animals already; he tells his

## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Warren County: **25 acres** gently rolling ground: **\$45,000** or \$1,800 per acre **★ 54 acres** with orchards, timber value and 100-year-old home: **\$154,000** **★ 25 acres** with home, barn and two outbuildings: **\$124,000**

parents he wants to follow in their footsteps. "I wanted to tie him to the land; I wanted him to have the kind of childhood I had," says Todd. "This is how I wanted him to grow up." And Warren County—Todd's home—"was the perfect place for it."



Anna DiMarco (above) and her husband, a thoracic surgeon, keep horses and ride the trails in Warren County.



Preston Swanson's parents are local vets, and he wants to be one too.

## WARREN AT A GLANCE

Population..... 42,271  
 Population Density .....47.15/mi<sup>2</sup>  
 Average Household Income....\$49,698  
 Average Home Price..... \$91,195  
 Crime Rate ..... 30  
 Pollution Rate ..... 85  
 Student/Teacher Ratio ..... 13.9:1  
 (See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)



# NO. 3 RANDOLPH COUNTY Illinois

Story and Photos by GREGG HILLYER



Nothing is more relaxing than spending an afternoon after school at the Randolph County State Recreation Area.



## RANDOLPH AT A GLANCE

Population .....	33,022
Population Density .....	55.33/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income.....	\$55,521
Average Home Price.....	\$79,838
Crime Rate .....	19
Pollution Rate .....	85
Student/Teacher Ratio .....	13.2:1

(See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)



THE ANNUAL POPEYE PICNIC held each September in Chester—the county seat—is as much about the people who live in Randolph County, Illinois, as it is to honor the town's native son Elzie Segar, who created the comic-strip character. The picnic provides a backdrop for the community to extend its hospitality; and it allows families to enjoy a festival of food and old-fashioned fun. It's "where friends meet" and folks greet one another with a smile and a wave.

There's certainly a lot to smile about when driving through this county in southwestern Illinois. Located about an hour south of St. Louis, Mo., its western border hugs the banks of the mighty Mississippi River. Travel along the Great River Road (Illinois Route 3) and you'll see fertile river bottoms planted to corn, soybeans and wheat that abruptly stop below the towering limestone bluffs.

Agriculture has long been a driving economic force in the county, aided by superior river transportation on the Kaskaskia and Mississippi rivers.

Randolph County's motto is "Where Illinois Began." It illustrates the area's historical importance in the state's settlement, beginning with the first French traders who established the village Kaskaskia in the early 1700s. The county's numerous historic sites embrace this heritage.

The rich history contributes to the quality of life, says Ed Crow. He moved his family here in the summer of 1990 to become the county's director of economic development.

## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Randolph County: **50 acres** recreational, 20 acres tillable: **\$135,000** or \$2,700 per acre  
 ★ **97 acres** of cropland; Class B soils: **\$389,000** or \$4,000 per acre  
 ★ **67 acres**—54 acres of cropland, the remaining wooded: **\$255,000** or \$3,800 per acre

"I saw it as a good place to raise my three children," Crow says. Three of the county's largest towns—Chester, Red Bud and Sparta—each have a hospital. And the county is served by seven school districts and Southwestern Illinois College.

With its proximity to St. Louis, officials are developing zoning ordinances for planned growth and development through 2025. They also aim to address conflicts between farm and non-farm land use. Their goal is to preserve open space while conserving the agricultural heritage of the county. You can bet that will bring plenty of smiles from everyone in Randolph County.

# NO. 4 GILLESPIE COUNTY Texas

Story and Photos by JAMIE COLE



The Enchanted Rock State Natural Area (left) overlooks the county. The fair (above), like in many Texas counties, is a big attraction at summer's end.

served a sausage than a steak in local restaurants. And this county is more well-known for citrus than cattle. Peach orchards turn family farms into tourist attractions, and roadside stands dot the highways left and right.

Russell and Lori Studebaker know what the land means to native Texans. "Neither one of us is city people," says Lori. Both grew up on Hill Country farms. "When you do that as a kid, you have a feeling of space and a need for it," says Russell.

