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POPULATION SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL NEBRASKA TOWNS

by

Andrew Husa

A DISSERTATION

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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POPULATION SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL NEBRASKA TOWNS

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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After beginning with an introduction to rural population trends and population sustainability in rural towns, this dissertation gives an overview of population change in rural Nebraska towns between 1950 and 2010. Following a series of maps depicting the changes in rural Nebraska towns between these two censuses, six case studies are used to explore the growth of individual towns. A discussion on the characteristics of growing rural towns in Nebraska follows these case studies.

The dissertation then continues by discussing statewide rural residential decision making and place attachment based on data collected by the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey. Following a comparison of the results from urban and rural survey respondents, the content switches to a focus on rural Nebraskans who have stayed in, or moved back to, the state's rural towns, and discusses differences in residential decision making and place attachment between different genders and age groups.



A special thank you to my dog, who travelled with me to several of the rural towns included in my research. You're a good girl, Rose.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my parents and my grandmothers.

To all my friends and family who helped me fall in love with rural Nebraska and my hometown of Liberty.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the American geographical imagination, the rural Great Plains is an empty place that one flies over or drives through as quickly as possible to get from one coast to the other. Yet, research on Great Plains rural communities, no matter how small, shows that the region is much more than seemingly endless miles of agricultural flatland. While the rural landscape has been emptying, many rural communities have diversified their economies by attracting new industries and amenities to sustain their current populations and attract new residents.

By definition, rural Americans live in the nation's open country and towns of under 2,500 people. At the 2010 census, nearly 60 million people, or about 19% of the population, lived in rural areas of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts). In many areas of the country, especially across the Great Plains, the rural population has plummeted since the early 20th century. Recent reports on population distribution, age structure, and net migration reveal that the Great Plains contains multiple communities and counties with declining populations, high percentages of people aged 65 and older, and soaring out-migration. While these conditions exist elsewhere in the country, they are especially pronounced in the rural Great Plains (Wilson 2009).

These conditions have been research foci across various disciplines and by several scholars, with interests in both historical and contemporary factors leading to out-migration on local, state, and regional scales. The patterns of rural out-migration have

therefore been largely documented throughout the history of the Great Plains. Seemingly going unnoticed in discussions on the region, however, are the rural Great Plains communities that have been able to sustain their populations and attract new residents.

One such community is the rural town of Hickman, Nebraska (Figure 1.1). After reaching a population of 380 in 1920, Hickman's population would decline to 279 by 1950. Hickman grew exponentially over the second half of the 20th century, however, reaching a population of 1,084 in 2000. Its growth has continued into the 21st century. In 2017, the latest survey reported that Hickman had more than 2,100 people, a 26% increase since its 2010 census population of 1,627. In fact, Hickman has been named the fastest growing town in Nebraska (KOLN/KGIN 2017).



Figure 1.1 Downtown Hickman (Photo by Author)

Hickman may be the fastest growing town in Nebraska, but it is far from the only rural one on the rise. While Hickman's growth can be attributed to its role as a bedroom community for those who make the thirteen mile commute to the city of Lincoln for

work, there are several growing rural towns across Nebraska that are far from Lincoln, Omaha, or any of the state's other urban communities. This project contributes to the research on the sustainability of rural towns by mapping the rural towns that are growing in Nebraska, discussing where these towns are located, exploring reasons behind their growth, and examining local residential decision making and community attachment.

This research is divided into four chapters with the collective goal of answering four questions: Which rural towns are growing in Nebraska? Where are these growing rural towns located? Why are these rural towns growing? And, what are the motivations for people to live in rural Nebraska? These questions are addressed in the following chapters. This introductory chapter continues with a review of literature on rural population trends and community sustainability, and research on rural residential decision making and place attachment.

The second chapter gives an overview of rural population change over the entire state, with a series of maps depicting the changes in rural Nebraska towns between 1950 and 2010. The third chapter consists of case studies that explore the reasons for the growth of six rural Nebraska towns. These case studies include information about their demographic, economic, historical, and social characteristics found through travelling to these towns and conducting interviews with local residents. The third chapter concludes with a discussion on the characteristics shared by these six communities.

The fourth chapter discusses statewide rural residential decision making and place attachment based on data collected by the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey. In early 2019, the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey was conducted to better understand the

factors that influence Nebraskans to stay, leave, or move back to the state. Following a comparison of the results from urban and rural survey respondents, the chapter focuses primarily on rural Nebraskans who have stayed in, or moved back to, the state's rural towns, and discusses differences in residential decision making and place attachment based on gender and age. Following the fourth chapter, a postscript summarizes the relationship between each of the chapters.

Initial background research for this dissertation sought to find existing literature in three key areas: historical rural population trends, both nationally and statewide; contemporary population recruitment and retention strategies in rural Nebraska towns; and the initiatives and organizations in Nebraska that support and promote the sustainability of rural communities. Much of the research in historical rural population trends and contemporary population growth in rural towns has been done on a national scale. There has been little done specifically about rural demographics in Nebraska outside of the enduring patterns of depopulation in many areas of the state. Rural population trends at the national level have been a research focus for Kenneth M. Johnson, a senior demographer at the Carsey School of Public Policy and Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Johnson, along with others, has written a wide variety of articles on the topic.

Kenneth M. Johnson and Glenn V. Fuguitt discuss the demographic patterns that rural America experienced in the late 20th century in their 2000 article, "Community and Change in Rural Migration Patterns, 1950-1995." The first identified pattern was the 'nonmetropolitan turn-around' of the late 1960s and 1970s, which was characterized by

population growth and net migration gain in non-metropolitan areas. Next, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, nonmetropolitan growth slowed considerably. This ‘turnaround reversal’ led some observers to conclude that the original turnaround was a short-term deviation in demographic trends. The third trend, however, the ‘rural rebound’ of the 1990s, included widespread non-metropolitan population gains fueled primarily by net in-migration from the nation’s metropolitan centers. For the most part, this ‘rural rebound’ took place on the nation’s coasts (Johnson and Fuguitt 2000, 27-49).

The ‘rural rebound’ is explored further in an article of the same name. In “The Rural Rebound” (1998), Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale discuss a variety of powerful social and economic forces that reversed the enduring patterns of rural depopulation that have plagued much of the United States for nearly a century. Their research shows that between 1990 and 1996, the population of America’s rural counties grew by nearly three million, or almost six percent. Driving this ‘rural rebound’ was a mixture of economic, social, and technological forces. Rural areas have become much less isolated as the internet has rendered distance virtually irrelevant in the transmission of information. Johnson and Beale also discuss the increasing importance of manufacturing jobs in rural areas: since 1960 manufacturing has accounted for nearly one-sixth of rural employment and supplied more rural jobs than farming, which has steadily lost employment. The biggest factors may be social, however; the authors identify the strong attachment that many Americans have to the “rural ideal,” a nostalgia that has remained with residents since their childhoods. Some former rural migrants are returning to the communities where they were born, now that jobs are available. Many

seek to raise their children in the same community where they were raised (Johnson and Beale 1998, 16-27).

Kenneth M. Johnson continued his discussion of demographic trends in rural America into the 21st century in his 2012 article, “Rural Demographic Change in the New Century: Slower Growth, Increased Diversity.” According to Johnson, population gains in rural America from 2000 to 2010 were considerably smaller than they had been during the ‘rural rebound’ of the 1990s: the rural population grew by just 2.2 million between 2000 and 2010, a gain barely half as great as that during the 1990s. Johnson found that the slowing growth of rural population was a result of reduced migration, partly because the manufacturing economy that brought so much of the in-migration to rural American during the 1990s declined from 2000 to 2010. The rural counties with manufacturing jobs had been the leaders in in-migration in the 1990s, but were surpassed in the new century by rural counties with natural amenities, recreational opportunities, and/or quality of life advantages (Johnson 2012, 1-12).

Kenneth M. Johnson and Daniel T. Lichter discuss recent rural demographics from 2010-2016 in “Rural Depopulation: Growth and Decline Processes over the Past Century” (2019). Net out-migration has become a serious problem: between 2010 and 2016, 462,000 more people left rural areas than moved in, with the majority of nonmetropolitan counties experiencing net out-migration. Losses in net out-migration have long been counterpoised by in-migration and natural increase, but in recent years that has no longer been the case. Both immigration from Mexico and other parts of Latin America and Hispanic fertility have slowed significantly since the recession of 2008-

2009, reducing a historically significant source of rural population growth. Natural increase is also no longer fully offsetting population losses from net out-migration in many rural counties, leading to total population loss in many rural counties. Johnson and Lichter found that for the first time in U.S. history, several rural counties actually lost population in the aggregate between 2010 and 2016. In fact, only 32 percent of all rural counties gained population between 2010 and 2016 (Johnson and Lichter 2019, 3-27).

A short brief by Kenneth M. Johnson, Rural America Growing Again Due to Migration Gains, reviews changes in rural populations in 2017 and 2018. While the population gain was small, there was indeed an increase in rural population. Johnson found that between July 2017 and July 2018, rural counties adjacent to metropolitan areas gained 46,000 residents because a domestic migration gain supplemented decreases in immigration and natural increase rates. In contrast, rural counties that were not near metropolitan areas continued to lose population due to sustained domestic migration loss (Johnson 2019).

Some studies specifically focus on rural population change in the Great Plains. In an entry in the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (2004), Kenneth Johnson wrote about rural population patterns across the region. From 1870 to 1930, the population of the Great Plains grew significantly, with most of the growth taking place in areas that are still considered rural today. In 1930, approximately three-fourths of the Great Plains population was rural. Following the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, however, the rural population was greatly diminished. In subsequent decades, outmigration continued from rural areas to the urban centers of the region and beyond.

From 1950 to 1960, the Great Plains lost 16 percent of the population residing in rural areas. Johnson notes that this exodus of young adults was particularly severe, with rural areas losing more than 200,000 20-29 year olds, or 44 percent of that age group, between 1950 and 1960. By the end of the 1960s, the urban population of the Great Plains exceeded the rural population for the first time in history (Johnson 2004, 181-182).

The rural population of the Great Plains grew in the 1970s for the first time in four decades. Johnson notes that this gain was almost entirely due to natural increase, rather than in-migration. The 1980s saw a return to depopulation, however, as the Great Plains lost over half a million of its rural population. The rural rebound that America experienced in the 1990s was evident in the Great Plains, albeit less pronounced than other rural areas of the nation. Still, Great Plains rural population grew by 42,000 between 1990 and 1998. This slight population increase was due to both net in-migration gain and natural increase, and it mostly took place near the region's cities (Johnson 2004, 181-182).

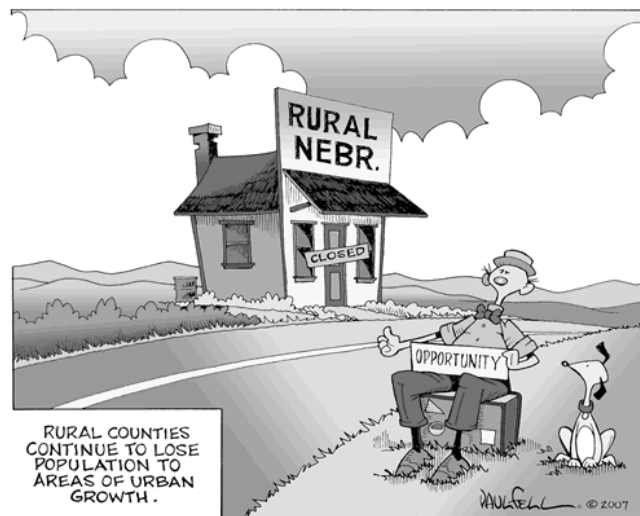


Figure 1.2 Paul Fell Cartoon from the *Prairie Fire Newspaper*, 2007

Randy Cantrell of the Rural Futures Institute at the University of Nebraska discusses recent rural population changes in Nebraska in “Nebraska’s Rural Population: Growth and Decline by Age” (2015). Rural population decline has concerned Nebraska policymakers for decades (as seen in the cartoon in Figure 1.2) and, despite an array of state and local efforts to encourage economic development and demographic renewal in rural communities, that decline has continued for most non-metropolitan portions of the state. The enduring problem of the depopulation of the rural Great Plains, including rural Nebraska, has led to state and community leaders exploring solutions through population recruitment and retention strategies in rural towns (Cantrell 2015, 1-7).

In the 1990s, the Nebraska Rural Development Commission was formed to create a blueprint to help guide rural Nebraska into the new millennium. The goal of this blueprint was to stimulate discussion, debate, and consensus regarding what rural Nebraskans should be doing locally, regionally, at the state level, and nationally to create their future for the next millennium. In 1998, the blueprint, Determining the Future of Rural Nebraska, identified ten rural development areas: Youth Retention & Development, Entrepreneurial Agriculture, Information Age Development, Small Business Development, Residential Communities, Retirement Communities, Next Generation Tourism, Community Wealth Retention, Cooperative Development, and Targeted Economic Development. Twenty years after the writing of this report, these areas are still relevant and vital in the population sustainability of rural Nebraska towns (Nebraska Rural Development Commission 1998, 2-5 & 29).

Youth Retention & Development was the first area identified: there is no greater challenge facing rural Nebraska than attracting and retaining young people. In times of economic and social crisis, the percentage of young people who leave rural communities is dramatic. The Nebraska Rural Development Commission recognized that there are no simple strategies to solve this challenge and that there is a great need to create a comprehensive statewide strategy to reverse this trend. This is still one of the greatest challenges facing rural Nebraska in 2020 (Nebraska Rural Development Commission 1998, 29).

Entrepreneurial Agriculture is just as important now as it was twenty years ago. The Commission recognized the importance of the new generation of agriculture, which is rooted in family-scale farming and ranching, and the strategies they must use to provide products through cooperatives, community-based activities, and direct marketing to consumers. Another important area is Information Age Development. The blueprint identifies development strategies such as distance learning, electronic commerce, telemedicine, and telework in creating new opportunities for rural Nebraska. Having adequate internet access continues to be a major focus in the development and sustainability of Nebraska's rural areas (Nebraska Rural Development Commission 1998, 29).

Small Business Development has helped several rural towns across Nebraska add jobs outside of agriculture to build a more diverse and thriving rural economy. This continues to be a fundamental development strategy in the 21st Century. Residential Communities are another important area highlighted in the blueprint, as one-third of all

Nebraska rural communities are within commuting distance of urban places where strong economic growth offers employment opportunities. Many of these communities have experienced population growth in recent years as they have seized the opportunity to become residential communities for these job-creation centers. The role of several of Nebraska's rural towns as Retirement Communities is vital as well. After agriculture, the second largest source of wealth in rural communities is retirement spending. Appropriate housing, health care services, and a supportive environment in general can help put this development strategy to work in Nebraska's rural towns (Nebraska Rural Development Commission 1998, 30).

