UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Bureau of Agricultural Economics

SIGNIFICANCE OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

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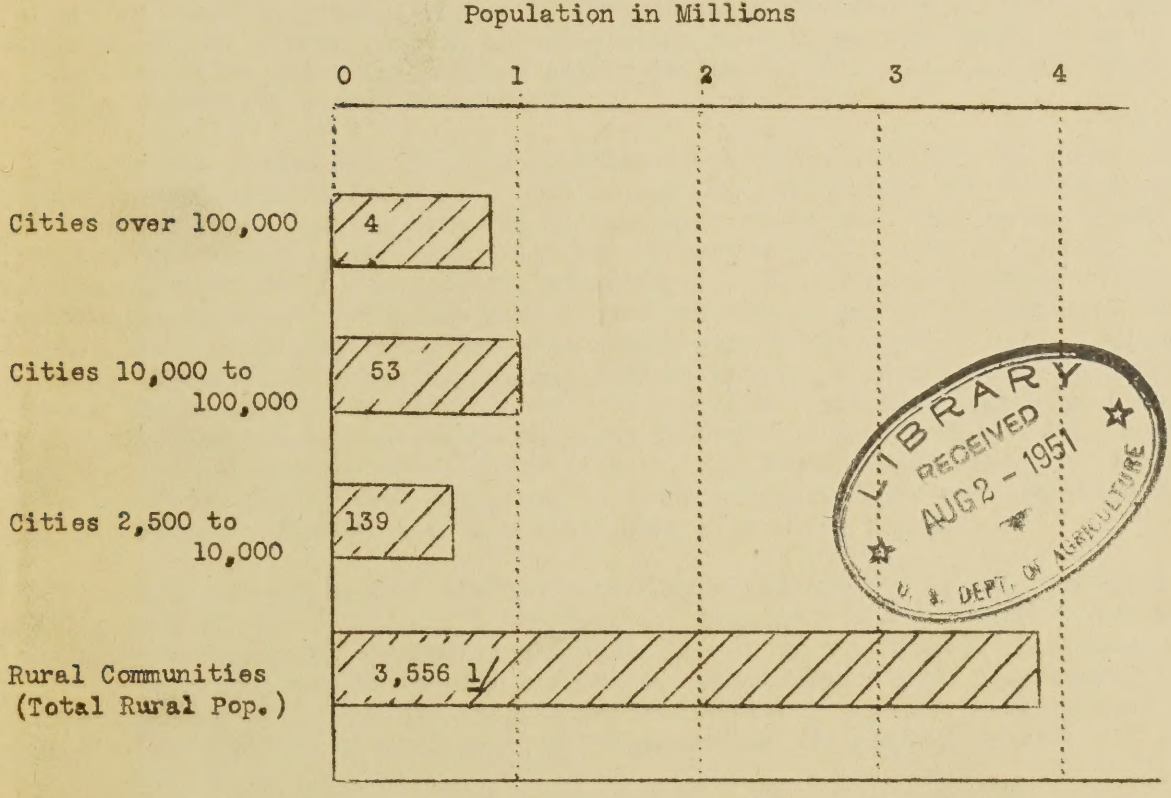
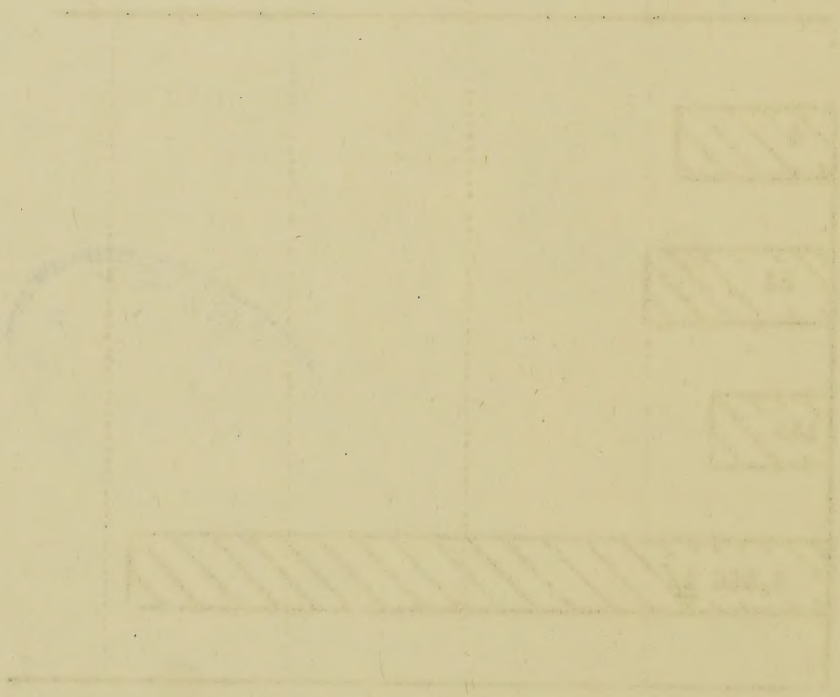
WHERE THE PEOPLE LIVE (1940 Census)



1/ Number of centers of 50 to 2,500 population.