Neither of them is originally from Gillespie County. While life on the land was certainly one appeal, they were drawn here for a different reason. "We wanted to grow peaches, but the school system was the draw," says Russell.

There's more to Gillespie County than a classroom education, though. The Studebakers' three sons help them grow 30 varieties of peaches on 60 acres, along with various other fruits and vegetables. "I tell my oldest son that he practically has a doctorate in that already," says Russell.

Billy and Susan Johnson are newcomers to Gillespie, and they feel



Population.....	23,046
Population Density.....	21.69/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income...	\$54,632
Average Home Price.....	\$228,732
Crime Rate.....	35
Pollution Rate.....	84
Student/Teacher Ratio.....	12.9:1

(See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)

**I**N MANY WAYS, Gillespie County is the kind of place you think of when you picture Texas: lots of wide-open spaces, cattle ranches, old men in cowboy hats. Even the major highways have cattle crossings.

Gillespie is so quintessentially Texas that Willie Nelson wrote a song about one of its towns—the legendary Luckenbach—and still has a Fourth of July music festival there every year.

But in other ways, this Hill Country county surprises. One resident said that in the spring, the wildflowers make the hills "look like tidal waves"—a perfect storm of bluebonnets like cool water under a red Texas sunset. German influences are everywhere; you're more likely to be



**The Studebakers make their home in Texas Hill Country, where the kids help work the land.**

right at home. They moved from Austin and started planting lavender on their 10 acres in 2002. Though a little more than an hour from Austin to the north or San Antonio to the south, Billy says this place “is like another world.”

Old and new residents alike say the Hill Country just gets in your blood. The Johnsons’ youngest daughter, Jessica—about to graduate from Fredericksburg High and move on to college—would say the same. Her essay for college applications: “How Moving to the Country Changed My Life.”

## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Gillespie County:  
**5-acre homesite** with view: **\$100,000** or \$20,000 per acre  
 ★ **24 acres** with woods, high scenic hill and creek: **\$240,000** or \$10,000 per acre  
 ★ **23 acres** of scenic beauty with ag exemption: **\$249,000** or \$10,825 per acre



## Operating a tractor has never been so easy.

The Kubota Grand L40's new HST Plus hydrostatic transmission delivers a smoother transfer of power. This innovative feature, along with more responsive foot pedal operation, makes experienced operators even more productive and inexperienced operators feel like a pro.

*The Kubota Grand L40 offers three different transmissions to match your skill level:*

- *HST PLUS (Hydrostatic Transmission Plus)*
- *GST (Glide Shift Transmission)*
- *FST (Fully Synchronized Main and Shuttle Transmission)*



**Kubota**  
 EVERYTHING YOU VALUE  
[www.kubotaGRL13.com](http://www.kubotaGRL13.com)



# NO. 5 UNION COUNTY

## South Dakota

Story and Photos by JIM PATRICO

**F**LY OVER UNION COUNTY, S.D., some misty morning and you get a perspective on what makes this a special place to live. Down south you'll see where the Missouri River and the Big Sioux River merge, creating flat, fertile farmland that is the county's economic anchor.

Farther north are rolling hills,

blanketed with bristling corn and bronze soybeans ready for harvest. A little farther north yet is Sioux Falls, S.D., outside Union County but a major economic, educational and cultural force in the region.

That's the lay of the land in and around Union County. But come down to earth to meet the people who

make it a great place to put down roots, raise a family and flourish.

Stop into Alcester to meet Jerry Joachim, who is superintendent of the Alcester-Hudson schools. His elementary school last year was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education. That is a mighty high honor, considering there

(Above) The town of Jefferson appears out of a morning mist. (Below) Soybeans are harvested near Alcester.



Population .....	13,465
Population Density .....	28.88/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income...	\$60,549
Average Home Price.....	\$148,315
Crime Rate .....	16
Pollution Rate .....	96
Student/Teacher Ratio .....	11.7:1

(See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)



Dale Farley (above) is proud of his show heifers.

were fewer than 300 schools so designated out of almost 120,000 schools in the U.S.