The next area the blueprint covers is Next Generation Tourism, which discusses how rural Nebraska could become a tourism destination. Ecotourism and agritourism continue to be explored in several parts of the state today. Community Wealth Retention is broken into two parts: first, a community must generate wealth through activities like agriculture, manufacturing, or providing services to others outside of the community, and second, the community, through retail trade, services, and other activities, must capture as much of the wealth created as possible. A central strategy focuses on creating thriving commercial activities. Cooperative Development discusses the importance of rural Nebraskans working together to create enterprises that can generate greater wealth and economic stability. Finally, Targeted Economic Development recognizes the need to provide meaningful work for area residents, especially in the areas with heavy depopulation (Nebraska Rural Development Commission 1998, 31).

In their article, “Community Recruitment and Retention of New Residents: A Study Using a Market Assessment Process” (2009), Gibson Nene, Bruce Johnson, *et al.*, explore new resident recruitment and retention plan development strategies in Nebraska’s Panhandle from two sides of the local market. The two sides are the demand side (new residents) and the supply/provider side (communities marketing themselves as desirable places to live). The authors use the survey results to draw implications for improvement in resident recruitment and retention programs (Nene, Johnson, et al. 2009, 1).

The authors’ first survey, distributed in June 2007, was comprised of general questions dealing with the demographics of the communities and how community members viewed different recruitment and retention factors and strategies, cooperation with other communities and organizations, and how involved their communities were in resident recruitment and retention efforts. Of the 52 survey respondents, about 60% reported that their communities engaged in some dimension of new resident recruitment efforts. More than half (55%) said their communities had worked together with other communities and other organizations in their recruitment efforts. However, the level of new resident recruitment effort had been relatively low (Nene, Johnson, et al. 2009, 1).

Community members were then presented with a set of recruitment strategies and asked to rank them on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest in importance. Housing Availability ranked first with a score 4.45, followed closely by Employment Opportunities at 4.42. Quality of Educational Services and Housing Affordability tied for third highest with a score of 4.18. In the open-ended portion of the survey, respondents listed the underlying reasons why they chose these factors: some responses were

“Employment and income opportunities drive new resident recruitment;” “Good and affordable housing is key to all potential new residents;” and “Progressive leadership leads to a progressive community; and potential new residents find that attractive” (Nene, Johnson, et al. 2009, 8-11).

Nene, Johnson, *et al.*, found that in order to recruit and retain residents, communities need to devote ample resources to reduce the shortage of housing, make services that appeal to different age groups available, create a positive attitude towards new residents, hold periodic community social functions with the purpose of reaching out to the newcomers, create new resident networking opportunities and welcome programs, and give new residents opportunities to genuinely participate in community affairs (Nene, Johnson, et al. 2009, 21).

In his 2011 presentation, “Marketing Rural Communities: Why do They Move?”, Randy Cantrell introduced his group’s initial research findings conducted in Nebraska from 2006 to 2008 on new resident recruitment and retention, as well as their current three-state (Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota) integrated project on community marketing that was started in 2008. Cantrell hoped to use his research to apply innovative marketing concepts and methods to attract new residents to rural communities and regions (Cantrell 2011).

Cantrell’s research consisted of a handful of surveys, the first of which asked residents why they moved to rural places. A plurality of respondents (53%) listed a desire for a simpler pace of life. Living in a less congested place and living closer to relatives were both selected by 50% of the respondents. Other highly selected reasons for moving

to rural places included both a lower cost of housing and a lower cost of living. Cantrell also mailed out Household and Labor Vacancy Surveys. From the combined data of these surveys, key themes and potential strategies to address the issues were identified. The combined data led to a set of guidelines for the development of a community marketing plan. These guidelines include a focus on community vision/mission, marketing goals, strategies/actions, providing a welcoming culture, improved community infrastructure, and leaving a positive visual first impression (Cantrell 2011).

In Marketing Rural Nebraska To New Residents (2016), Ariana Brocious of NET News interviewed Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, a University of Nebraska–Lincoln extension specialist in Scottsbluff, on her development of a program called Marketing Hometown America. This program was tested by seven communities in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska (Neligh and Kimball) in 2014. The Marketing Hometown America program includes training local residents to lead small discussions among community members, talking about what strengths their community has and how they could better highlight them. After several discussions, the various small groups shared their findings with one another and decided on ways they can act (Brocious 2016).

This creates a list of good characteristics of a community and identifies what members might be able to improve, including ideas to attract new people. From that list communities decide among themselves who will take on the projects. Project members consist of volunteers, city council, private business, or others. Burkhart-Kriesel and others have found that these rural communities are ready for growth, ready for change, and wanting to put a team together to do that. Marketing Hometown America continues

to be a good way of connecting people with diverse perspectives in rural towns who want to be involved in community conversations and to contribute to their hometown's success (Brocius 2016).



Figure 1.3 Paul Fell Cartoons, 2017

Many rural towns have their own community clubs that work toward providing incentives for people to move in, such as those shown in the cartoon in Figure 1.3. At the state level, there are a handful of groups and initiatives that have committed themselves to helping locals with the attraction and retention of people in rural towns across Nebraska. There are several foci among these groups and initiatives, including providing quality educational opportunities, economic diversification through entrepreneurship, food security and grocery stores, access to health care, logistics/internet access, manufacturing employment, parks and recreational opportunities, and the support of healthy main streets, including finding ways to retain current businesses and attract new businesses.

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln is home to some of these groups and initiatives. One such example is the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR), which launched the Community Vitality Initiative in 2012 with the goal of promoting rural towns through a focus on entrepreneurship, recruiting new residents, engaging youth and young adults, and building businesses.

In 2019, the IANR’s commitment to Nebraska’s rural towns was strengthened with the formation of the Rural Community Prosperity Working Group. This group was formed in part to mobilize the resources available through the University of Nebraska to substantially strengthen rural community prosperity across the state. While every community has the primary responsibility for its own development, the goal of the Rural Community Prosperity Working Group is to create a comprehensive strategic framework for an innovative, integrated, and robust approach to rural community prosperity, resilience, and vitality. The group plans to create an innovation hub which will have the mission to identify the keys to success in thriving rural communities, sharing these lessons with other communities, and developing resources that build upon these lessons (IANR Rural Community Prosperity website).

The University of Nebraska Rural Futures Institute is another important effort to promote the sustainability of Nebraska’s rural towns. The Rural Futures Institute encourages bold and futuristic approaches to address critical rural issues, and works collaboratively with community leaders across the state, while providing access to education that encourages leadership and entrepreneurial development and focuses on recruitment and retention efforts. The Rural Futures Institute also hosts the Nebraska

Thriving Index, the first economic and quality of life benchmarking tool for rural Nebraska. The Nebraska Thriving Index is an important commitment and resource for rural community prosperity (Rural Futures Institute website).

Another important initiative conducted by the Rural Futures Institute, in partnership with the UNL Department of Agricultural Economics, is the Rural Poll. The Rural Poll is an annual survey that focuses on such issues as community, government policy, well-being, and work. The goal of the Rural Poll is to ensure that the state's rural voice is heard so that local and state leaders may have a better understanding of the challenges and concerns of Nebraska's rural population. The questions vary slightly every year to address contemporary issues. In 2019, the 24th annual Nebraska Rural Poll asked rural Nebraskans about immigration and education as well as the core questions about well-being and community (Nebraska Rural Poll website).

Other important groups in the University of Nebraska system that work with rural communities across the state include the Nebraska Academy for Research on Rural Education, which is housed in the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln; the Center for Entrepreneurship and Rural Development at the University of Nebraska–Kearney; and a few other rural health academic programs, including the Kearney Health Opportunities Program at the University of Nebraska–Kearney and the Rural Health Opportunity Program, a cooperative venture of the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska's state colleges in Chadron, Peru, and Wayne which addresses the special needs of rural Nebraska by encouraging rural residents to pursue health care careers.

There are also other groups and initiatives outside of the University that seek to help sustain and grow Nebraska's rural towns. One of these initiatives is Blueprint Nebraska, a group of business, industry, and civic leaders who have worked together to create a strategic plan to propel the state to ongoing success, or as they put it, to continue "growing the good life." The vision for 2030 developed by Blueprint Nebraska includes five aspirations and four growth themes for Nebraska's rural and urban communities. These aspirations include creating 25,000 new jobs, making Nebraska a top three state in which to live, bringing in 43,000 young adults (ages 18-34), adding \$15,000 to the annual income of every Nebraskan, and securing an additional \$200 million in annual research and development investment money. The four growth themes include people, places, government, and sectors. Initiatives related to rural towns include promoting diversity, rejuvenating town centers, increasing rural broadband access, and diversifying, expanding, and improving the productivity of Nebraska's agri-business sector (Blueprint Nebraska website).

Another group, or network, that helps rural communities is the Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF). Located in Lincoln, the NCF uses shared experiences, ideas, and resources to help local leaders from rural communities across the state unleash the assets and talents within their own place, or, as it says on their website, to "help hometowns turn up their dream switch" (Figure 1.4). The NCF's affiliated fund network teaches over 250 communities across the state, encouraging communities to grow using grassroots philanthropy that builds leadership, engages young people, and supports people attraction (Nebraska Community Foundation website).

The Nebraska Community Foundation's website features several community success stories, including the rebuilding and reopening of the Ainsworth movie theater, which had burned down in 2014, and the push for a community center to be built in St. Edward. These are just two of the many examples of the NCF assisting and encouraging local efforts in enriching several of Nebraska's rural communities (Nebraska Community Foundation website).



Figure 1.4 From the Nebraska Community Foundation website

The second and third chapters of this dissertation contribute to the aforementioned literature and to the goals of the groups and initiatives listed above by both discussing the overall population trends in rural Nebraska from 1950 to 2010 and by providing detailed local examples of population sustainability in rural towns.

Further background research for this dissertation involved investigating existing literature in two areas: rural residential decision making and place attachment. The data used in the fourth chapter were collected through the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey,

which came out of an earlier mobility project in 2014 based in Vermont (Morse and Mudgett, 2018, 2017; Morse 2017, 2015). In 2019, essentially the same methods used in the Vermont Roots Migration Survey were repeated in Nebraska and Utah as part of the American Roots Migration Project. The goal of the American Roots Migration Project is to compare rural responses across diverse rural settings and places.

One of the articles that came out of the Vermont research was Cheryl E. Morse and Jill Mudgett's "Happy to Be Home: Place-Based Attachments, Family Ties, and Mobility among Rural Stayers" (2018). As the subtitle suggests, this article focuses specifically on the reasons that Vermonters cite for remaining in their home state. A statistical analysis of the Vermont survey's responses shows the importance of rural place-based factors and family ties as key drivers in stayers' residential decision making. As part of the article's conclusions, Morse and Mudgett add that there is a need for detailed examinations of place attachment across the urban-rural gradient (Morse and Mudgett 2017).

Differences in place attachment across the urban-rural gradient are explored in "Lifetime stayers in rural, urban, and highly rural communities in Montana" (2018) by Lance D. Erickson, Scott R. Sanders, and Michael R. Cope. The authors of this article discuss the distinction between community attachment and community satisfaction, with the first being an emotional connection and the second being how well a person's needs are met. The emotional sense of attachment and the practical notion of satisfaction become important considerations in understanding the experiences of individuals in their hometowns (Erickson, Sanders, and Cope 2018).

Place attachment among those who have left a rural place is explored in “Place Elasticity: Exploring a New Conceptualization of Mobility and Place Attachment in Rural America” (2010) by Holly Barcus and Stanley D. Brunn. In their article, Barcus and Brunn describe “place elasticity” as the concept of how individuals can stay tied to one place through technology and communication while living somewhere else. Place attachment and mobility used to be seen as mutually exclusive, but recent studies cited in the article show that they can be complementary. For some, strong place attachment can be expressed by feeling a connection to the place, rather than physically residing in the place (Barcus and Brunn 2010).

In “Understanding Place Attachment to the County in the American Great Plains” (2015), Jeffrey S. Smith and Jordan M. McAlister discuss the strong attachment to place that exists in rural communities and counties of the Great Plains and how this attachment helps form their identities. Smith and McAlister describe these rural residents as distinct in character and extremely loyal to their hometowns, many of which are in economic decline. One of the strongest bonds these people form is to their communities and the county in which they live. Rural stayers (and some leavers) have a lot of pride in the community and county in which they grew up (Smith and McAlister 2015).

William Wetherholt discussed place attachment in Nebraska in his dissertation, “Exploring Rootedness in the Very Rural Great Plains Counties of Kansas and Nebraska” (2016). Wetherholt’s research sought to gain a better understanding of what place-based factors contribute to an individual’s rootedness in a very rural area where so many others have moved away. In 2015, Wetherholt mailed questionnaires to 1,000 randomly-

sampled households in Kansas and Nebraska, as well as creating small focus groups. Place-based factors that emerged in peoples' decisions to stay in these areas revolved around the rural lifestyle, such as the aspects of living in a small town and the freedoms it affords, and community attachment, including a sense of pride and feeling of acceptance (Wetherholt 2016).

Another interesting piece on place attachment in Nebraska comes from Roger C. Aden and Scott Titsworth (2012) in a book chapter, "Remaining Rooted in a Sea of Red: Agrarianism, Place Attachment, and Nebraska Cornhusker Football Fans." Their chapter contributed to a book on sports fans and identity using the example of Cornhusker fans' connections to the University of Nebraska's football team, each other, and a way of life that they consider representative of Nebraska. Their studies illustrate that being a Cornhusker fan is about being rooted in Nebraska's dominant agrarian culture as the players enact agrarian principles (hard work, dedication, etc.) on the field. Being an out-of-state Cornhusker fan also allows those who have left to remain rooted in Nebraska (Aden and Titsworth 2012).

Differences in place attachment and sense of place among males and females in the Great Plains are addressed by Cary W. DeWit in "Women's Sense of Place on the American High Plains" (2001). In his article, DeWit explores the distinctions between men's and women's sense of place. From 1991 to 1996, DeWit conducted a field study on sense of place in western Kansas and eastern Colorado to explore women's contemporary experience of life on the Great Plains and the different ways that women experience the region compared to men. The sample group used in DeWit's study

included women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (although most were white Euro-Americans), economic levels, social groups, and differing levels of education (DeWit 2001).

DeWit found that along with gender roles placing men and women of the Great Plains in very different social situations, there were also fundamentally opposing responses to the land. The women who live on the Great Plains cite very different qualities than those mentioned by men. DeWit found that men tend to value opportunity, freedom to work their own schedule, and easy access to recreation. Women, on the other hand, were found to value relationships the most, praising the closeness of families, intergenerational ties, and the intimacy and helpfulness of the community. DeWit concludes his article by saying that the differences between men's and women's attachments to the Great Plains are a topic worthy of further study (DeWit 2001).

