



*How many millions of acres of healthy, intact ecosystems have been cleared and burned in order to plow and plant but a few annual crops?*

ancestors cleared the great eastern forests of their previous inhabitants as best they could (both animal and human), burned the stumps off and began to plow. Then they marched from the shores of the Atlantic driven not by promise, as we have been told in our history books, but because they had devastated their resource base. By the early 1800s eighty percent of the New England states had been shorn of their primeval forests. The thin, rocky glacial soil quickly eroded exposing more rocks and in many places the bedrock itself. Even this epic wrestling against nature failed to provide for the growing populations. The American expansion westward was driven as much by want and privation as by dreams of progress and a glorious utopia.

In the Midwest, how many *millions* of acres of "useless brush" have now been cleared and burned in order to plow and plant but a few annual crops? The miles of barren cornfields before my gaze represented only a few generations of this so called "agricultural progress."

In this area of southwest Wisconsin some families still reside on the land homesteaded by great-grandfather and they still remember the stories most often told about clearing the land, the deprivations of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl years. The Dust Bowl isn't just history here. It's a very recent family memory for many.

But what kind of progress was I looking at on that ridge overlooking the combines in the cornfield? The ridge was approximately half a mile from the center of Ash Ridge, Wisconsin. A neat green sign with the town name and

"town incorporated" is about all that marks the town today. Only a general store, a fix-it shop and two churches. The "town" of Ash Ridge is now home to five residents: a disabled retiree, an over-the-road truck driver, couple and two commuters nearing retirement age who work in "town" 25 miles away.

Where is the progress in this? Is our progress as a society to be measured by how big our sport utility vehicles are? Or is our progress measured by the fact that we have a 72-inch widescreen plasma TV in the living room with 300 channels of programming? Is it progress to be able to buy a 40-ounce "Big Buddy" soft drink at every corner and have a Walmart store within 30 miles of every citizen?

Do we measure our progress by the number of extremely overweight Americans that there are in the country? The United States has one of the highest rates of heart disease (#13) and diabetes (#3) in the world according to the World Health Organization. Is progress measured by the fact that Americans are so unhealthy that the latest Army statistics show that 75 percent of military-age youth are ineligible to join the military because they are overweight, can't pass entrance exams, have dropped out of high school, or



*A mere generation ago much of agricultural America was bustling with vibrant communities and now?*