“This reflects the dedication of our teachers, the hard work that the students put into their studies and the commitment to excellent education that the communities of Alcester and Hudson have,” Joachim told the local newspaper.

On a farm a few miles from Alcester, meet the Dean and Cynthia Farley family. They have turned a life-on-the-land hobby into a life-learning experience for 14-year-old son Dale.

As he puts a heifer through her practice paces, Dale smiles with pride and self-esteem. He knows what he is doing, and his skill has earned him and his Hereford heifers honors in cattle shows on a local, regional and national level.

“One of the reasons we wanted Dale to get involved in showing cattle is that he is so quiet,” says his mother, Cynthia. “This has given him so much confidence; he is a different kid.”

That is what life in the country—and in Union County—can do for a boy.

## LANDWATCH

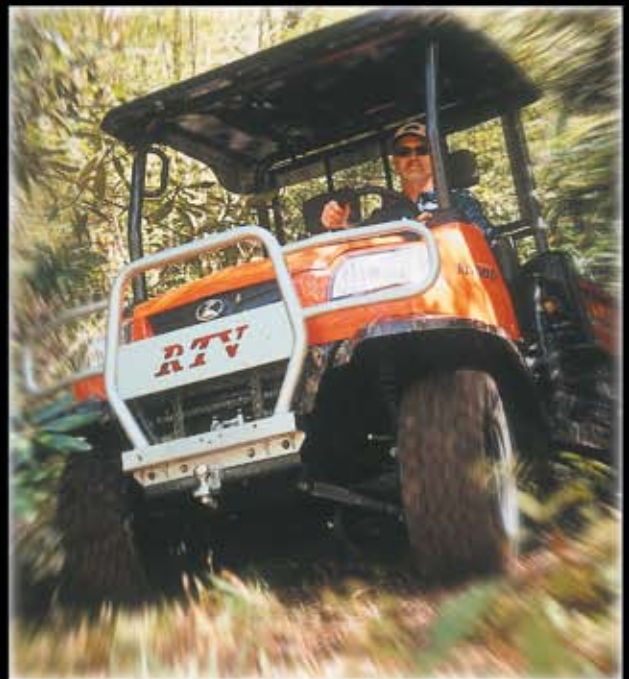
Some recent land prices in Union County: **160 acres** of cropland, 50% tillable: **\$440,000** or \$2,750 per acre ★ **5 acres** with log home and machine shed: **\$365,000** ★ **12 acres** with well-maintained house, 40' x 60' shed and horse barn: **\$160,000**



## Chores go a lot faster when they're fun.

With its 4-WD, power steering, hydraulic bed lift and a 3-range variable hydrostatic transmission (VHT), the Kubota RTV900 utility vehicle can do just about anything – even make a hard-day's work fly by.

Featuring a fuel-efficient 21.6 HP Kubota diesel engine. Available in Kubota orange or Realtree® camouflage.



**Kubota**

EVERYTHING YOU VALUE

[www.kubotaRTV13.com](http://www.kubotaRTV13.com)



# NO. 6

# ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY

## New York

Story and Photos by **JOE LINK**



**W**HEN WE RUN the numbers each year to find the best places to live in rural America, we never know where they might lead us—St. Lawrence County, for instance.

In this one county—and granted, it is one of the biggest counties in the United States—you’ll find a wonderful mix of attractions: traditional arts, great hunting and fishing, an outstanding collection of Frederic Remington artwork.

And how many rural areas can boast of having one of the premier

**Potsdam (below) is a quaint and quiet college town. The county is home to four colleges and a forestry school.**



music schools in the nation? The Crane School of Music started here in 1886 and continues to turn out professional musicians. One of their graduates is world-renowned opera star Renée Fleming.

Located just across the river from Montreal, St. Lawrence County is a recreation paradise. A large part of the Adirondack Mountains is here, as are more than 200 rivers and ponds, making it a fisherman’s paradise.