The *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (2004) includes an entry by DeWit entitled "Gender and Sense of Place." This entry discusses the different ways in which males and females experience the plains. DeWit discusses how many women regard the Great Plains as a male place, and they feel more restricted to traditional female roles in work, home life, and community than they would in other places. Women are also more likely to find the Great Plains to be less physically appealing than males. DeWit includes the terms "barren," "desolate," "edge of the earth," and "vast nothingness" as terms that women have often used to describe the physical landscape of the Great Plains. In many ways, it is almost as if males and females are describing different worlds (DeWit 2004, 329-330).

Gender and age differences in both rural residential mobility and place attachment are discussed by Robert Shepard in his article, “The Role of Gender in Rural Population Decline in Kansas and Nebraska, 1990—2010” (2014). In his article, Shepard discusses the migration patterns of young adults in the Great Plains and the differences in these patterns between young men and young women. Shepard used the 2000 census to calculate the ratio of males to females aged 12 to 17 in more than 2,200 Nebraska and Kansas communities. He found that the ratio of males to females increased from 2000 to 2010. Shepard concludes his article with a call for more research into why young women migrate away from rural areas (Shepard 2014).

The fourth chapter in this dissertation uses data from the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey to fill in some of the gaps in the aforementioned literature. Specifically, the survey results are used to examine and discuss the differences among the urban-rural gradient and the male-female contrast in Nebraska among those who have stayed in the state, those who have left, and those who have returned. The next chapter maps and considers population changes in rural towns across Nebraska between 1950 and 2010, with particular emphasis to the towns that are growing.

CHAPTER TWO

MAPPING POPULATION GROWTH IN RURAL NEBRASKA TOWNS

Rural depopulation has been an ongoing problem in the Great Plains since the late 1930s. The Great Depression and severe drought forced many rural families to quit their farms and abandon their lands and homes, seeking work elsewhere, often relocating to a larger urban community. Even after World War II, when the agricultural economy stabilized, advancements in farming technology led to larger farms and fewer farm families, contributing to further rural depopulation. Reduced populations resulted in a reduced demand for goods and services, leading to fewer job opportunities, more out-migration of young people, and subsequent low birth rates in rural areas of the region. Patterns of rural depopulation have been studied across different places and different times throughout the region's history by several scholars. While many of the region's large cities continue to grow, its small towns continue to dwindle and disappear.



Figure 2.1 Shaded Counties Have 1930 or Earlier as Year of Highest Census Population

(Map by Author)

Perhaps no state provides a better example of ongoing rural depopulation than Nebraska, which lies in the heart of the Great Plains. In fact, 72 of Nebraska's 93 counties had a year of highest census population of 1930 or earlier (Figure 2.1). Nebraska has a small population, especially when compared to its geographical size: although Nebraska is the 16th largest state in total area in the United States, it is only 38th in population size. Nearly three-quarters of Nebraska's 2010 census population of just over 1.8 million people live in urban areas, communities with over 2,500 people, as defined by the United States Census Bureau. Nebraska's population has been more urban than rural since the 1960 decennial census, and while the state's population has continued to increase, it has often come at the expense of rural towns, as rural population has declined severely since the beginning of the 20th century. Following a slight rebound in 1980, the rural population has continued to decline. By 2010, Nebraska's rural depopulation had fallen to nearly 500,000 people, the lowest it had been since 1890 (Figure 2.2) (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts).

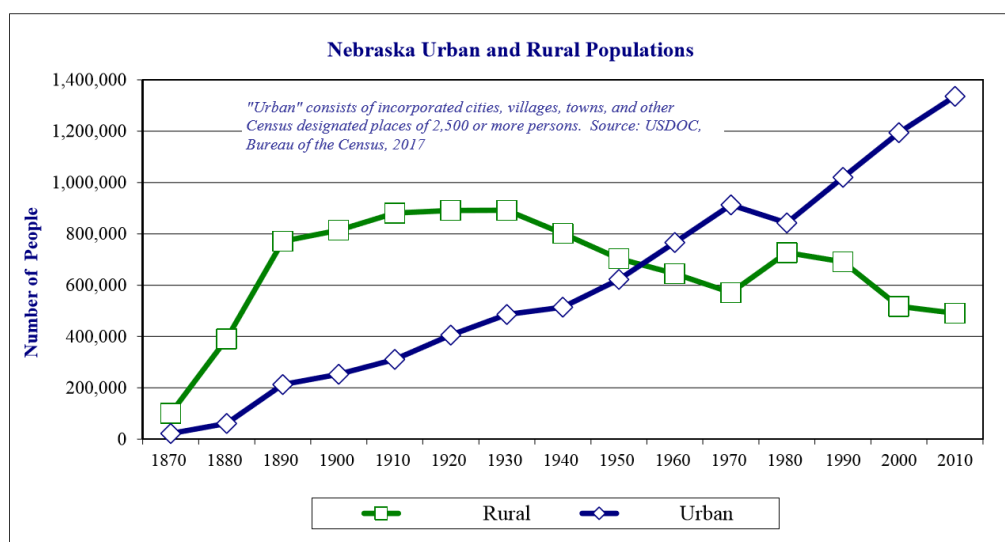


Figure 2.2 "Nebraska Urban and Rural Populations"
(Nebraska Department of Economics)

Nebraska Urban Communities

Although 94% of the state's land is defined as rural/agricultural, only 27% of the state's population call this land home. The other 73% can be found in the state's urban centers, especially in its largest city, Omaha (population 408,958), and second largest city and state capital, Lincoln (population 258,379). These are the only two cities in Nebraska with populations that exceed 100,000 people. Bellevue, the third largest, has a population of 50,137. Grand Island, the fourth largest, comes close with 48,520. For the fifth largest, you have to drop down to the 30,787 people in Kearney. The rest of the top ten ranges from Fremont's 26,397 people to Columbus's 22,111. The rest of the state's communities are under 20,000, and after Lexington, the state's 16th largest city with a population of 10,230, the rest are under 10,000. Valentine, with a population of 2,737, is the 48th and the last of the communities with more than 2,500 people. Figure 2.3 shows the locations of the forty-eight urban communities of Nebraska (Nebraska Blue Book).

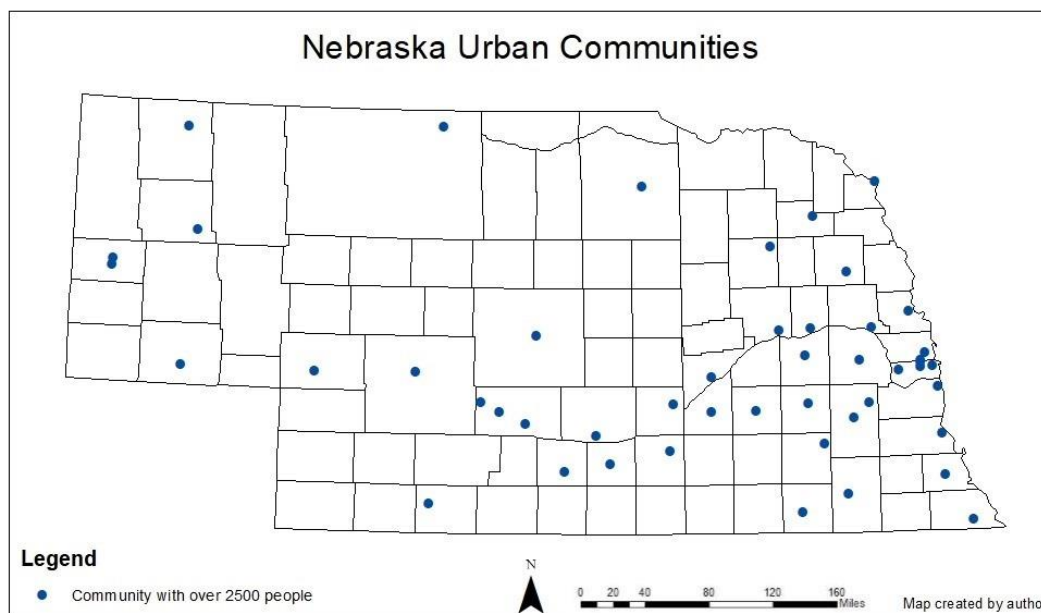


Figure 2.3 Map of Nebraska Urban Communities (Map by Author)

Nebraska Rural Communities

At the 2010 census, only 27% of Nebraskans lived outside of these forty-eight urban communities. While the United States Census Bureau does not actually define “rural,” they do state that “rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included in an urban area (at least 2,500 people). The three largest rural towns of Kimball (2,496), Ashland (2,453), and Madison (2,438) fell just short of being designated as urban. Including these three, there were 491 incorporated small towns in Nebraska that were under 2,500 people in 2010. Although the minimum population required for incorporation is 100, many villages that have lost population over time currently have fewer than 100 people. The datasets used in this chapter do not include the growth or decline of the unincorporated towns. The following map, Figure 2.4, shows the 491 rural towns of Nebraska (Nebraska Blue Book).

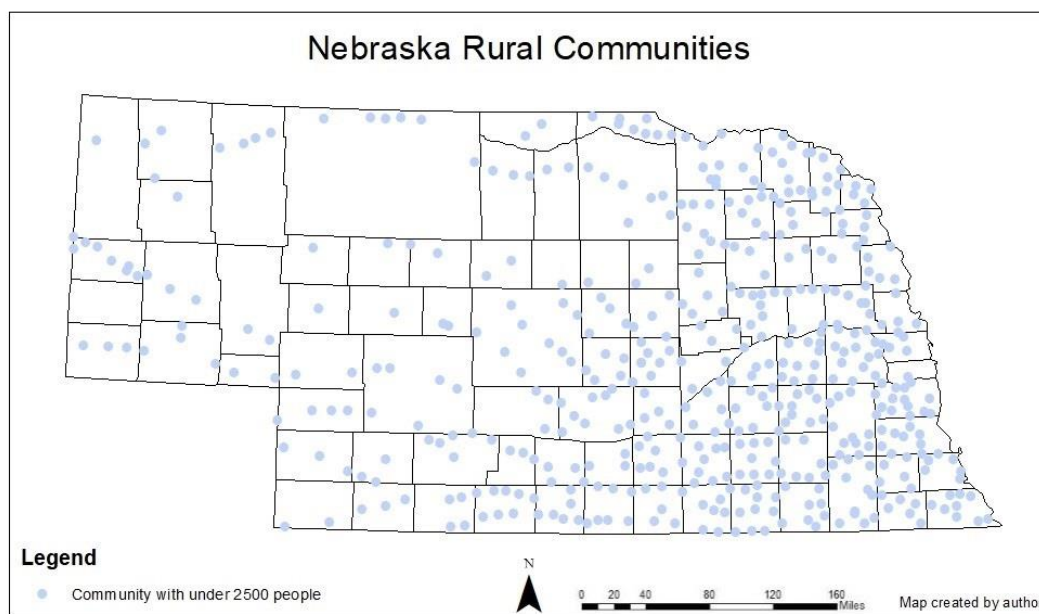


Figure 2.4 Map of Nebraska Rural Communities (Map by Author)

Most rural towns that dot the map of Nebraska are old railroad towns. This can be seen in the linear patterns of communities on the map, as well as in the layout of the towns themselves, with streets that are laid out parallel to the railroad track or as a T-town, where the main street runs perpendicular to the railroad. In their early days, rural towns performed several crucial roles, often for the surrounding farm families. Rural depopulation led to an exodus of people and businesses, as well as schools and banks from many of these towns. Today, the typical small town consists of a church, a post office, and a grain elevator, along with the occasional cafe and/tavern, general goods store, and/or gasoline station.

As rural depopulation continues to plague Nebraska, many rural towns have become mere shells of themselves, while others have disappeared from state maps when their inhabitants moved away long ago. Despite an ever-dwindling overall rural population, however, some rural towns in Nebraska have been able to sustain their population, while some have even grown. By mapping population change between two decennial censuses conducted in Nebraska's small towns, two questions may be addressed: Which rural towns are growing in Nebraska? And where are these growing rural towns located?

To compare population growth or decline in Nebraska rural communities, changes between the 1950 and 2010 censuses were examined. The 1950 census was chosen for comparison of small-town growth as it was the last census in which Nebraska had a predominantly rural population. The 2010 census was chosen as it was the last decennial census to be taken, so it is the most recent, and will continue to be until 2020. Beginning

with the 1960 census and through the 2010 census, Nebraska's rural population dropped from 53.1% of the population to 26.9% in 2010; even though the state gained population overall, the rural population declined by nearly 150,000 between 1950 and 2010.

It is important to note the differences between the two censuses. Nebraska's population was 1,325,510 at the 1950 census, just over 500,000 less than it would be in 2010. The urban population was a much smaller percentage, comprising 46.9% of Nebraskans in 1950. There were seven fewer urban communities in 1950 as well, as Aurora, Central City, Gretna, La Vista, Minden, Ralston, and Waverly each grew from below to above 2,500 people, while Superior fell from above to below 2,500 people between 1950 and 2010. These eight communities have been excluded from the map of small-town growth or decline (Figure 2.5) as they were not under 2,500 in both the 1950 and 2010 censuses.

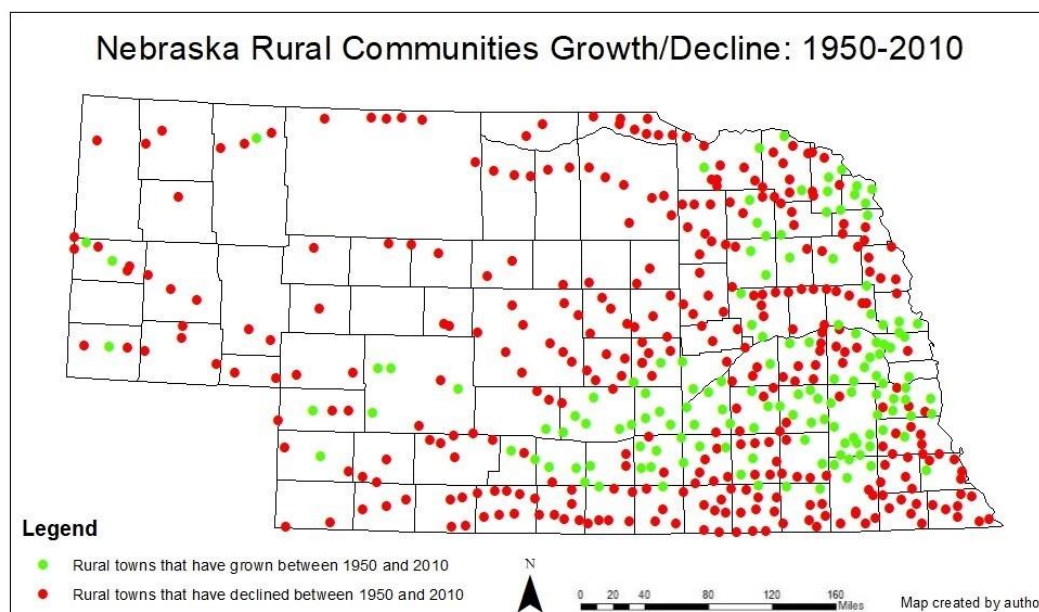


Figure 2.5 Map of Nebraska Rural Communities by Growth or Decline between 1950 and 2010

(Map by Author)

On the heels of the Great Depression and post-war urban migration, rural depopulation continued in the 1950s. Although the state was still more rural than urban at the time of the 1950 census, nine counties in western Nebraska reported fewer than two people per square mile. The number of Nebraska counties with fewer than two people per square mile would increase to eleven in 1960 and fourteen in 1970. By 1970, most of Nebraska's rural counties had dropped to less than twenty-five people per square mile. The *Atlas of Nebraska* notes that rural areas throughout southern and eastern Nebraska would lose over half of their populations between 1910 and 1970 (Archer 2017, 71).