Lincoln, Nebraska
July, 1945



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INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the compact agricultural village community in Europe, the typical rural community in the New World includes village or town dwellers and scattered country families. The rural people of the Plains community are sometimes distributed over a wide area as a result of the early homestead laws or the requirements of an extensive agricultural economy. Communities usually include several country neighborhoods, with a common trading center, churches, schools or other institutional activities.

Three out of five persons in the Plains live in a rural community, and three out of five of these rural residents live on a farm or a ranch. Rural families seldom live in solitude. The community groupings are not the result of formal rulings or decisions, but grow out of circumstances and free association. Examination of the actual pattern of association reveals that boundary lines of rural communities and neighborhoods seldom follow section lines and that they do not have regard for county boundaries.

It is not always easy to find criteria by which to demarcate in space these community and neighborhood areas. But no one who has studied the actual functioning of rural people in the Northern Plains could doubt that they exist in modern life and that their social impact is felt in many ways. A complex pattern of loyalties, expressed in the social, educational, religious, fraternal, and business relationships, makes up the context of much individual and group behavior. When driving along a country road, one sees such physical features as hills, valleys, streams, highways, farm buildings, and fences; habits of association and neighborhood and community relationship are not revealed. But these are almost as real in the minds of the people as the physical features of the land, and they represent the actual functioning of rural society. In fact, a small group of representative rural people with a minimum of technical assistance can usually map the communities and neighborhoods in a whole county in a few hours.

The influence of modern transportation and highways and of the progressive urbanization of rural life has been notable. Communities and neighborhoods have everywhere changed greatly during the past quarter of a century. This change is still in progress, but the social effects of these factors have been somewhat stabilized, and it is not expected that rural social groupings in the Plains will change as much in the next 25 years as they have in the past 25 years.

1/ The Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana - approximating one-fifth of the United States. (by Rural)

THE RURAL COMMUNITY IN THE PLAINS

While trade and service area communities differ from the European village settlement in some important respects, they have many characteristics in common with the more compact farm village. Modern communication, automobiles, and highways have done much to overcome distance and physical isolation. Communities in the Northern Plains are relatively young, 40 to 80 years, but the pattern of community life goes back to pre-historic time.

Rural communities have been called the seed beds of basic culture as well as of population. The elemental traits which are the controlling factors of civilization are learned in the intimate world of the home and the small community as the mother tongue is learned. The individual on the small stage of the community is conditioned for playing the role of citizen in the Nation and the World. Here in the community he acquires priceless experience with the democratic process before he has given any thought to abstract principles. The community, moreover, serves as a laboratory for the testing and refining of social inventions. Ideals which the Western World holds precious are survivals of ancient community ways but new socio-economic adjustments must constantly be made, to keep pace with technological changes.

The Northern Plains is an area of high birth rate and limited opportunities. This region is therefore a heavy contributor of population to other parts of the Nation. The net migration from the region as a whole was well over a half-million persons from 1930 to 1940. In addition, the rural communities contributed to urban population within the Great Plains. Wealth as well as population was exported. For example, many family estates were divided between the children who migrated to other areas and the children who established homes in their own communities. It is important that such an area have strong and well-developed rural communities to rear and educate its youth properly for usefulness elsewhere and yet conserve its population and cultural base in the process. As the Northern Plains is predominately an agricultural region, the rural community takes on particular significance.

Broad Characteristics

The lot of rural communities in this area is hopeful, for besides their abundance of healthful fresh air and sunshine they are close to basic food-supply resources and their problems are on a relatively manageable scale. In a large city the pressure of groups may grow so great that sight of the individual is almost lost. But in the rural community specific persons loom larger than their group labels, and problems are seen in terms of well-known neighbors.

Many leaders recognize that our rural communities have a strategic place, not only in the present war effort, but in peace-time reconstruction. The resourcefulness, initiative, and resolution of the people are a vast national resource. Regions within the Nation differ greatly; there are inescapable reasons for those differences which have not always been clearly understood.

Perhaps the time has arrived for rural leaders to search for answers to broad questions of policy and action in the light of regional characteristics. The general features of the Northern Plains have an important influence on the functioning of the rural community in this region.