If you make it to Ogdensburg, be sure to spend some time at the Frederic Remington Art Museum. Remington was raised in nearby Canton, so it’s nice that his home county has such a wonderful collection of his sculptures and paintings. You could spend hours admiring his work.

This county is also where the non-profit Traditional Arts of Upstate New York is located. TAUNY records and helps preserve the cultures of this county and five others, an area generally referred to as the North Country. Basket weavers, woodworkers, rug makers and other traditional artists are celebrated. And, of course, there are plenty of fine folk musicians.

People who move here stay here, notes Alan Solomon, who came six years ago to become the dean of the Crane School of Music. “I’ve been really amazed by the people who

### LANDWATCH

*Some recent land prices in St. Lawrence County:* **4 acres**, partially wooded: **\$15,000** or \$3,750 per acre  
**★ 54 acres** adjacent to trees and river stream: **\$175,000** or \$3,240 per acre  
**★ 192 acres** with pond and four-wheeler trails: **\$190,000** or \$990 per acre

live here and their commitment. It’s a very welcoming and open community.” The downside? Winters are harsh. “But the summers,” adds Solomon, “are some of the most beautiful I’ve ever experienced.”



### ST. LAWRENCE AT A GLANCE

Population.....	110,838
Population Density.....	39.37/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income...	\$49,836
Average Home Price.....	\$76,292
Crime Rate.....	23
Pollution Rate.....	86
Student/Teacher Ratio.....	12:1

*(See “How We Did It,” page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)*

# NO. 7 SAC COUNTY Iowa

Story and Photos by  
JIM PATRICO

IF THE SIGHT of golden corn on rolling hills in summer evening sunlight doesn't make your heart glad, Sac County, Iowa, might not be the place for you. If you don't think the sound of a combine rolling through a distant soybean field has a kind of mechanical magic to it, stay out of Sac County in the fall. And if you don't like friendly people who know how to get things done, don't slow down when you see the Sac County highway signs.

Sac County is as Iowa as Iowa gets—corn and soybeans as far as the eye can see. Cows and hogs. Clapboard farmhouses and big barns.

For having fun, you can't beat the nationally known Farmall Promenade, based in Sac County's Nemaha (town population: 120; slogan: "A Mighty Small Town"). Nine years ago, some tractor-driving jokesters decided to perform a square dance using antique Farmall tractors (see photo above). They merrily mixed traditional dance "steps" with comedy. For the sake of authenticity, half the guys dressed as women. The event was a hit, and now the group performs several times a year at fairs in the region. It's good, clean, Iowa-style fun.

Kind of like the sign in Hazel's Café



Farm homes like this one in Sac County are quintessentially Iowa.



in Nemaha, which says: "Get your own damn coffee." Might sound rude, but it's an Iowa kind of rude you use only with friends, family and strangers who can appreciate a sense of humor.

It's this sense of community that makes Sac County a good place to live, says Kim Muska. Four years ago Kim and her husband, Brian, moved—with some trepidation—from the East Coast to Sac County. They had never been to the Midwest and didn't know what to expect.

Sac County's big heart won them over, Kim says. "I feel like a person here. People know me, and they want to know me. Everyone waves. It's like one big family."



## SAC AT A GLANCE

Population .....	10,523
Population Density .....	18.22/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income...	\$43,842
Average Home Price.....	\$62,308
Crime Rate .....	25
Pollution Rate .....	90
Student/Teacher Ratio .....	8.4:1

(See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)

## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Sac County: **122 acres** of cropland with 67 Corn Suitability Rating (county average is 71): **\$463,600** or \$3,800 per acre ★ **90 acres** with 55-plus acres timber and creek land; remainder cropland: **\$351,000** or \$3,900 per acre ★ **160 acres** with 105 acres timber and creek land; remainder in Conservation Reserve Program: **\$480,000** or \$3,000 per acre

# NO. 8 GARFIELD COUNTY Oklahoma

Story and Photos by JIM PATRICO

## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Garfield County: **157-acre** farm with minerals: **\$155,000** or \$990 per acre  
 ★ **77.4 acres** of recreational land with woods, grassland and close to lake: **\$100,000** or \$1,290 per acre  
 ★ **320 acres** of grassland, water and home: **\$269,000**