On the other hand, suburbanization near Lincoln and Omaha has helped Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy counties become the center of population growth in Nebraska. This is a trend that started in the 1960s and continues today. Populations have also grown in rural towns that surround other clusters of urban communities, like the tri-cities of Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney, in central Nebraska, in the northwest around Scottsbluff and Gering, and in the northeast part of the state near both Norfolk and South Sioux City (Archer 2017, 71).

Counties far from these urban clusters have trended down: seventeen western counties dropped below two people per square mile by 2010, while thirteen more had less than five persons per square mile. In fact, apart from some the counties along the Platte River valley and Interstate 80, all of the counties in western Nebraska have less than ten people per square mile. The counties bordering Kansas are similar, with several having dropped to fewer than ten people per square mile by 2010 (Archer 2017, 71).

Nebraska's declining towns should not be considered failures. These towns were successful, and many still are, despite their declining populations, as they are still performing the role they were intended to as grain-collection points. In an unpublished speech given at Kansas State University, John Hudson argues that depopulation should not be equated with failure, and that the Great Plains does not require a sedentary, stable, dispersed rural population to make it function. Although many rural towns themselves have lost hundreds of peoples and dozens of businesses, their grain elevators have often thrived throughout the 20th century and continue to do so today (Hudson 1996).

In the face of all these statistics on rural depopulation, however, some rural towns grew between 1950 and 2010. Of Nebraska's 491 rural towns, 139 grew in population between the 1950 and 2010 censuses. Figure 2.6 shows these 139 rural towns by the proportion of their population growth from 1950 to 2010.

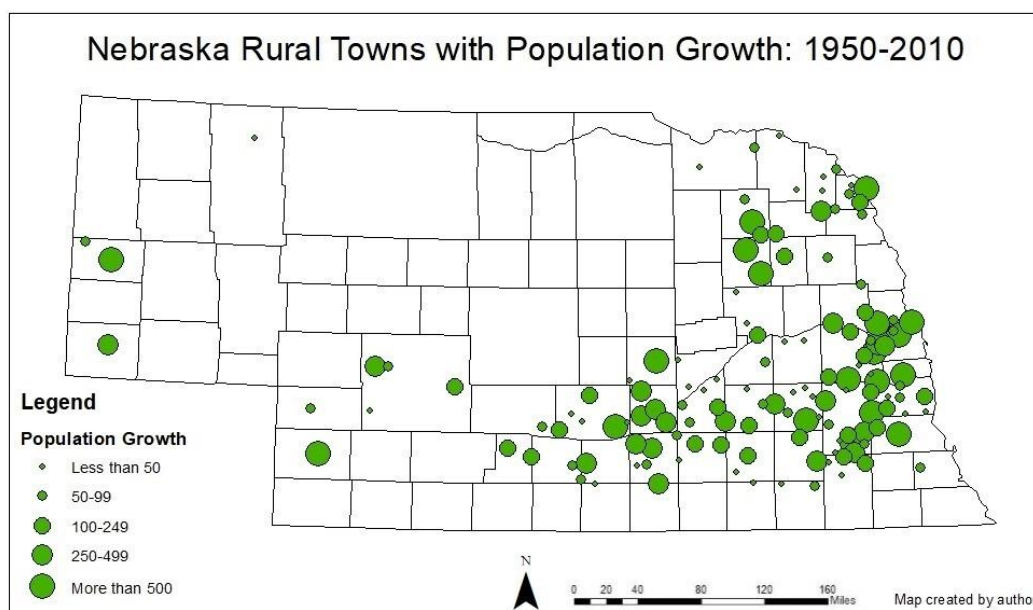


Figure 2.6 Map of Nebraska Rural Towns by Proportion of Population Growth from 1950 to 2010

(Map by Author)

Of the 139 towns that gained population between 1950 and 2010, only five gained more than 1,000 people. Each of these five is near a larger urban community, with Hickman and Milford close to Lincoln, Springfield and Bennington close to Omaha, and Dakota City just outside of South Sioux City. The rest of the top twenty each grew by 500 people between 1950 and 2010. Figure 2.7 shows the rank and population of these twenty towns; Figure 2.8 shows a map of these towns. Of the top twenty rural towns in terms of population growth between these two censuses, only two, Terrytown and Imperial, are west of the 100th meridian. Terrytown's growth can be explained by its sandwiched location between Scottsbluff and Gering. Imperial's may be explained by its status as a county seat, which is addressed on a later map in this chapter.

Ranking	Town Name	1950 Population	2010 Population	Growth
1	Hickman	279	1657	1378
2	Dakota City	622	1919	1297
3	Springfield	377	1529	1152
4	Bennington	315	1458	1143
5	Milford	951	2090	1139
6	Terrytown	228	1198	970
7	Yutan	287	1174	887
8	Syracuse	1097	1942	845
9	Madison	1663	2438	775
10	Gibbon	1063	1833	770
11	Eagle	255	1024	769
12	Valley	1113	1875	762
13	Ashland	1713	2453	740
14	Arlington	593	1243	650
15	St. Paul	1676	2290	614
16	Pierce	1167	1767	600
17	Fort Calhoun	314	908	594
18	Battle Creek	630	1207	577
19	Ceresco	374	889	515
20	Imperial	1563	2071	508

Figure 2.7 Table of the Top 20 Rural Towns by Growth from 1950 to 2010
(Table by Author)

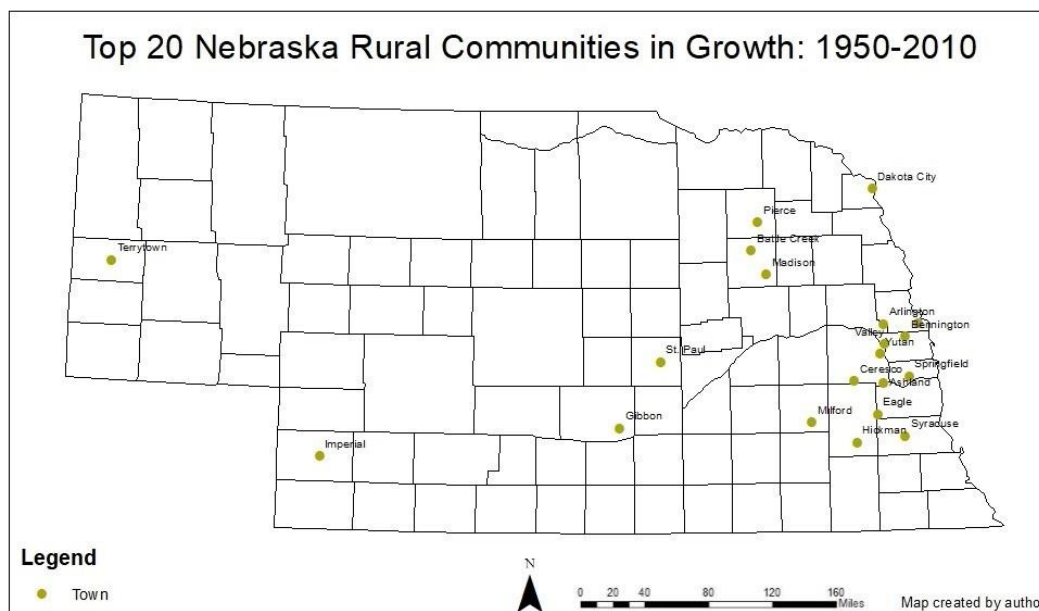


Figure 2.8 Map of the Top 20 Rural Towns by Growth from 1950 to 2010

(Map by Author)

Most growth occurred in the satellite or commuter towns, the suburbs and exurbs of the large urban centers of Nebraska. Suburban population growth has been greatest around Nebraska's largest city, as is shown in the many growing rural towns surrounding Omaha. These Omaha suburbs are well represented by proportion on the map in Figure 2.6 and by many being in the top twenty rural towns in population growth in Figure 2.8. While these rural towns are still separate communities, they have become interconnected due to the suburban expansion of Omaha, becoming commuter towns for the larger metropolis. The best example, although not considered a rural town in 1950, is Bellevue. Bellevue, the oldest continuous town and second oldest settlement in the state, went from 3,858 in 1950 to 50,137 in 2010, passing Grand Island to become the state's third largest city. (Except of course on Husker football game days when Memorial Stadium holds nearly 90,000 fans.)

Unlike Bellevue, Gretna, Papillion, and Ralston were each small towns in 1950. They grew into urban communities by 2010, in large part due to the many inhabitants who commute to Omaha for work. The smallest of the three, Gretna, saw a growth of over 4,000 people, going from a population of 438 in 1950 to 4,441 in 2010. Papillion's population grew by nearly two thousand percent from 1950 to 2010, going from 1,034 to 18,894. Ralston, which had been the largest of the three with a population of 1,300 in 1950, climbed to 5,943 people in 2010. There's also La Vista, home to 15,758 people in 2010, which didn't exist until its development in 1959.

Some of Omaha's suburbs are still designated rural communities, such as the small towns of Ashland, Bennington, and Springfield. This designation will not last for long, however, as each has grown by over 1,000 people from 1950 to 2010, and although some rural land still separates them from the urban landscape, the ever-growing suburbia is making its way out to them. They are just three examples of small towns experiencing growth due to their growing proximity to the expanding Omaha metropolitan area, and just three examples of satellite, or halo, towns of other larger urban communities such as Lincoln, the Scottsbluff and Gering area in the northwest, the northeast in the areas near Norfolk and South Sioux City, and the Tri-cities of Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney.

The rural communities in the Tri-cities area may also be experiencing population growth due to their proximity to Interstate 80. While the introduction of the interstate hurt many rural towns by bypassing them and was a factor in their population declines, it helped the ones in central Nebraska, in both population and business growth.

The old 'T-town', whose main street and businesses were platted perpendicular to the railroad, has been replaced by a new version, where gas stations and fast food chains line up along the interstate exits, while the local businesses remain miles to the north or south of Interstate 80. Although this has killed the main streets, the heart and soul, of these rural towns, Interstate 80 has kept them on the map and provided ample job opportunities and economic success. The interstate allows the market to come to them, often in the form of motel and restaurant customers, or truck repairs and fuel sales.

Unfortunately, small towns far from the Platte River Valley have suffered due to their distance from the interstate. Much like the rural towns of old that were abandoned after being bypassed by the railroad in the late 19th century, present day rural towns bypassed by the interstate and other major highways have seen their businesses close or move to other towns, followed by their populations.

When the railroad was being built, it was important for a town to secure a line. In the past, county seat status often guaranteed that the railroad would be built through town, helping many such towns experience a population boom. County seat status does not guarantee a large population, however – fifty-five of Nebraska's ninety-three county seats have under 2,500 people (Figure 2.9). In fact, many aren't even the largest towns in their counties, and although some are one of only a few towns, or even the only town, in a county, their populations are declining. Some are as small as Brewster in Blaine County with a population of 17 and Stockville in Frontier County with only 25 residents. Harrisburg in Banner County and Tyron in McPherson County are unincorporated towns. Counties with only one community include Arthur, Garfield, Harrison, and Hooker.

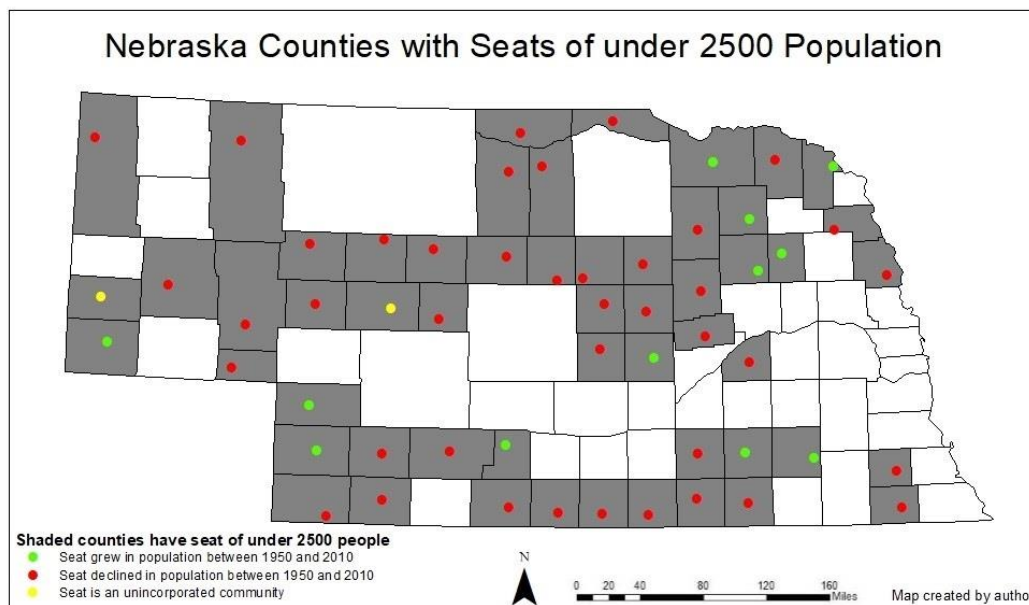


Figure 2.9 Map of Nebraska Counties with Seats of under 2,500 Population

(Map by Author)

Only 12 of the 55 rural county seats grew between the two censuses. The rural county seats gaining the most people between the 1950 and 2010 censuses are found in the northeastern portion of the state, with Madison, St. Paul, and Pierce each gaining more than 600 people. Nearly all of the rural county seats in the Sandhills lost population between the two censuses. The rural county seats that lost the most population between the 1950 and 2010 censuses can be found in the counties along the Kansas border. Pawnee City in Pawnee County (loss of 728 people) and Red Cloud in Webster County (loss of 724 people) declined the most of all rural county seats. Alma, Benkelman, Franklin, and Trenton also each lost more than 500 people. As Figure 2.10 shows, many of the counties with rural seats had their year of highest census population in 1950 or earlier. While the county courthouse, local government, and safety services provide some job opportunities and other business, it does not ensure population sustainability.