(1) The average density of population in more than half of this vast region is only six persons per square mile, even when cities are included, and within large areas it drops to less than 1 per square mile. There are no large cities in the Plains. Human habitations make a thin pattern of inconspicuous dots on the wide panoramaof hill and valley and plain. They are distributed irregularly over the region. Here and there are nuclei of varying sizes from less than 100 persons to 300,000. Only four cities in the entire region have more than 100,000 people; only 57 cities had more than 10,000 persons in 1940. Thus most of the families in the region are part of a characteristically rural community. Farm and ranch families are grouped through relative proximity and association into community service areas, which are most often centered around a rural village or town.

(2) A characteristic of the region is the extreme variability of precipitation and other factors influencing agricultural production. A year-to-year difference of 10 inches of rainfall may mean the difference between prosperity and poverty in much of the region. Hazards - such as grain rust, or grasshoppers or hail - can quickly undo the work of a full year. A problem of the community as well as of the individual farmer or rancher is how to get economic and social stability out of a situation which is, and always must be, based upon the vagaries of Nature. Here, social invention by communities or groups of communities must alleviate some of the effects of Nature's caprice. Struggles have been won by cooperative action which would have been lost had each tried to stand alone.

(3) Agriculture in much of the Plains is specialized; it is dominated by one-crop farming or ranching. Fluctuations strike hard. Here technological changes and mechanical inventions affect the whole farming system whereas in more diversified areas changes can be absorbed with less shock because they affect a smaller segment of the farm organization. Institutional life in these communities must be oriented to this characteristic of the agriculture of the Plains, and the collective effort of a community must be directed toward cushioning the shocks of crop failure and other hazards of specialization.

(4) The wide prevalence of the pioneering and speculative psychology in much of the Northern Plains creates peculiar community problems. This region was settled rapidly and not so long ago. It does not show the deep, rich community life found farther east. The first settlers were a restless, mobile people many of whom moved on before their claims could be proved. In this get-rich-quick country many became infected with the speculative spirit, and the prevalence of the money motive in the early agriculture of much of the region held back the development of strong community life. At the time some of the areas of the Plains were settled, farming had become largely a matter of cash trade, and the main

crop in much of the region was an export crop. Moreover, the climatic peculiarities made for a certain tentativeness of plans. With periodic local crop failures there was scant encouragement to take a long view. The tendency was rather to move to other and perhaps "greener" pastures. Yet with all these handicaps communities did develop, even if slowly and haltingly. Neighbors gradually met and organized, and communities began to be cherished - churches, schools, parks, and community halls, as well as better stores, banks, hotels, and movie houses grew up around the trading post, the depot and the elevator. Indeed the speculative spirit led to overexpansion of services in some of these rural towns.

(5) In many communities in the Plains lands adapted to cultivation are intermingled with lands best suited to grazing. Individual farmers have not always been able to adjust land use for optimum stability. Land which is low in productivity because of soil or topography is often used too intensively because it does not exist in a broad area, but rather, lies between land adapted to more intensive use. Maladjustments in the use of land often unnecessarily jeopardize whole communities in the Plains. A Corn-Belt economy in Central Nebraska or a cash wheat economy on the dry benches of Montana may bring disaster when one dry year follows another. Unsound land use, which progressively depletes soil resources in a less spectacular way, likewise may seriously impair the resources of agriculture and, indirectly, of the whole community. The community has a stake in the conservation of the natural resources as really as the farmer and the rancher. Sound community planning must, therefore, be as broad as the economic interests of the town and country families of the community. This state of affairs is to be contrasted with those found in broad areas in the United States where the type of farming and the use of the land are reasonably well adapted to the most profitable use.

(6) In addition to the economic interest of making a living, the people of the rural community have many and varied requirements. The needs of the community have to do with local government, relations with county, State, and National Governments, cooperation of town and country, cooperation with other communities, health, housing, education, recreation, community ethical standards, religious and cultural activities, and many other vital community interests. Far removed from urban centers, the people of the Plains are dependent, in a peculiar way, upon the services of the rural towns. It is important, therefore, that these should be community centers with high standards of service.

(7) A peculiar feature of the Plains is the wave-like fluctuation of population growth. This region was settled by people of approximately the same age; they reared their families at about the same time, and the children who migrated left the communities at a similar time. This characteristic has been intensified by population movements associated with World War I, the drought of the 1930's, and World War II. Many of the rural communities have problems of maintaining school enrollment, recreation, religious services, health, and business. Some of them have been able to deal realistically with these local problems through organized community planning and effort.

Neighborhood Life

Some so-called communities are so small that they are neighborhoods in reality, but the typical rural community in the Plains is made up of several small neighborhood groups. Such primary groups may be made up of a few families or of many, but frequent contacts and a feeling of "belonging" characterize the group. This fellowship and cooperation may be organized or it may be entirely informal; it may represent different degrees of intimacy and cohesion. However this may be, it is the primary social environment in which the family and the individual function.

A few generalizations may be outlined as the basis for discussion of the significance of neighborhood life in Northern Plains communities.