## GARFIELD AT A GLANCE

Population ..... 56,753  
 Population Density ..... 53.55/mi<sup>2</sup>  
 Average Household Income.....\$47,137  
 Average Home Price.....\$126,211  
 Crime Rate ..... 136  
 Pollution Rate ..... 78  
 Student/Teacher Ratio ..... 13.9:1  
 (See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)

**G**ARFIELD COUNTY, Okla., started with a boom. At the sound of a signal gunshot at noon on Sept. 16, 1893, thousands of prospective landowners—some on horseback, some in wagons, some on foot—poured into what is now Garfield County to stake land claims. The new Oklahomans were in a rush to get one-quarter sections of free land in what was then known as the Cherokee Outlet—land bought from Indian tribes by the U.S. government to give to settlers.

The descendants of those “Boomers” have made quite a nice home for themselves. Eighty-five miles from Oklahoma City and 120 miles from Tulsa, Garfield County is largely an agricultural region—wheat and cattle. The countryside around county seat Enid is dotted with horse pastures and folks living on acreages.

Enid has two medical centers—Northwestern Oklahoma State University-Enid and Northern Oklahoma College-Enid. Vance Air Force Base, on the south side of town, provides jobs and occasional aerial entertainment as pilots train to fly fighter jets.

Marty Meyer (below left) and his son Payton talk about riding horses.



Enid is alive with restaurants, shops and parks. It also embraces a surprising amount of public art, much of it with a local history theme and much of it by Harold T. “H” Holden, a local artist with a national following. He specializes in western sculptures, including monuments to the “Boomers” who settled Garfield County.

History is never far in the past here. Bob Klemme, who loves regional history and has made a second career of marking the Chisholm Trail through the county, says you can see the past reflected in the character of today’s residents. “The county is full of honest, hard-working people,” says Bob Klemme. “That’s what makes this a good place to live.”





# № 9 AMADOR COUNTY

California

Story and Photos by JAMIE COLE

## LANDWATCH

Some recent land prices in Amador County: **44 acres** of gently rolling land with oak trees: **\$519,000** or \$11,800 per acre ★ **10 acres** with creek and building pads: **\$250,000** or \$25,000 per acre ★ **4 acres** with creek ideal for horses: **\$100,000** or \$25,000 per acre

AMADOR COUNTY is really three distinct “best places” in one. Within its borders are three markedly different climates, three options for your surroundings, three *lifestyles*.

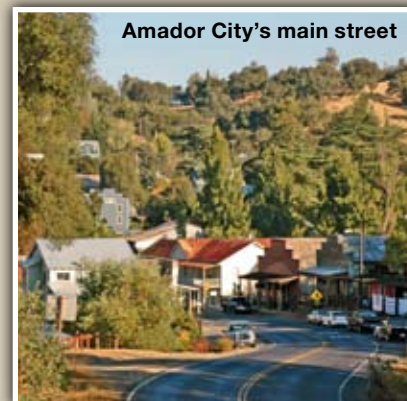
To the southwest are the towns of Amador City, Drytown and Sutter Creek, along with the county seat of Jackson and small farms and ranches. The low-slung buildings and storefronts along the main streets evoke a Wild West familiar to anyone who’s seen a John Wayne movie, only the roads are paved. These are gold rush towns that make a priority of preserving and maintaining their heritage.

Dimitris and Elaine Zorbas, self-proclaimed city folk who moved to Amador County for good in 2001, say that even then it was fairly undiscovered. Not so much now. “Growth is inevitable,” says Elaine. “But it’s still small enough that individuals can make a difference.”

Keep traveling east along State Highway 88 and you’ll run right into the El Dorado National Forest. There the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas

get serious and abruptly become mountains; the tall evergreens are sometimes laden with snow even in September. Within 20 minutes along 88 you can drive from the 70-degree, “California Dreamin’” idyll to full-on deep freeze.