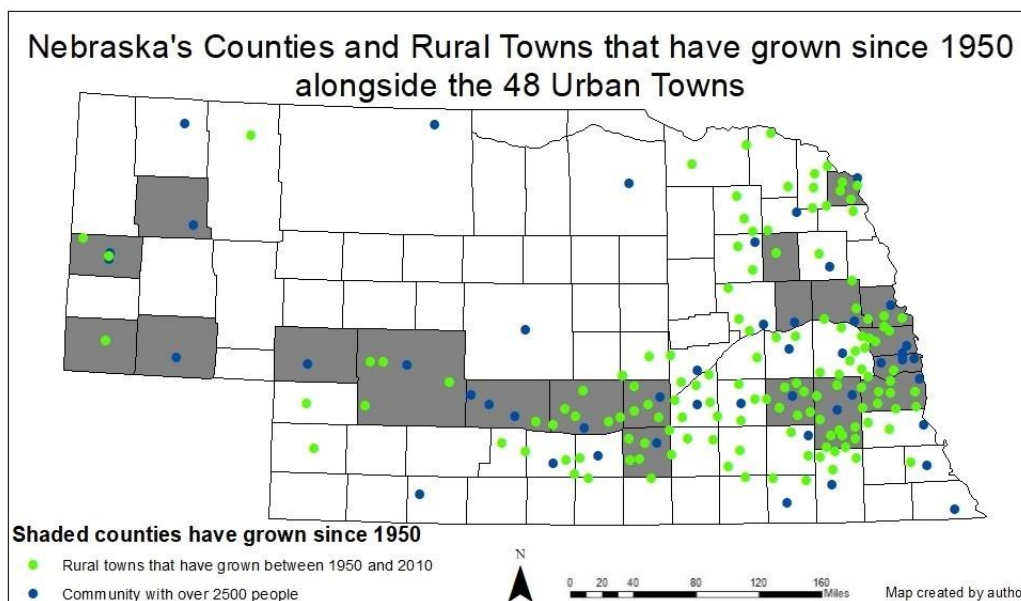


Figure 2.10 Map of Counties and Rural Towns that have grown since 1950 alongside the Urban Towns

(Map by Author)

The map in Figure 2.10 shows the 139 rural towns that grew in population between the 1950 and 2010 censuses, alongside the twenty counties that have grown in population since the 1950 census, as well as Nebraska's forty-eight urban communities. Many of the growing rural towns are in these twenty counties and near the state's forty-eight urban communities.

Of the twenty counties that have grown in population since 1950, twelve had their highest populations yet at the 2010 census. All these counties include or are adjacent to Nebraska's big cities. This includes the eastern counties where Fremont, Lincoln, Norfolk, Omaha, and South Sioux City are located, as well as several of their neighboring counties. The central Nebraska counties that have grown in population since 1950 are along Interstate 80 and home to urban communities, such as Grand Island, Hastings, Lexington, and Kearney. In the Panhandle, the urban towns of Alliance, Gering,

Scottsbluff, and Sidney have helped their counties' populations grow, although it should be noted that the two counties in the southwest of the Panhandle, Cheyenne and Kimball, had their year of highest census population in 1960 (Archer 2017, 79).

What the map in Figure 2.10 shows is that growing rural towns are often in growing counties and usually within proximity to urban towns. This is especially true in eastern Nebraska, where most of the growing rural towns are located. These maps help to answer the two questions asked in the beginning of this chapter: Which rural towns are growing in Nebraska? And where are these growing rural towns located?

The answers to these two questions only scratch the surface, however, in answering a third question: Why are these rural towns growing? Location is an important factor, but it is one of many. To further investigate why these 139 rural Nebraska towns have grown, while so many have not, they must be looked at on a local scale as individual case studies. While these maps help answer some initial questions, a deeper analysis of six individual cases in Chapter 3 will address several more reasons why some rural towns are growing in Nebraska.

CHAPTER THREE

CASE STUDIES OF GROWING RURAL NEBRASKA TOWNS

This chapter focuses on the six rural towns of Axtell, Blue Hill, Imperial, Morrill, Wakefield, and Wilber as individual case studies to address why some rural towns are growing in Nebraska. These particular six towns have been chosen due to their distances away from Lincoln, Omaha, and Interstate 80, which helps them stand out among many of the rural towns that have gained population between 1950 and 2010. Figure 3.1 shows the location of these six rural towns.

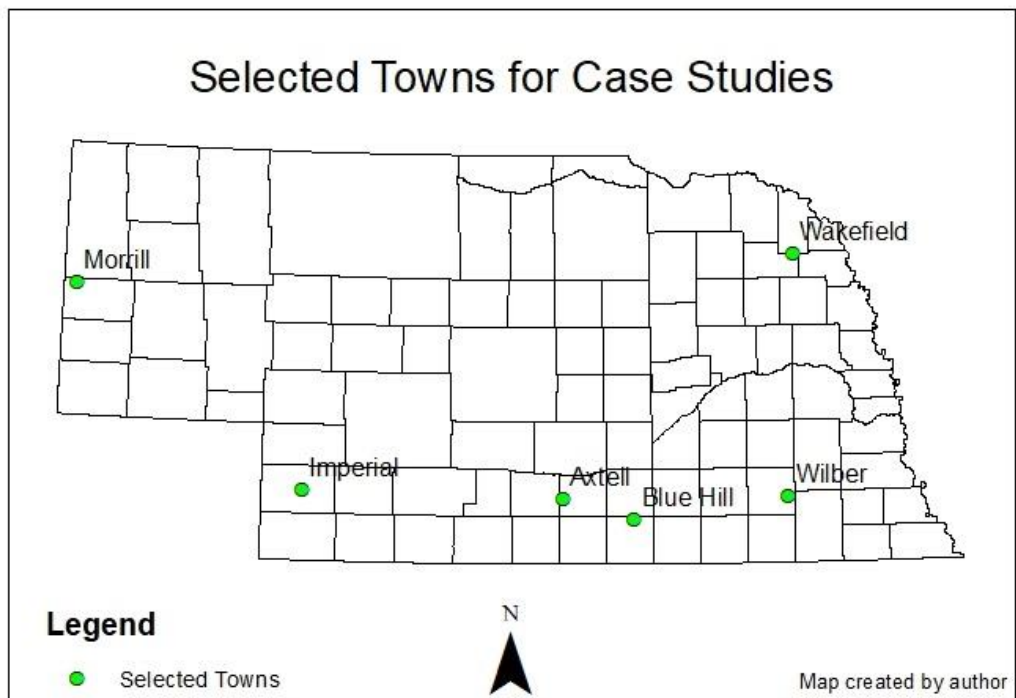


Figure 3.1 Map of Selected Towns for Case Studies (Map by Author)

Axtell

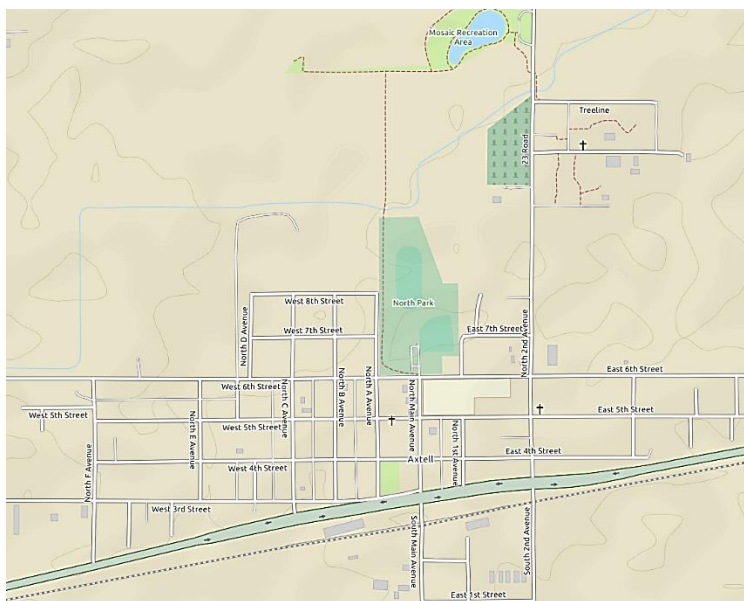


Figure 3.2 Map of Axtell (Open Street Map)

The rural town of Axtell is located in south central Nebraska, approximately 18 miles south of Kearney. Axtell lies along U.S. Highway 6-34, near the middle of the distance between two urban communities: 13 miles east of Holdrege and 10 miles west of Minden. U.S. Highway 6-34 runs along the south side of town. Main Street and the heart of Axtell runs perpendicular to the highway in the middle of town. Axtell, also known as the Windmill City, was home to 726 people at the 2010 census.

Axtell's 2010 population was more than double what it was in 1950 (Figure 3.3). Beginning with a growth of over one hundred from a 1950 population of 352 to a population of 477 in 1960, this upward trend continued in subsequent censuses up until 1990, when Axtell reached a population of 1990. Following a slight decline to 696 in 2000, the population grew once again to 726 in 2010. Axtell's population is expected to be its highest yet for the 2020 census.

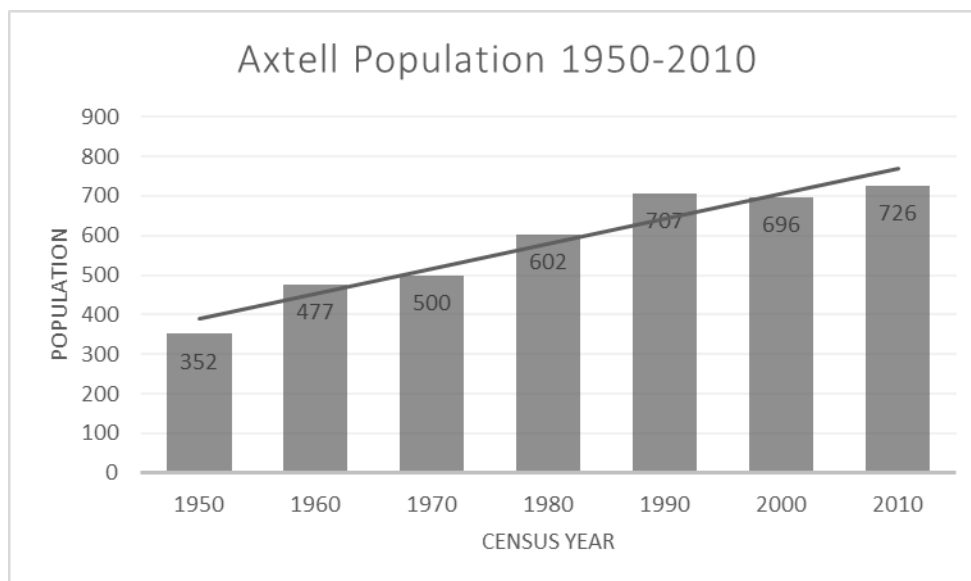


Figure 3.3 Axtell Population 1950-2010

The settlement of Kearney County and the area where Axtell would be platted began in 1873. Many immigrants came directly from Sweden, or from Swedish communities in Iowa after being attracted by the advertisements of the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad after 1883. The railroad came to Axtell in 1885 and the village was incorporated in December of that year. Tradition says Axtell was named after the engineer of the first train to pass through the village (Axtell, Virtual Nebraska website)

The railroad played a vital role in the early success and sustainability of Axtell. The Axtell Grain and Elevator Company, one of the most enduring and important businesses in Axtell, was organized in 1903 to haul grain away from the farming community. Today, the Axtell Co-op is owned by Cooperative Producers, Inc., a company based out of Hastings. The Axtell Co-op continues to serve the community's farmers with its modern grain handling facilities located on the Burlington-Northern Railroad and along U.S. Highway 6-34 (Axtell, Virtual Nebraska website).



Figure 3.4 Bethphage Mission (Photo by Author)

Pastor K.G. William Dahl stands out in the early history of Axtell. Pastor Dahl felt a divine call to establish a home for people he called "unfortunates." He felt compassion for those who society labeled as "imbeciles," "cripples," and without home or family. Together with fifty-four other charter members, he founded the Bethphage Inner Mission Association in 1913 and located the institution in Axtell. At first, Pastor Dahl rented and renovated four homes in Axtell. In 1914, the first four guests arrived. Within a year, the mission had grown to include forty guests and twenty workers, and a new setting on land north of Axtell. The "hill," as the Bethphage Mission casually came to be known, reflected a Swedish architectural style like Pastor Dahl's native Sweden. The original buildings of the Bethphage Mission (Figure 3.4) in Axtell were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2013 (Axtell, Virtual Nebraska website).

After community-based programs for people with developmental disabilities became common in the 1970s and 1980s, Bethphage grew into a national institution. In

2003, Bethphage and Martin Luther Home (originally from Sterling) united to become Mosaic. Following the unification of the two organizations, Bethphage became one of the many Mosaics that have opened across several locations in eleven states, reaching hundreds of communities and providing support to more than 4,500 people with disabilities, mental and behavioral health needs and autism, as well as to aging adults. The Axtell Mosaic at Bethphage Village continues to carry on the legacy created by Pastor K.G. William Dahl (Mosaic website).

The relationship between Axtell and the Mosaic is mutually beneficial. According to a blog on Nebraska Rural Living, The Mosaic in Axtell employs some 200 people, making it the community's major employer. Nearly a quarter of these employees live in Axtell. The Mosaic also boosts the community's businesses through buying groceries and other supplies locally. Both Axtell and the Mosaic also benefit from a modern five-mile bicycle and walking trail that circles a recently restored wetlands, and a handicapped accessible fishing pond adjacent to the Mosaic campus (Nebraska Rural Living website).

Curtiss Dill, the Executive Director of the Axtell Mosaic, describes the institution as an active participant in the community. This includes being one of Axtell's largest employers and the institution's use of local resources. Dill believes that the phenomenal support by the town is also key in the relationship between Axtell and the Mosaic. This strong relationship has led to a survivability for the Axtell Mosaic which is not typical of many rural community businesses or organizations, especially ones such as the Mosaic. Likewise, this relationship has created a viability for Axtell that is not typical of a lot of rural communities (Curtiss Dill, Telephone Interview, November 2019).



