Rewriting the Rural Narrative

*Speak softly and carry statistics*

February 12, 2021
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Rural Sociologist
Extension Center for Community Vitality
Why the Pandemic Is Making Some City Folks Think Rural

Drawn by remote work, perceived safety and lower cost of living, some young people are making the move.

People Fleeing Big Cities May Spur Economic Growth In Smaller Metros

Remington Tonar and Ellis Talton Senior Contributor @ Leadership Strategy
We explore urban innovation and infrastructure.

Millennials Could Be a Boon to Smaller Communities. How Can Those Towns Attract Younger Workers?

The Heartland’s Revival

by Joel Kotkin
A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

1 year ago.....
People keep leaving rural America. According to U.S. Census figures from 2010, just 16% of the country’s population lives in rural areas, down from 20% in 2000, and down dramatically from 72% about a hundred years ago. Behind these stories, both of the people who left their rural homes and of the small percentage of Americans who still live in our nation. There are stories, too, of people who’ve left for myriad reasons. We want to know those stories, too.

From Breadbasket to Basket Case

In the 1980s, rural Americans faced fewer teen births and lower divorce rates than their urban counterparts. Now, their positions have flipped entirely.
The slow, agonizing death of the small US town

When death comes to a small town, the school is usually the last thing to go. A place can lose its bank, its tavern, its grocery store, its shoe shop. But when the school closes, you might as well put a fork in it.
THE NARRATIVE

• There’s a brain drain
• We live in the middle of nowhere
• We are a sleepy town
• Everyone knows one another
• Nobody lock their doors

• What we had
• What we don’t have
• What we wish we had
• What we could have had…
NO MORE ANECDATA!

**anecdote** (noun). *information which is presented as if it is based on serious research but is in fact based on what someone thinks is true*
1900-1950

- Mechanization of agriculture
- Roads and transportation
- Educational achievement and population loss
- Church closings (Delafield)
1950+

- Main street restructuring
- School consolidations
- Hospitals closings
The rural idyll

“Agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy.”
Iron Range town fighting for more than the mail

Calumet challenges the decision to close its post office, which is a social hub for its residents.

Who are you going to find in a small town when you travel to small towns in morning and afternoon?
RURAL IS CHANGING, NOT DYING

• Yes, things are changing
• Small towns are microcosms of globalization
  • Many of these changes impact rural and urban areas alike (not distinctly rural)
  • Yet more apparent in rural places
• Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life
• Research base does NOT support notion that if XXXX closes, the town dies
  • In Minnesota only 3 towns have dissolved in past 50 years
Rural Rebound

- Since 1970, rural population increased by 11%
  - Relative percentage living rural decreased

1970:
- Total population: 203,211,926
  - Rural: 26% (53.6m rural)

2010:
- Total population: 308,745,538
  - Rural: 19% (59.5m rural)
Rural Data

Population figures reduced by formerly rural places now designated as urban (25% since 1974)

- Iowa 473,312
- Minnesota 352,224  rural residents now classified urban
- Montana 120,261
- Nebraska 170,855
- North Dakota 181,639
- South Dakota 207,790

Urban areas have grown WIDER, not taller
Total Population Infatuation

2000-2010
Total Population Infatuation

Wait, what?

### Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UMVRDC Region</td>
<td>69,063</td>
<td>61,806</td>
<td>59,822</td>
<td>50,845</td>
<td>50,011</td>
<td>45,190</td>
<td>-34.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households</td>
<td>19,428</td>
<td>19,367</td>
<td>22,026</td>
<td>20,088</td>
<td>19,846</td>
<td>20,039</td>
<td>3.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Stone County</td>
<td>8,954</td>
<td>7,941</td>
<td>7,716</td>
<td>6,285</td>
<td>5,820</td>
<td>5,269</td>
<td>-41.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chippewa County</td>
<td>16,320</td>
<td>15,109</td>
<td>14,941</td>
<td>13,228</td>
<td>13,088</td>
<td>12,441</td>
<td>-23.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lac qui Parle County</td>
<td>13,330</td>
<td>11,164</td>
<td>10,592</td>
<td>8,924</td>
<td>8,067</td>
<td>7,259</td>
<td>-45.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swift County</td>
<td>14,936</td>
<td>13,177</td>
<td>12,920</td>
<td>10,724</td>
<td>11,956</td>
<td>9,783</td>
<td>-34.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Medicine County</td>
<td>15,523</td>
<td>14,415</td>
<td>13,653</td>
<td>11,684</td>
<td>11,080</td>
<td>10,438</td>
<td>-32.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census Bureau
Kids graduate
Population: -2
Households: NC