The temperature stays mild on the east side of the county through the summer, though a camping trip near Bear Creek or Silver Lake in the fall might best be described as “brisk” if not downright cold. In the winter, some roads in this part of the county close until spring.



Amador City's main street



## AMADOR AT A GLANCE

Population .....	38,762
Population Density .....	64.13/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income.....	\$68,137
Average Home Price.....	\$363,393
Crime Rate .....	32
Pollution Rate .....	73
Student/Teacher Ratio .....	18.7:1

(See "How We Did It," page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)



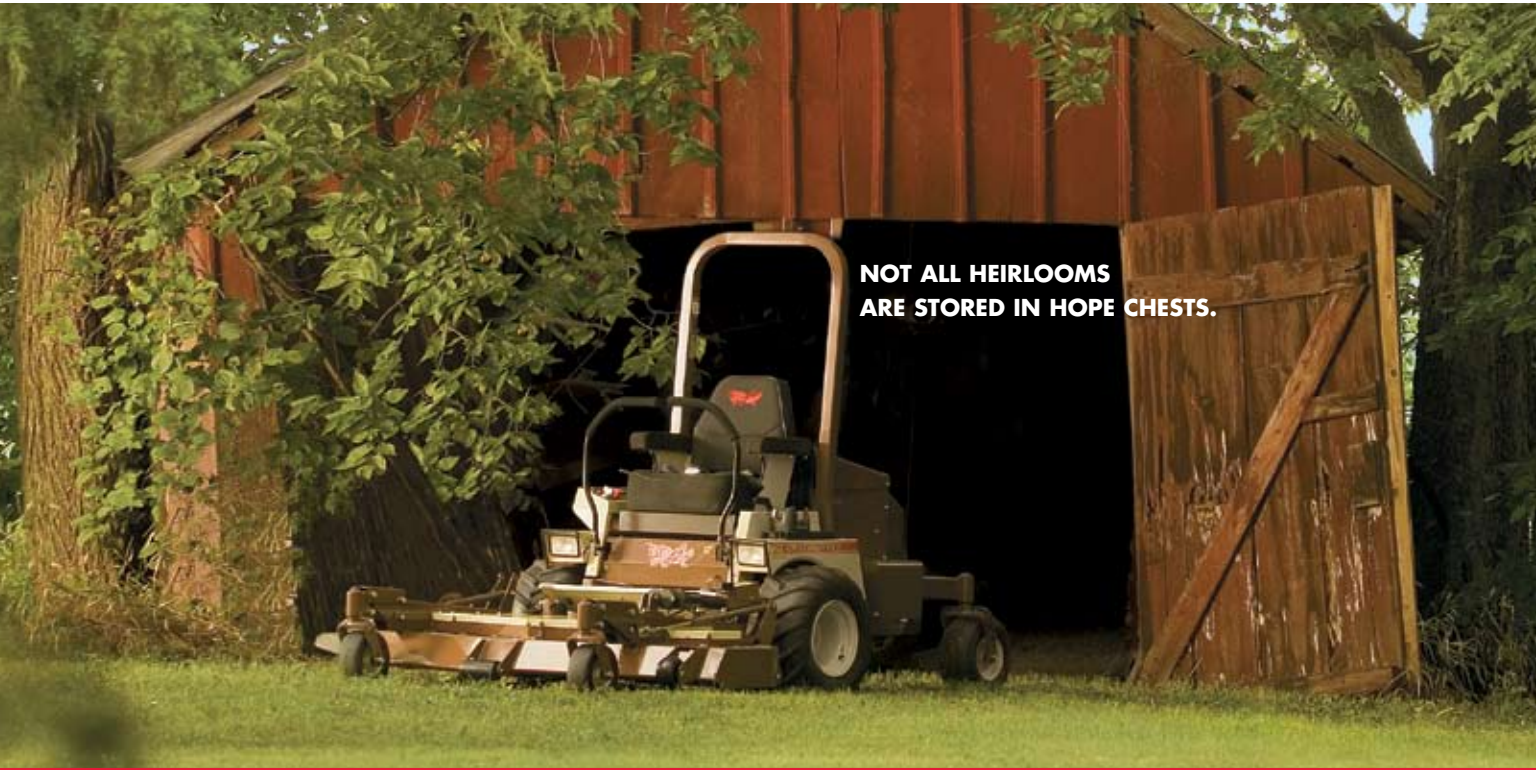
The view of Silver Lake from Hwy. 88 is enough to make even the locals pull over.