Figure 3.5 Axtell Community School (Photo by Author)

Since the town's founding, Axtell has been very proud of its school system. The Axtell Community School (Figure 3.5), with its purple and white Wildcats, is one of the town's central features and a focal point of community events. Wildcat pride is evident throughout town with the team logo painted on the water tower and paw prints painted on the roads near the school. Axtell was a pioneer of redistricting in Nebraska, which has helped keep its enrollment numbers high. In 1952, the residents of thirteen surrounding school districts voted to establish a new district, the first such redistricting effort in Nebraska. This vote assured quality education for all children in Axtell area. Following the 1952 consolidation, Axtell's school enrollment was 223 (Nebraska Historical Society 1994, 440).

Axtell's school enrollment has increased in the 21st century. In 2014, Axtell Community School had 310 students, with an average class size of 22. The school building is thoroughly modern and recently remodeled, and the curriculum includes band

and choir as well as a full range of extracurricular and sports activities. Axtell Community School is also one of the town's leading employers (Nebraska Rural Lifestyle website).

While the Axtell Co-op, the Axtell Mosaic, and Axtell Community Schools all play a prominent role in the community's continued success, they are just three of the many businesses and services offered in Axtell. Along Highway 6-34, Kat's Korner Mart and Grandpa's Cellar share a building, with the former selling groceries and general goods, and the latter being a liquor shop. There is a small park to the side of this building. This park is home to a Nebraska Historical Marker which tells the history of the community.

Axtell's business district (Figure 3.6) is located on Main Avenue, which runs perpendicular to Highway 6-34 and nearly splits the town into equal western and eastern halves. Businesses and services located on Main Avenue include the Axtell Public Library, Cub's Den Bar & Grill, Farmers and Merchants Bank, Shelly's Salon, the Axtell Post Office, Soderquist Custom Cabinets, Integrity Construction, Scandinavian Mutual Insurance, and the Axtell City Hall. Main Avenue comes to an end after it passes the school building, where it reaches the elementary playground and high school football field. To the northeast, located along 2nd avenue, is the Axtell Fire and Rescue Department and the Mosaic.



Figure 3.6 Downtown Axtell (Photo by Author)

Much of Axtell's original housing is located close to the highway in the southwest and southeast parts of town. As the town has grown in the second half of the 20th century, new development has been in other areas of town as Axtell has extended beyond its original town limits. Since 1950, there have been two major purchases of land that have helped Axtell grow: one in the 1970s and the second 15 years ago.

The housing market in Axtell grew in the 1970s. In 1974, the Axtell Chamber of Commerce conducted a housing survey and found there was a real need for new housing. Around this time, the state offered to sell two pieces of property to the community, one on the west end and one on the east end. These were two areas that the state took over when Highway 6-34 was rerouted. The Axtell Chamber of Commerce was not allowed to obtain government funds for developing a housing project, so instead they organized the Greater Axtell Housing and Development Corporation in 1975. The Greater Axtell Housing and Development Corporation was founded with the following purpose: "The

general nature of business to be transacted is to further the economic development of Axtell, Nebraska, and its surrounding area, and to promote the general social welfare of the community and everything necessary and proper in connection therewith” (Axtell Centennial Corporation).

The Greater Axtell Housing and Development Corporation purchased the eastern property from the city and named it “Windmill Estates.” The property was surveyed and platted for 33 building sites. One of the first units built on the Windmill Estates was the Windmill Manor. The Windmill Manor was built in 1978 as an eight-person low-income elderly, disabled, or handicapped dwelling unit. To live at Windmill Manor, one must be 62 years of age or older, or a person with disabilities. Residents are responsible for their apartment. The Axtell Housing Authority does maintenance, lawn care, and snow removal. Rent, which includes utilities, is based upon 30 percent of the residents’ adjusted gross income (Axtell Centennial Corporation).

Axtell has continued to expand its limits, with new subdivisions on the north side of town (Figure 3.7). Vicki Nelson, Axtell’s Village Clerk/Treasurer, discussed how the community bought forty acres of agricultural land from a farmer on the north side of Axtell about 15 years ago. Nelson explained that the addition is being developed ten acres at a time. Eighteen new houses were built on the first ten acres soon after the land purchase, with these homes filling up fast. The second ten acres began its development in 2017, again with eighteen new houses being built. Nelson says that roughly half of these new homes have already been sold. She believes that the rest of the houses will soon be

sold and that another ten acres will need to be developed soon (Vicki Nelson, Telephone Interview, December 2019).

Vicki Nelson says that Axtell's success hinges on its location, as she acknowledges the town's role as a bedroom community for the larger cities of Holdrege, Kearney, and Minden. She mentioned the strength of Axtell's school system and the overall small-town charm as two characteristics that help make Axtell such an attractive place to live for these commuters. Nelson also mentioned a few of Axtell's own businesses factoring into the town's success as well, pointing out the employment opportunities offered by the Mosaic, the school, and the farmer's co-op. Looking towards the future, she mentioned the recent opening of a Thunderhead Brewing (based in Kearney) taproom and noted that the town was considering a potential agronomy business (Vicki Nelson, Telephone Interview, December 2019).



Figure 3.7 New Housing Development in Axtell (Photo by Author)

As the community continues to grow, Axtell leaders look forward to continuing to address the community's high housing demand. The already impressive school system will continue to thrive with the influx of new students as more families move to town. The added population will benefit the businesses and services of Axtell. The Axtell Chamber of Commerce and other community organizations will also expect larger crowds for their three major annual summer celebrations.

The first is the annual Memorial Day celebration sponsored by the Axtell Chamber of Commerce. Every year, they organize a Memorial Day parade, games for children, a water fight supervised by the Axtell Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department, a horseshoe tournament, homemade ice cream, and a barbecue. Axtell Community High School also hosts their all-class reunion during the annual Memorial Day celebration. The second annual celebration is a community picnic sponsored by the Bethany Lutheran on Mid-Summer Eve, reminiscent of the community's Swedish heritage. The third annual celebration takes place on the Fourth of July, when the people of Axtell turn out for a community barbeque, entertainment, and a city-sized firework display (Nebraska Rural Lifestyle website).

The success that Axtell has enjoyed has certainly made the community deserving of such grand celebrations. Axtell is a prime example of a rural town that has capitalized on the opportunity to be a bedroom community for not just one, but three larger cities. Continuing to seize this opportunity and profit from it will lead the town into the future.

Blue Hill

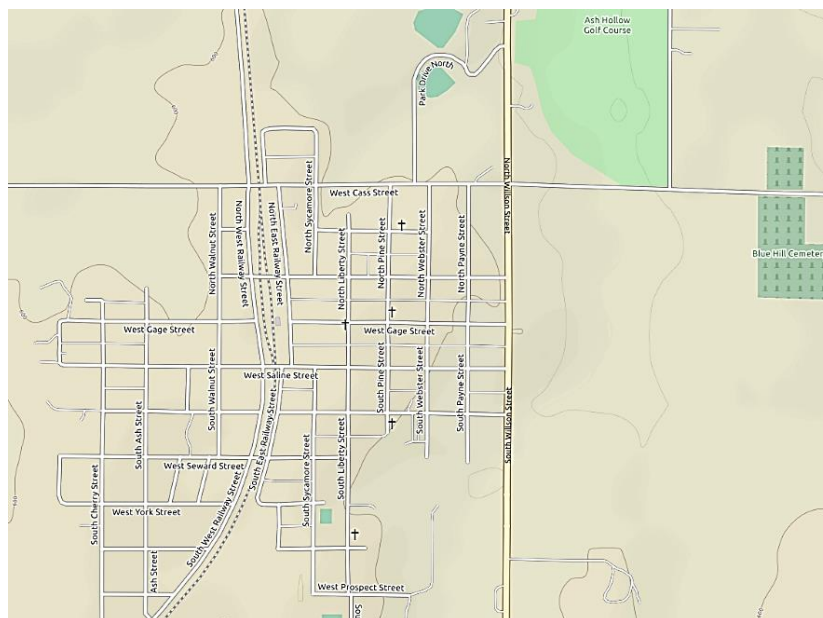


Figure 3.8 Map of Blue Hill (Open Street Map)

The rural town of Blue Hill is located along U.S. Highway 281 in northern Webster County. Blue Hill is located near the middle of the distance to Hastings, 18 miles to the north, and Red Cloud, the Webster County seat, 20 miles to the south. It is approximately 24 miles north of the Nebraska-Kansas border and roughly 40 miles north and a little east of the geographical center of the United States. Blue Hill was home to 936 people at the 2010 census.

The population of Blue Hill has grown remarkably since the 1950 census (Figure 3.9, when the town was home to 574 people. The town's population grew to 723 people in 1960, 784 in 1970, and 883 in 1980. Following the 1980 census, Blue Hill's population declined slightly to 810 in 1990. This decline proved to be an exception, rather than the rule, as the population began to grow again to 867 in 2000 and 936 in 2010. Some residents believe that Blue Hill may reach a population of 1000 by the 2020 census.

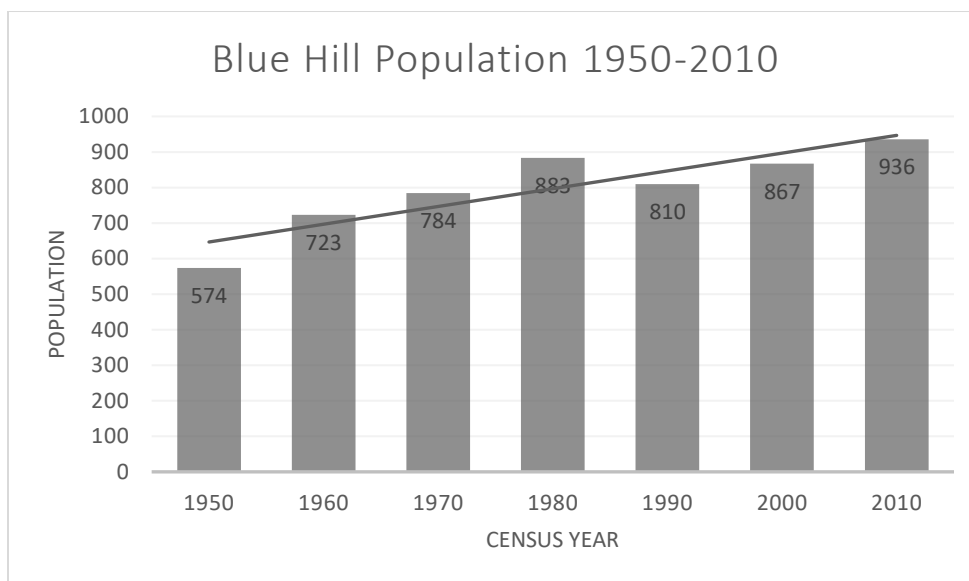


Figure 3.9 Blue Hill Population 1950-2010

The land in the area where Blue Hill would be located began its transformation in the 1870s as the railroad, the horse, the plow, the windmill, and barbed wire helped the settlers transform the prairie. The town that would become Blue Hill was platted in 1878 under the name of Belmont. Since there was already a town with the same name in Nebraska, the name was quickly switched to Blue Hill. The town was named for its location among the hills of the Blue River (The Blue Hill Bicentennial History Committee).

Colonial Isaiah Piatt was one of the first to give a description of the young town of Blue Hill, writing in 1890 that “the town of Blue Hill is situated one mile south of the northern boundary and nine miles west of the eastern boundary of Webster County, of the crossing of the Hastings branch of the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad and the Nebraska & Colorado Railroad.” Colonial Piatt’s written description would go on to say that Blue Hill’s “distance from large towns, its fine railroad facilities and good country

surrounding it, render its future prosperity sure” (The Blue Hill Bicentennial History Committee).

The first building in Blue Hill was a hotel owned by Albert Blumenthal. A post office was built with John A. Wetmore as postmaster. Wetmore then established an agricultural implement business. By 1882, there were three banks and a full array of shops and businesses, including a photographer, two physicians, and a newspaper. The newspaper is still in operation. In 1890, a 100,000-gallon water tower was built, which still serves as Blue Hill's water system. The Glenwood Telephone Company opened in 1901 and built lines in Blue Hill and the surrounding area the next year. (Blue Hill, Virtual Nebraska website).

The Glenwood Telephone Company still serves Blue Hill and several other communities in the immediate area (Figure 3.10). Glenwood Telephone's mission is "to provide exceptional customer service and high quality, cost effective telecommunications services, using the latest technology available, throughout central Nebraska." Today, Glenwood Telephone serves approximately 2,200 telephone customers, 1,000 Cable TV customers, and 3,000 broadband Internet customers. It is one of the largest employers in Blue Hill and the surrounding region with a staff of approximately 40 (Glenwood Telephone website).

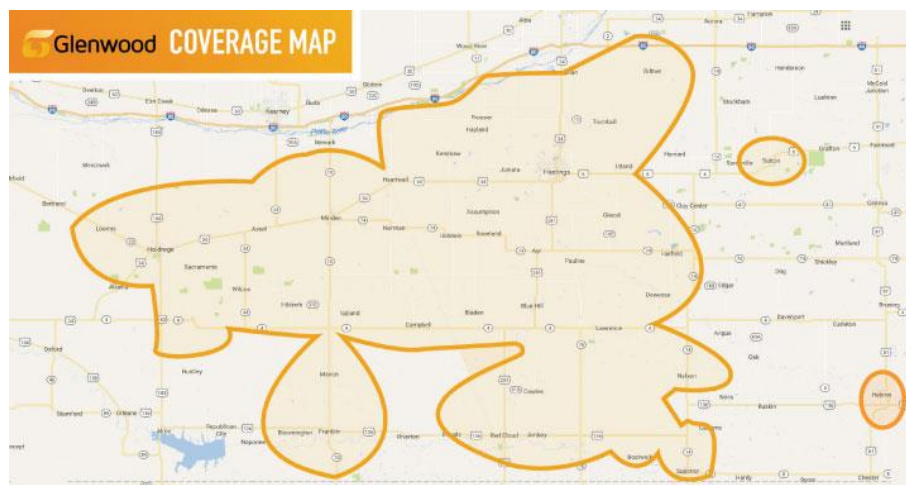


Figure 3.10 Glenwood Telephone Company Coverage Map (Glenwood Telephone website)

Blue Hill is home to several other businesses and services. Although most of the town is located west of U.S. Highway 281, some of the newest businesses and services are located along the east side of the highway. These include the Blue Hill Motel, Blue Hill Fitness Center, Ash Hollow Golf Course, Dollar General, and South Central State Bank. Businesses and services located along the west side of the highway include Blue Hill Care Center and a CPI-Ampride gas station. A new car wash is planned in 2020.