(1) Primary neighborhood groups are important as carriers of tradition and culture. The elemental social traits become vigorous and mature enough to survive in the protective shelter of primary groups where there are intimate acquaintance and mutual confidence. Here, attitudes of neighborly goodwill, tolerance, fair play, and cooperation are developed. Basic human culture is of slow growth; simple attitudes such as honesty and courtesy have required thousands of years to be refined and established. While culture origins are diverse in the Northern Plains, the diversity often finds expression in the relatively superficial aspects of behavior; common elemental traits and universal sanctions permeate the different ethnic groups.

(2) Neighborhood discussion is important among the freedom-loving citizens in rural areas of the Plains. Socrates, in speaking of the Greek City-States, said they should never be allowed to grow beyond the size at which all the citizens could hear the voice of any one citizen who wished to speak his mind to them in open forum. Some have held that the radio can supply this need in sparsely settled areas, bringing the voice of the leaders to the ear of practically all who will listen. However useful radio may be, it is not a substitute for direct face-to-face exchanges of views between free citizens. Mutual understanding, so necessary to cooperation, is in reality not a matter of communication (as in a radio talk) but of inter-communication as in small discussion groups or informal neighborhood exchange of experience. This interchange is especially important in areas of scattered settlement. The family and the individual are more likely to take part in group deliberation and action in these small groups. They "count" more in the primary group than in the "Great Society". Indeed, the vitality of democracy has always depended upon its association with informed and responsible local citizenship.

(3) World War II has brought a noticeable shift toward a sense of neighborhood responsibility in the Plains. There has been a return to earlier informal cooperation between neighbors. It had never entirely disappeared but was strong in only a few isolated neighborhood groups. The strategic importance of agriculture's part in the war has impelled many farm people to organize neighborhood cooperation as the most effective method of getting things done for the

neighborhood group is a logical unit for mutual aid and cooperation, and for organized group action on many problems of rural people. A sizable book could be written about recent achievements of many rural neighborhoods in the Plains. War has stimulated pooling of labor, machinery, and transportation, cooperative effort in salvaging of scrap metal and rubber, development of community victory gardens, preservation of food, fire prevention; it has stimulated Community Chest and War Fund drives. Hundreds of small neighborhood machinery and sire cooperatives have been organized, and many purchasing and marketing associations have contributed to agricultural production. Neighborhood recreation has been revived, and useful neighborhood discussion of agriculture's part in the war, and of the issues of the war, and similar themes are fortifying democracy for the efforts and stringencies of war and for the difficult post-war years. These developments indicate a growing sense of local responsibility and a more vital citizenship.

INTEGRATION OF RURAL LIFE IN THE PLAINS

In hundreds of communities throughout the Northern Plains local people have demonstrated capacity for effective teamwork. They cooperate in many ways to produce things they need and to achieve common goals; to do this comes so easily and naturally that it is taken for granted. It follows a democratic pattern based upon needs and aspirations. Many voluntary association groups carry on strong programs reflecting the social values cherished by the people, and some of these programs have been well financed and directed by local people for many years; churches, service clubs, lodges, farm organizations, community clubs to mention only a few. Some local leaders have had extensive experience in community activities hence the leadership patterns are well developed.

Thus the rural community is a natural unit of planning and organization in the Plains. Many activities of the rural people have long been organized on a community basis. Habits of cooperation and mutual respect are often strong among the leaders hence organizations are sometimes informally coordinated on a purely personal basis. Established organizations in the community are often well coordinated through "interlocking" memberships. The same may be said of the relationships between the different local neighborhoods.

Professional agricultural workers and others who have responsibility for assisting rural people can be of greatest help if they recognize the basic community patterns in county activities. Community planning also offers the best hope for sound and constructive modernization in the post-war period. Cooperation of local organizations, agencies, farmers and townspeople, and between communities, can go far to adapt modern technical and scientific developments to the long-time interests of rural people. A representative committee can best study the community's needs in various lines of business or service and analyze its relationships to other communities. This would incidentally uncover a number of opportunities for returning veterans and would help guide post-war improvements in rural communities. Because of the sparse population and great distances the service pattern in the Plains should be adapted to the area. Smaller rural trade centers in the Plains generally form constellations around larger service centers.

Were the services planned on a rational basis many rural community centers could probably be strengthened and modernized. Schools, churches, grocerys, grain elevators, oil and gas services, creameries, freezer lockers, machinery repair shops, health clinics and other local needs can best be provided near consumers on the farms and ranches. Other services can best be provided in larger centers. Such rural-urban adjustments are already in process and many local leaders are thinking in these terms. Because of a long period of hard times the service pattern established before modern transportation has fallen into disrepair in many places and is ripe for rebuilding. In the post-war period rural communities may have an opportunity to bring it up to date - somewhat like rebuilding London.