The third and perhaps most well-known face of Amador is its wine region to the northwest. What started as fruit and vegetable farms for gold miners in the 1860s is now one of the premiere grape-growing regions in America. If you've drunk a good

California Zinfandel, chances are the grapes came from here. The secret is the spongy clay subsoil that absorbs water in the winter and lets the vines get a good drink when they need it.

Ken Deaver and wife, Jeannie, own Amador Flower Farm along with a

few vineyards. Ken says his family settled in Amador looking for gold, "but that didn't work." What did work were the grapes, and some of the mission vines on his land are evidence; they're 150 years old and still producing. Now *that's* tradition.



**NOT ALL HEIRLOOMS  
ARE STORED IN HOPE CHESTS.**

Some are lucky enough to inherit a Grasshopper®. Those who can't wait, buy their own. Stop by your dealer to start your Grasshopper True ZeroTurn™ mower legacy. You'll be amazed how much better your relatives will treat you when they think they've got a shot at your Grasshopper. **For more information call (620) 345-8621.**

**GRASSHOPPERMOWER.COM**



# NO. 10 POLK COUNTY

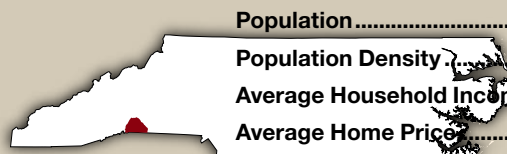
## North Carolina

Story and Photos by **JOE LINK**

FOR THE PAST DECADE OR MORE, the people of Polk County have watched neighboring counties grow with unbridled abandon. Hip, trendy Asheville is just 30 minutes to the north, and other surrounding areas have seen similar influxes of people—and skyrocketing land prices.

And yet this little cluster of communities, tucked into the foothills of the Appalachians, has somehow gone unnoticed. Consider this: Polk County does not have a Wal-Mart (a fact in which more than a few residents take pride).

Most of the communities here could be referred to as “one-street towns”—an exaggeration, perhaps, but not by much. One of them is Saluda, where Robert Pace (right) runs the general store his father started 108 years ago. The store has changed little since its doors opened, so visitors love to come in and visit with Pace, who one resident



**POLK**  
AT A  
GLANCE

Population.....	19,102
Population Density.....	80.09/mi <sup>2</sup>
Average Household Income.....	\$50,379
Average Home Price.....	\$191,743
Crime Rate.....	45
Pollution Rate.....	91
Student/Teacher Ratio.....	14.2:1

(See “How We Did It,” page 26, for info on how to read these stats.)



### LANDWATCH

*Some recent land prices in Polk County:* **23 acres** with fenced pastures, mountain view and well: **\$262,000** or \$11,400 per acre ★ **70-acre** horse farm with trails and water: **\$1,120,000** or \$16,000 per acre ★ **16 acres** with shared stocked pond and barn: **\$220,000** or \$13,750 per acre



described as a “town treasure.”

“I’ve seen it all,” says Pace. “People come in here from all over the world.”

Tourism is a big part of the economy here, bringing in \$17 million each year, says Kipp McIntyre, director of economic development. But increasingly, people who come to visit want to stay.

And some, like Polk County native Alvin Pack, just end up coming back. Pack returned to his roots after years in California’s Sonoma Valley to start Green Creek Winery. His wines are good, brother Marvin grows the grapes, and business is thriving.

The county is growing, and it has people here looking to the future. A billboard ordinance keeps Hwy. 26 clean—a nice touch for any place that cherishes and plans to capitalize on its scenery. But here and there you will see a band of freshly cleared earth on a mountaintop where developers plan to build. That can cause a stir here, with people wondering whether this place too will look like the many mountain homes near Asheville.