Avg HH Size
1940: 3.6
2018: 2.6 (-29%)

Spouse passes
Population: -1
Households: NC
## 2000-2010 Population and Housing Units Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>% Pop Change</th>
<th>% Housing Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bowman</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>-11%</td>
<td>+0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>-14%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh</td>
<td>-17%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ransom</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sargent</td>
<td>-12%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheridan</td>
<td>-23%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traill</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Population loss is demographic destiny! (and may continue to be so)
Mobility

Households Moving Every 5 Years:

44%  Iowa
46%  Minnesota
North Dakota
Wisconsin
47%  Nebraska
48%  South Dakota
49%  United States
Brain Drain

1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change

- 55-59: 5.5%
- 50-54: 4.0%
- 45-49: 7.0%
- 40-44: 14.5%
- 35-39: 23.9%
- 30-34: 48.5%
- 25-29: -26.9%
- 20-24: -43.0%
- 19: -5.7%
- 10-14: 25.0%
Rural Prairie County

2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change

-80% -60% -40% -20% 0% 20% 40%

-50.2% 25-29

-61.6% 20-24

-17.2% 15-19

11.2% 10-14

30.9% 30-34

13.3% 35-39

5.4% 40-44

3.1% 45-49

-3.2% 50-54

-0.6% 55-59

0 2,000 4,000 6,000 8,000 10,000 12,000 14,000 16,000 18,000

2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change

Core Metropolitan County
Buffalo Commons Research
Dr. Randy Cantrell and Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel
University of Nebraska
Newcomers: Why?

- Simpler pace of life
- Safety and Security
- Low Housing Cost
Newcomers: Who?

- 31% moved primarily for a job
- 25% lived there previously
- 91% have some college or bachelor’s
- 75% household incomes over $50k
- 47% have children in household
- 14% telecommute!

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.
Move Factors with Preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move Factor</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take advantage of the slower pace of life</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live closer to relatives</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a less congested place to live</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live among people with similar values</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find lower priced housing</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a safer place to live</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live in a smaller community</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a lower cost of living</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a good environment for raising children</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a job that allowed a better work-life balance</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a job that matches my skills</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take on a new job</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a higher paying job</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live closer to friends</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find higher quality schools</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.
Cohort Lifecycle

Avg. American moves 11.7 times in lifetime
(6 times at age 30)
CHOOSING RURAL

• Brain Gain: migration to rural age 30-49
  • Also 50-64 but not as widespread
  • Brain drain is the rule, not the exception
  • Happening since the 1970s
• Newcomers look at 3-5 communities
  • Topical reasoning (local foods regions)
  • Assets vary by demographic
• Employee recruitment must get past “warm body” syndrome
SOCIAL LIFE IS DYING!

• First question: How many people do we need to run our town?

• We have numerous leadership programs currently training leader supply, but are we keeping up with the organization demand?
Social Life is **Not Dying**
Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010

- North Dakota gained 5% in population and 6% in the number of nonprofits.
  - The most rural counties experienced a loss of 5% in population, yet the number of nonprofits increased 6%.

- This growth can be both good and bad news for rural places.

*National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau*
Definition: Number of people each organization has available to them to locate a positional leader.

- Yes, people serve on multiple boards.
- Assumption of 3 per board is conservative.
- Age 18+ includes many age groups that are less active.
NORTH DAKOTA HAS THE HIGHEST DEMAND IN THE U.S.

