ABSTRACT
This qualitative study examined older adults’ experiences and perceptions of aging in place in changing rural communities. Interviews were conducted with 13 individuals residing in eastern North Dakota. Findings indicated that the diversity of individual and community characteristics impacts the lived experience of growing old in rural areas. Rural elders have a strong attachment to place in spite of deteriorating physical and social conditions. Good health, ability to drive, and strong social networks are needed to buffer feelings of isolation, loneliness, and vulnerability.

METHODS
Researchers used a qualitative open-ended interview to explore participants’ feelings regarding life experiences, community satisfaction, perception of community change, and factors impacting their decisions to stay on in their community. Participants included 13 individuals (4 males and 9 females) aged 65 years and older from six counties in eastern North Dakota who had resided in their small town or rural area for a minimum of 15 years.

Data Analysis
The researchers used a basic interpretive approach for analyzing the data (Merriam, 2002). Transcripts were analyzed to develop initial codes and build themes. Rich descriptions from quotes were incorporated in the findings.

RESULTS · THEMES
1) Sense of sadness and loss was expressed regarding changes in their communities.
   “It’ll become an address. It won’t be any bonding like there was years ago! And that’s kind of sad. That’s the way things are going all over. I guess.”
   “I miss our café. It was closeness and now we have to talk on the phone.”
   “All the businesses and a lot of the things we used to do in a small town have left and gone out of places.”
   “There aren’t many young people left here.”
2) Communities differed widely in their characteristics and capacity to support seniors.
   “There’s nothing here for me.”
   “And here we are lucky we have a grocery store and a nice restaurant.”
   “I got whatever I need here.”
3) Strong attachment to place and way of life influenced decisions to ‘stay on’.
   “My grandfather homesteaded this area.”
   “I have always loved the prairie.”
   “Well, it is difficult to pull old people off: they hate to leave. You know, they’re born and raised on the farm and in their own mind, they figure they’ll die on the farm.”
4) Most seniors viewed their community as a good place to live despite objective challenges.
   “I’m comfortable here.”
   “I told my daughter, I will live here until they take my driver’s license away.”
   “Well, I’m kind of in a routine here.”
   “It’s good. It could be better.”
   “You know, there is nothing here for me but I’m sticking around.”
   “I don’t mind living here, it’s quiet.”
5) Strong family support buffered the effects of withering social networks for some, but not all, seniors.
   “I’ve lost a lot of my older friends that we used to do things together. I don’t know how to describe that one.”
   “Some people move to the metro area just to have someone to talk to.”
   “Having kids close by is absolutely important.”
6) Decline in sense of community varied among communities.
   “….if I have trouble or a problem, even people who don’t like me are gonna help me out!”
   “Most of them come and go from their own house and live in their own little life….there just isn’t that sense of community there used to be.”
   “It’s lost.”
   “There’s more people living in town that I don’t know. We have no bond with them whatsoever.”

CONCLUSION
This study showed how the physical and social aspects of diverse rural communities can affect the well-being of older adults. North Dakota’s population has been shifting from rural to urban areas, resulting in rural counties losing population (ND State Data Center, 2011). More research should focus on the unique needs of rural elders and how service providers can strengthen support networks and create opportunities to lessen rural isolation. Future research should examine the development of a typology of rural communities to assist in identifying appropriate interventions for rural elders aging in place.

REFERENCES CITED
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