“We were undiscovered and now we’re discovered,” says county Extension agent John Vining, who also is a native. “There’s going to be a lot of growth, and it’s going to be



(Above) Marvin Pack gets Chardonnay grapes ready for his brother’s Green Creek Winery. (Right) A sign of town pride sits in a store window.



**YOU'RE LUCKY THIS IS RED BRAND FENCE,**  
[ or we'd be fertilizing your lawn. ]



Smart move, choosing American-made RED BRAND fence with the unique Monarch® knot. It's strong, flexible, and virtually

**RED BRAND**  
Standing guard since 1889.

maintenance-free—a conspiracy to keep us from making your grass really grow. Now, who said humans weren't very smart?

[www.redbrand.com](http://www.redbrand.com) | Keystone Steel & Wire Company | 1.800.447.6444

# Undiscovered GEMS

FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER, these quiet little corners of the country aren't likely to make our list. But we love them anyway. Our editors chose a few regions that they love to visit and would even want to live.



If you are looking to live close to nature, then the **eastern Kansas Flint Hills**, a narrow band of tall-grass prairie, may be the place for you. The waist-high bluestem grass, summer wildflowers, deer, turkey, prairie chicken and songbirds make this a nature lover's paradise. Absentee owners who don't contribute much to the local communities own much of the land, and schools are below average—as are health care and roads. Still, this is the largest, most intact tall-grass prairie in North America and is a sight to behold. —*Jack Odle*

PHOTO: JIM PATRICO



Bounded by desert mesas on the east and west, the **Mesilla Valley of southern New Mexico** encompasses less than a 100-mile stretch of fertile farmland that snakes along the mighty Rio Grande River. Farmers use the Rio Grande's life-giving water to turn arid land into lush fields of crops. One of the area's strengths is a strong family farming tradition, but the area has begun to attract outsiders as well. A dry, mild climate complemented by spectacular mountain views adds to the area's appeal. —*Kim Allen*

PHOTO: MIKE GROVES



Tucked neatly within Florida's panhandle is an approximately 300,000-acre region of gracefully rolling landscape that has been distinguished by the Nature Conservancy as one of America's "Last Great Places." Known as **Florida Hill Country**, this scenic terrain extends from Tallahassee, Fla., to the nearby counties of Jefferson, Calhoun, Gadsden, Leon and Liberty. The area is home to some of the last remnants of the ancient longleaf pine forests in the nation. —*Jack Odle*

PHOTO: ST. JOE LAND CO.



To thousands of vacationers, **Maine's southeastern coast** isn't the least bit undiscovered (the Bush clan has its compound there in Kennebunkport). But roam just a few miles off the coastal highway and Maine becomes an unspoiled rural beauty, perfect especially for people looking to truly escape. If you're a "people person," though, forget it—I mean, there are miles and miles of nothing. It's darn cold too; the growing season is short. But for rural peace and (real, real) quiet, coastal Maine gets my vote. —*Jamie Cole*

PHOTO: JAMIE COLE

## ★ HOW WE DID IT

Each year, *The Progressive Farmer* partners with OnBoard LLC, a real estate research firm, to put together a preliminary list of rural counties that meet certain criteria. We look at household income, household spending, home and land prices, crime rates, air quality, education, access to health care . . . all things that can give us a snapshot of places we think our readers would want to call home.

For several months out of the year, our team of editors travels to these top counties, taking pictures, interviewing residents and getting the lay of the land. We meet in November and finish off the list, ranking counties based on what we learned during our travels.

While the numbers can't tell us everything, they do help complete the picture. Crime rates and pollution rates are gauged against the national average of 100; so, if for instance you see a crime rate of 25 listed here, you are only one-quarter as likely to experience crime as you would in an average county. So, the lower the better.

We packed this special section with information, but there's much more on our web site, including expanded statistics, photo galleries, the top 50 counties in each region of the country and a special tool that lets you create your own top 10 counties based on what's most important to you. Visit the site at [progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces](http://progressivefarmer.com/bestplaces). —*Jamie Cole*