1 IN 20 ADULTS MUST SERVE AS A LEADER!

NUMBER OF PEOPLE EACH ORGANIZATION HAS AVAILABLE TO THEM TO LOCATE A POSITIONAL LEADER.
Social Organizations

- Diversification of rural life socially, too
- Reflect the social interests at any given time
- Today is not 25 (or 50, or 100) years ago!
- The people today seem unable to “connect” with the existing social infrastructure
Changing Types of Involvement - The Social Organization (historical)

- Place-based
- Broadly focused
- Word of mouth

Green & Haines. 2007. *Asset Building and Community Development*
Changing Types of Involvement - The Social Organization (present)

- Cover wide geographic area
- Narrowly focused goals/self-interest
- Diverse social interests
- Technological – social media

The people today are challenged in “connecting” with the existing social infrastructure.

Green & Haines. 2007. Asset Building and Community Development
OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

• New residents are more than warm bodies
• Younger people (Millennials age 18-34)
  • Decentralized approaches to leadership
  • Simplified methods of communication
• Generational interests change yet organizations do not
• Start with a small request
• Engagement before leadership
Living in the Middle of Everywhere
Diversifying the rural economy

Jobs by Industry

Professional & business services
  Trade
  Health & social services
  Government
  Manufacturing
  Leisure & hospitality
  Other services
  Construction
  Transport & warehouse
  Agriculture
  Utilities
  Mining

Twin Cities  Greater MN

0  200,000  400,000  600,000  800,000  1,000,000  1,200,000
We live in a REGIONAL COMMUNITY, not an ECONOMY
MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

No town is a one-stop-shop

• Home → Work: 30 minutes

• Home → Eat/shop: 45 minutes

• Home → Play – 2+ hours!
MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

• Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)
  • Most effective in a town or small region

• How do we include people that work and visit in our community planning?

• Partner with groups, not just in your place but different “jurisdictions”

• Social Capital needs **Bonding and Linking** capital
How can we make local decisions while at the same time respect the reality of lives?

The REGION is the primary unit of interest

Mayor, how do you market your town if you don’t know what’s going on around you?
IMPLICATIONS

• Marketing

• Transportation planning

• Employee recruitment

• Housing
Where We Live and Where We’d Like to Live

by community type

- City: 25%
- Suburb: 30%
- Small town: 23%
- Rural area: 21%

20% live rural/small town
51% would PREFER to

MOVING IN: Demand for rural and small town living!

Reframing Rural Migration

- National societal preferences to live in small towns and rural places (low-density)

- Not everyone is leaving small towns
  - It’s a lot of work to make this move but people are doing it

- Not everyone is flocking to the city
  - Most urban have gotten wider, not taller

- A new urbanity is found in formerly rural places
MIGRATION AND THE NARRATIVE

• Migration patterns open the door to discussing the narrative

• There are varied reasons for people to move to small towns and rural places
Prepare for one of the largest demographic changes to rural America since 1930
75% of rural homeowners are Baby Boomers and older.

30% over 70 today!
Narrative Matters

You’re not really from here....
Resident Recruitment Efforts In Minnesota
WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Consider resident recruitment as a possible outcome in your marketing efforts
- Learn about newcomers in your community
- Consider that some visitors might be looking for this information already…make it easy to find when they arrive
The Rural Choice

These newcomers are:

• Creating groups, building their community
• Diversifying the economy
• Buying/starting businesses, working from home
• Living in a region (no longer a 1-stop-shop)
• More than warm bodies (employee recruitment)
The Rural Choice: Opening New Doors and Welcoming New Neighbors

The bottom line is people WANT to live and move here for what you are today and will be tomorrow, not what may have been!

Rural Revitalization is Upon Us!
Brain Gain Landing Page
http://z.umn.edu/braingain/

Rural Issues and Trends Webinars
http://z.umn.edu/ruralwebinar/

Reddit: *Rural By Choice*
/r/ruralbychoice

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