South of the gas station is a large arrow shaped sign pointing west down Gage Street towards the business district (Figure 3.11). The business district is bordered by the Blue Hill Public Library, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Blue Hill Medical Clinic, and Blue Hill Volunteer Fire Department. Moving downtown, there is a floral & ceramics store, an insurance office, taxidermy shop, the Blue Hill Post Office, furniture store, mortuary, Glenwood Telephone, City Hall, the Blue Hill Tavern, Ron's Pharmacy, Thramer's Food Center, the Blue Hill Leader newspaper, Corner Nook gift shop, and the community and senior center. Downtown Blue Hill is bounded on the west where Gage Street comes to a T-intersection near the railroad. The city park sits between the road and the railroad.



Figure 3.11 Downtown Blue Hill

In addition to the city park in downtown Blue Hill, there is also a ballpark on the north side of town, which features two baseball fields, playground equipment, and a covered picnic area. Blue Hill also offers other recreational activities, including a public swimming pool and the aforementioned Ash Hollow, a 9-hole golf course to the east of U.S. Highway 281. Next to Ash Hollow, the Blue Hill Fitness Center also helps residents stay in shape with cardio, strength resistance, and aerobic equipment (City of Blue Hill website).

The Blue Hill Fitness Center is also home of Mary Lanning Healthcare Blue Hill Physical Therapy, which provides physical and occupational therapy/rehab to patients on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Located downtown is the Blue Hill Clinic – M.L.M.H, a rural satellite facility of Mary Lanning Memorial Hospital in Hastings. The Blue Hill Clinic is a full-service medical facility serving the needs of area residents. The Blue Hill Care Center, a 62 bed skilled nursing facility, is located along the highway in north Blue Hill (City of Blue Hill website).

In September 2019, the Blue Hill Care Center (Figure 3.12) was one of four Nebraska facilities acquired by Azria Health, an Omaha-based company that operates senior care facilities in Nebraska and Kansas. Later that month, the residents and staff learned that the center was to be closed in November due to the facility's poor financial performance in recent years, despite the fact that the facility's administrator in Blue Hill said they've been making money. The Blue Hill Care Center is the third largest employer in town and the closing of the facility would cost about 40 jobs and the relocation of 35 residents (Hastings Tribune, September 23, 2019).



Figure 3.12 Blue Hill Care Center (Photo by Author)

The community formed a committee to look for alternatives within days of the closure announcement in an effort to save the Blue Hill Care Center. In October, Azria Health announced that it would lift the request for closure of the Blue Hill Care Center having felt that the support shown by both community and staff helped show that the facility has potential. The people of Blue Hill are hopeful for the future of the facility and

there is no immediate threat of it being closed again (Hastings Tribune, October 18, 2019).

Along with its strong support of healthcare, the community has also put an emphasis on its school system. The first school district was formed in 1880. Early that year, land in the southern part of town was donated for the building of a schoolhouse. A new junior-senior high school was built in 1963 following reorganization of the district. The blue and white Bobcats of Blue Hill have long recognized that a strong school system requires dedicated teachers, students willing to learn, adequate facilities, a steady population base, and financial support from the public school district residents (Nebraska Historical Society 1994, 777).

Today, Blue Hill Public Schools consists of a K-6 Elementary and a 7-12 High School, both housed in a 150,000 square foot single level building. The Webster County Early Learning Center is also located in Blue Hill schools. The Blue Hill Schools website lists a staff of 63, making it the town's largest employer. There is also the New Beginnings Preschool, which is located near downtown Blue Hill (City of Blue Hill website).

The first houses in Blue Hill were built near the first schoolhouse. Since then, housing has spread throughout the town, especially west of the railroad track. Along with the one-family houses, Blue Hill offers rentals, duplexes, low income housing, retirement housing, and senior housing. Westgate Manor is a public housing complex operated by the Blue Hill Housing Authority located in the southwest part of town. It consists of

twelve brick buildings with two to four apartments in each building. Preference is given to the elderly, disabled, and low-income (City of Blue Hill website).

The people of Blue Hill come together for several community events. The Blue Hill Community Club sponsors an annual Easter Egg Hunt in the downtown city park on the Saturday before Easter. Blue Hill is also known for its Memorial Day Celebration, which is held at the Blue Hill Cemetery. The event is sponsored by the Blue Hill American Legion & Ladies Auxiliary. The Blue Hill Community Club also sponsors a City-Wide Garage Sales event on the second Saturday of every June. The community also has a large 4th of July Festival, featuring activities all day, including pool games, children's games, softball, sand volleyball, bingo, BBQ, and a parade sponsored by the Blue Hill Community Club. A fireworks show is held at the end of the day at the Blue Hill Golf Course. The first Saturday of every December, there is a Holiday Bazaar at the Blue Hill Community and Senior Center. Other activities in Blue Hill have centered around the school gym, city hall, and the community room at Westgate Manor. These events and the organizations that sponsor them help bring community members together several times a year and add to the sense of community (City of Blue Hill website).

One major organization in Blue Hill is the American Legion – Arthur L. Shirley Post #176. Organized in January 1920, the Legionnaires are responsible for the annual Memorial Day Service, presiding military funerals and the annual Veterans Day Program and Soup Super. Also, the Legionnaires, together with the Boy Scouts, offer an annual Flag Retiring Ceremony. The Legion also sponsors Boys State Participant, Boys and

Girls Junior Lawman's Training, Local Student Scholarship, Summer Baseball and Softball Programs, and Boy and Girl Scouts (City of Blue Hill website).

Other organizations in Blue Hill include the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Blue Hill Better Herds 4-H Club, Lucky Seven 4-H Club, Webster County 4-H Wranglers, Webster County Pheasants Forever, Partners in Learning, Blue Hill Booster Club, Good News Bearers, Blue Hill Foundation, and Blue Hill Library Friends Foundation. Several of these organizations contribute to community improvements through raising funds through grants and donations (City of Blue Hill website).

The Blue Hill Community Club is one of the most important organizations in Blue Hill. The Blue Hill Community Club replaced the Blue Hill Chamber of Commerce in 2003. Members of the Blue Hill Community Club are active in many improvement projects for the physical, social, and economical development of the community. The Community Club core members are few, according to Rev. Ron Kuehner, but many volunteers come forward for the all-day and evening festivities, including a \$5,500 fireworks show. They also sponsor Ladies night out in September, Candy Cane Lane in November, and the aforementioned Craft Bazaar in December. The Blue Hill Community Club's present goal is to build a new aquatic center, including a swimming pool within the next several years. Fundraising is well on its way, with a 0.5% sales tax being collected. In the meantime, Kuehner described Blue Hill as being aggressive in cleaning up properties and upgrading and paving streets (Ron Kuehner, Telephone Interview, December 2019).

Kuehner also mentioned the town's newest business, the Blue Hill Treasure Trove. Area residents bring their unwanted or unused items to this community thrift store. The items are sorted, displayed, and sold. This is an all-volunteer business. The money is given to community organizations and charities. In December 2019, they gave \$1,000 to the Webster County Giving Tree and \$500 to the Backpack food program at the Blue Hill Public School. Kuehner added that Blue Hill's dedicated residents and its location make a good combination for a thriving town (Ron Kuehner, Telephone Interview, December 2019).

Susan Kohmetscher, the Deputy City Clerk of Blue Hill, described Blue Hill as a bedroom town for commuters to Hastings and Red Cloud. While many of these people prefer the employment opportunities offered in these two larger cities, they want to live in a rural setting, which Blue Hill provides. Blue Hill's amenities and strong schools are added enticements for commuters to call the town home (Susan Kohmetscher, Telephone Interview, December 2019).

Kohmetscher discussed the importance of building more houses in Blue Hill. Currently, Blue Hill is saturated in terms of housing, with land unavailable. The community has actually had to turn people away in previous years due to the shortage of housing. Kohmetscher added that community leaders hope to annex more land to build additional houses, as they have done a handful of times in the past (Susan Kohmetscher, Telephone Interview, December 2019).

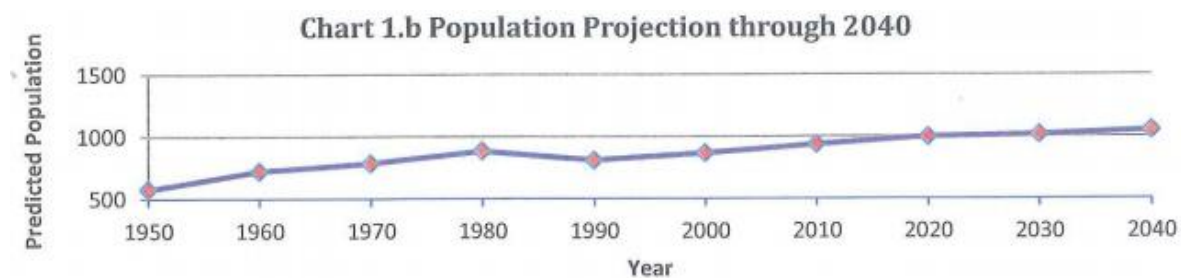


Figure 3.13 Blue Hill's Population Projection through 2040
(The City of Blue Hill Comprehensive Plan – City of Blue Hill Website)

The City of Blue Hill Comprehensive Plan was created in 2014 to guide Blue Hill's economy and community growth. The plan sets out achievable goals to ensure that Blue Hill will be able to meet the challenges associated with growth and create a prosperous community. To meet these goals, Blue Hill will need to continue to offer quality, affordable housing, and incorporate more land into its city limits in order to meet the oncoming demands for residential growth (Figure 3.13) (City of Blue Hill website).

The City of Blue Hill Comprehensive Plan also discusses the importance of maintaining the relationship between the school and the community, an increased focus on the transportation system, energy use awareness, and addressing certain improvements in the community, including long term street development and rehabilitation, construction or complete rehabilitation of the public swimming pool, and infrastructure installation. The City of Blue Hill Comprehensive Plan is a good indicator of what community members want Blue Hill to look like and how they want their town to grow, and its guidance helps to ensure the future sustainability of Blue Hill (City of Blue Hill website).

Imperial

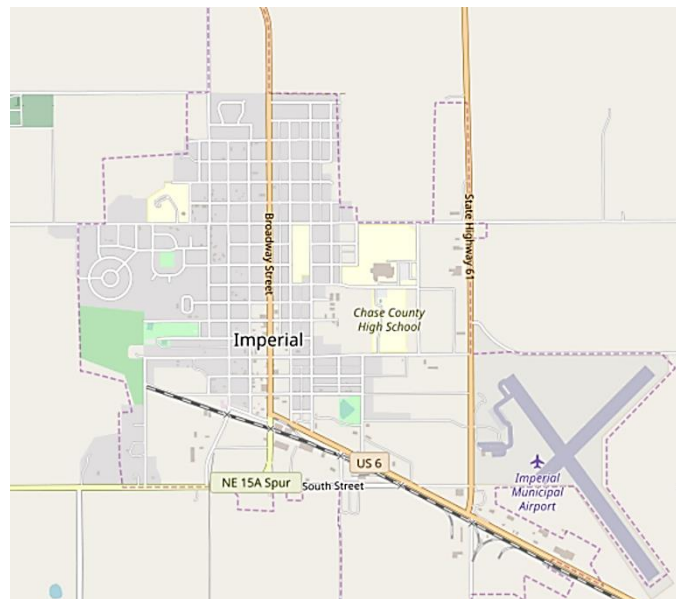


Figure 3.14 Map of Imperial (Open Street Map)

Imperial is located at the junction of U.S. Highway 6 and State Highway 61 in the southwest corner of Nebraska, approximately 24 miles east of the Colorado border and 39 miles north of the Kansas border. The closest urban communities are Ogallala, 48 miles to the north, and McCook, 62 miles to the southeast. Imperial is the county seat of Chase County and one of only three incorporated in the county. Imperial was home to 2,071 people at the 2010 census.

Imperial grew by 508 people between the 1950 and 2010 censuses, expanding from a population of 1,563 to 2,071 (Figure 3.15). Although the overall population growth between the two censuses is impressive, it should be noted that there were instances of population decline between 1950 and 2010. In 1960, Imperial recorded a population of 1,423, a decrease from 1,563 in 1950. The population also fell from 2,007 in 1990 to 1,982 in 2000. The 2010 population of 2,071 is Imperial's highest yet.

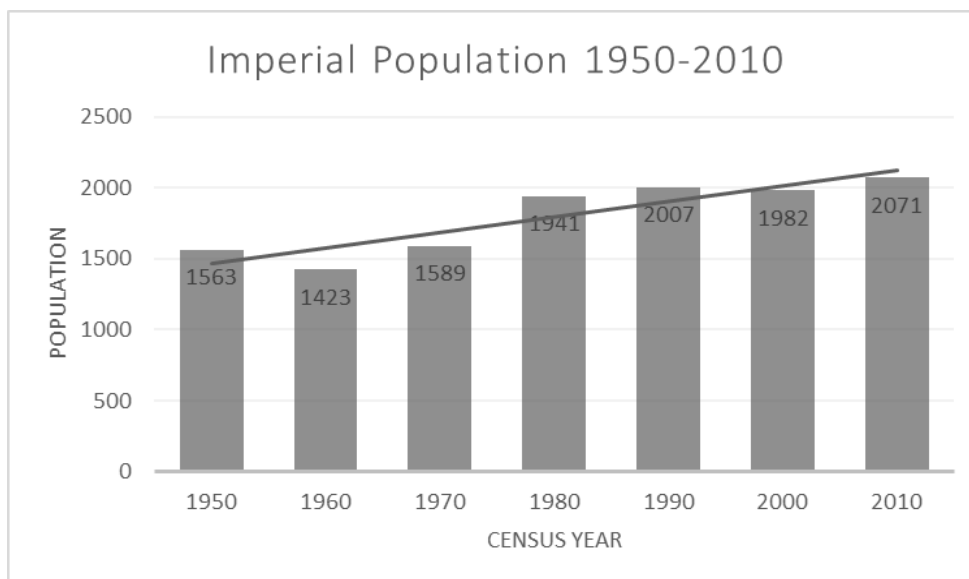


Figure 3.15 Imperial Population 1950-2010

Imperial was founded in 1885 by Thomas Mercier. Legend has it that Mercier was walking west from McCook when he met two cowboys looking out over a broad valley. In making small talk with the cowboys, Mercier told them that he wanted to build a town. One of the cowboys said, and the other agreed, "if I were going to start a town, I would do it in the middle of that big valley down there." Mercier would return years later and do just that, establishing the "Imperial" post office, named either for his former home in Canada or the British imperial government (Imperial, Virtual Nebraska website).

The town was platted on land claimed by Thomas Mercier and Melville J. Goodrich. In order to get things started, Goodrich and Mercier gave a lot to anyone who would put up a building. Early businesses in Imperial included a bank, hardware store, lumber yard, drug store, blacksmith shop, and two general stores. In 1886, Imperial was named the Chase County seat, and the town's first courthouse was built in 1889. The courthouse was a gift from the Lincoln Land Company, a subsidiary of the railroad

company which gave lots to those who would move their buildings to the “Railroad Addition.” In 1892, the rail line built by a division of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad reached Imperial. By securing a railroad line, Mercier had built a town that was there to stay (Imperial, Virtual Nebraska website).

Today, Imperial’s Business District (Figure 3.16) is located on the former “Railroad Addition” lots. Imperial has become a strong agricultural community and serves as a sale and service hub for southwest Nebraska. Its basic economic development activities include farming, ranching, cattle feeding, retail sales, financial and professional services, health care, and tourism. Imperial’s retail area extends approximately fifteen miles north, twenty-five miles east, thirty-seven miles southeast, thirty miles to the south, thirty miles southwest and twenty-four miles west to the Colorado line. Imperial’s sustained growth is attributable to a diverse manufacturing and service base and to energetic planning (Imperial Community Profile).



Figure 3.16 Downtown Imperial (Photo by Author)

The largest employers in Imperial (as of 2019) are Chase County Schools (Figure 3.17), with 97 employees; Chase County Community Hospital and Clinic, with 84 employees; Frenchman Valley Coop, with 78 employees; and Imperial Manor-Parkview Heights Assisted Living Community, with 74 employees. Other major employers in Imperial include Harchelroad Motors Automobile Sales and Service, with 32 employees; 21st Century Farm Machinery Sales and Service, with 28 employees; and Allo Communications, with 21 employees (Imperial Community Profile).

The Chase County school district covers approximately 750 square miles of southwest Nebraska. The current school building opened in the fall of 1991 and houses grades K-12. Student enrollment has been growing in recent years, increasing from 613 for the 2014-2015 school year to 647 for the 2019-2020 school year. In 2008, Chase County Schools opened the Career Academy, a fifth year of high school program in cooperation with Mid-Plains Community College, to provide students the opportunity to obtain an associate's degree in conjunction with their high school diploma (Imperial Community Profile).



Figure 3.17 Chase County Schools (Photo by Author)

Mid-Plains Community College Imperial Extended Campus opened in 2002. As enrollment and the number of offerings expanded, the college began the search for its own building and moved into its new and expanded site in 2009. Soon after, the Imperial Extended Campus opened the Center for Enterprise, which helps students coordinate with area businesses to offer job training opportunities. The Mid-Plains Community College System includes McCook Community College, North Platte Community College, and extended campuses at Broken Bow, Imperial, Ogallala, and Valentine (Imperial Community Profile).

The Chase County Hospital and Clinics are the second largest employer in Imperial. This is a Critical Access Hospital (CAH), a designation given to eligible rural hospitals by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The CAH designation is designed to reduce the financial vulnerability of rural hospitals and improve access to healthcare in rural communities. Eligible hospitals must meet the following conditions: they should have twenty-five or fewer acute care beds, be located more than thirty-five miles from another hospital, maintain an annual average length of stay of ninety-six hours, and provide 24/7 emergency services (Rural Health Information Hub).

Chase County Community Clinic operates two clinics staffed by three family practice physicians and two physician assistants and one nurse practitioner. One clinic is located in Imperial and adjoins the hospital. The second clinic is located in nearby Wauneta. Chase County Community Hospital and Clinics are self-sustaining and not supported by tax dollars. The Chase County Hospital Foundation was established in 2001 to secure resources to support the hospital (Imperial Community Profile).



Figure 3.18 Frenchman Valley Farmers Cooperative, Inc. (Photo by Author)

The third largest employer is Frenchman Valley Farmers Cooperative, Inc. (Figure 3.18). Headquartered in Imperial, Frenchman Valley Coop has a long history of serving area agricultural producers, providing crop and livestock inputs and services, grain marketing and storage, finance and crop insurance, petroleum and transportation. Since its inception in 1912 as the Farmers Union Equity, Frenchman Valley Cooperative has continued to expand its base of operations. Most recently, Frenchman Valley Coop merged with Farmers Elevator Company, expanding operations into the Nebraska Panhandle and Wyoming (Imperial Community Profile).

The fourth largest employer in Imperial is the Imperial Manor-Parkview Heights Assisted Living Community. Constructed in 1968, the Imperial Manor offers skilled nursing care, activities program, physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy. Parkview-Heights was opened in 2002. Services offered at Parkview-Heights, an

independent and assisted living facility, include 24-hour staff, emergency medical care, personal care, housekeeping, meals, and transportation (Imperial Community Profile).

Imperial has added a handful of businesses in recent years, while several existing businesses have expanded or moved to new and improved locations. 21st Century Equipment, Imperial's John Deere Dealership, completed a 20,000 square foot expansion in 2011. Also in 2011, Allo Communications expanded their headquarters, nearly doubling their available space. Bomgaars, a retail chain of farm and ranch supply stores, opened a shop in Imperial in 2015. Harchelroad Motors Dealership and the Sweden Crème restaurant both opened in 2015. Helena Chemical moved to a new location in town in 2015 as well. In 2019, Farm Credit Services moved to a new location (Imperial Community Profiles).

To encourage new commercial and light industrial development, Imperial Economic Development purchased a seventy-eight-acre site on the southeast edge of town, adjacent to State Highway 61, in 2011. The Cornerstone Commercial Park, as the site was named, provides incentives to new businesses, including economic development loans, tax increment financing, and discounts on land purchase inside the site. Since 2013, more than \$2 million of public money and more than \$4 million of private money has been invested in Cornerstone Commercial Park (Imperial Community Profile).

Allo Communications has also helped bring businesses to Imperial. Allo was founded in Imperial in 2002. Allo provides high-speed internet to the community and surrounding region. Broadband internet access is vital in breaking down communication and distance barriers and allows rural businesses to expand their target audience far

beyond that of their base. Since its inception, Allo has continued to expand its service lines as well as its service area, helping promote commercial development in Imperial (Imperial Community Profile).

Promoting commercial development is one of the six goals of the community's long-term comprehensive plan, Investing in Imperial's Tomorrow: 2014-2024.

Introduced in 2014, the comprehensive plan provides guidance on where and how Imperial will invest and change in the future. Along with the aforementioned goal of promoting commercial development, the comprehensive plan includes goals of expanding recreational attractions and community amenities, enhancing gateway entrances and community beautification, improving public infrastructure, enlarging the existing housing market, and developing a marketing campaign (City of Imperial, Nebraska).

Availability of a variety of recreational services and parks is important to maintain a high quality of life for residents of all ages, which makes expanding recreational attractions and community amenities an important goal. Currently, Imperial has the Chase County Fairgrounds, community swimming pool, nine-hole golf course, bowling alley, movie theatre, several ball fields, and several areas with playground equipment, including the city's main park, Campbell Park, as well as Max Addition Park and Schroeder Park. Imperial wants to ensure that there are parks within walking distance of any new housing that is built (City of Imperial, Nebraska).

Residents of Imperial expressed a desire to enhance the community's gateway entrances. This includes providing signage which includes wayfinding and landscaping. Wayfinding signage serves a dual purpose in both directing people and grabbing the

attention of travelers. A beautified gateway entrance helps make a memorable statement to a visitor, which is why it is important for Imperial to have signage that gives a good first and lasting impression on visitors. Recently, the community added a new welcome sign on the east Highway 6 entrance (Figure 3.19) (City of Imperial, Nebraska).



Figure 3.19 Imperial Welcome Sign (Photo by Author)

In recent years, the community has significantly improved its public infrastructure. Imperial has thirty-one miles of streets, twenty-five of which are hard surfaced. In 2010, the community completed a \$1.8 million paving project, rebuilding nearly two miles of street connecting State Highway 61 to Main Street, as well as improving access to the school. In 2013, Imperial completed \$2.5 million in paving projects including the Sage Addition and 2nd street in the Cornerstone Addition. In 2016, the community completed \$1.6 million in paving projects, including paving Cape Street and building 3rd street in the Cornerstone Addition. Imperial Municipal Airport has also made several upgrades including constructing a new airport terminal building in 2008 and replacing the airport ramps and taxiways in 2016 (City of Imperial, Nebraska).

Improving the housing market is another priority for community leaders. Since 2014, more than twenty-five new homes have been built in Imperial. Most of the community's existing homes are single family housing units. In recent years, Imperial Housing Authority has overseen the construction of more low cost, multi-family, and retirement housing. Currently, there are sixteen multi-family housing units comprised of four apartment buildings and twenty duplex units reserved for elderly and disabled tenants. Heather Estates is a housing development in Imperial that consists of ten single family homes, of which eight are restricted income rentals (City of Imperial, Nebraska).

Along with the Imperial Chamber of Commerce, the Imperial Community Foundation Fund (ICFF) has helped the community's improvement efforts. The ICFF was established in 1999 as an affiliated fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation. As of the end of 2019, ICFF has provided nearly \$350,000 in local support for the community. Their mission is for Imperial "to be a friendly, caring, safe, and progressive community that fosters a diverse business community, abundant economic opportunity, innovation, quality health care, world-class education, ample housing and recreation options, all of which enrich our quality of life" (Imperial Community Foundation Fund).

The ICFF does not just simply ask for money; rather, they ask for interest in investing in the community, according to fund advisory member Lori Pankonin. The ICFF has raised engagement from the community while collecting funds that will last for generations. In recent years, money given to the fund has gone to school projects, upgrading fire department equipment, and doctor recruitment. The ICFF is also known for gifting custom mailboxes to graduating seniors of Chase County Schools. Pankonin

explained the symbology behind giving mailboxes rather than luggage, a traditional gift given to graduating seniors. While luggage is associated with leaving, the mailboxes show that the community wants graduates to stay, or to return to Imperial after they finish college. This caring gesture has made a big impact on alumni. The success of the ICFF speaks to the effort of the community and the large donations reflect a strong belief in the future of Imperial (Lori Pankonin, Telephone Interview, January 2020).

Dwight Coleman, mayor of Imperial, looks forward to the future. According to Mayor Coleman, the community's population has yet to peak. Imperial will continue to grow as a result of more young adults returning to the big family farms surrounding the community and more new people will move in to take advantage of the high-speed internet while they work at home. He believes the biggest factors in Imperial's success are a good farming economy, high-speed internet, and a diversified economy, which includes adding new jobs. Mayor Coleman is hopeful that an organic dairy may open outside of Imperial soon, adding up to seventy jobs (Dwight Coleman, Telephone Interview, January 2020).

Imperial's website includes two new community slogans as part of their improved marketing plan. The first slogan speaks to the importance Mayor Coleman put on Imperial's farming economy, high-speed internet, and a diversified economy, as it describes Imperial as "Where Hometown Values and Modern Technology Combine to Make the Good Life Even Better." The second slogan appeals to its continued growth, calling for prospective members of the community to "Come Home to Imperial."

Morrill

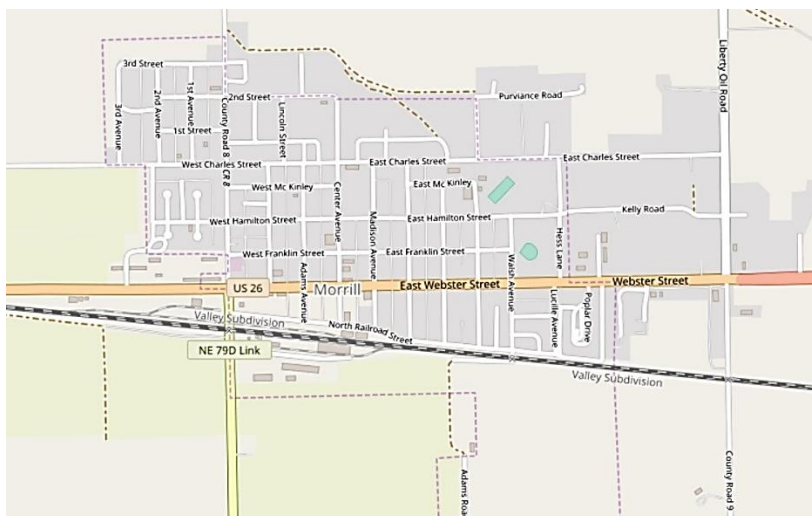


Figure 3.20 Map of Morrill (Open Street Map)

Spread out along U.S. Highway 26 in the extreme western reaches of Nebraska's Panhandle, just seven miles from the Wyoming border, is the rural town of Morrill. U.S. Highway 26 runs west to east through Morrill parallel to Railroad Street one block to the south. U.S. Highway 26 and Railroad Street make up the southern portion of the town grid of Morrill and are split down the middle by the perpendicularly running Center Avenue. Morrill was home to 921 people at the 2010 census.

Morrill's 2010 population is up 72 from the 849 residents of the town counted in the 1950 census (Figure 3.21). The town actually grew to 1,097 at the 1980 census and has been declining since. This downward trend is expected to end with the upcoming 2020 census. Although Morrill has experienced population loss in recent decades, its overall growth since 1950 and projected upward trending line for future populations make the town an excellent case study for population sustainability in rural Nebraska towns. Several residents of Morrill believe that their town's population has yet to peak.

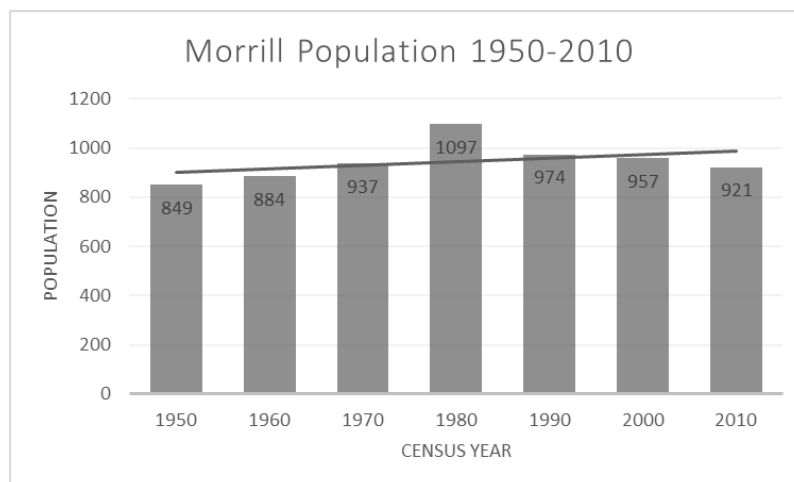


Figure 3.21 Morrill Population 1950-2010

The history of Morrill can be traced back to 1886 when the first settlers, moving northeast from Fort Collins, Colorado, found a fertile valley at the mouth of Sheep Creek where they staked their claims. This community was named Collins, in remembrance of their previous home, and was located less than a mile north of where present-day Morrill sits. When the railroad first came through the region in 1900, it determined the relocation of the settlement to what is now Morrill in 1901. Named for Charles Henry Morrill, then president of the Lincoln Land Company (a company controlled by Burlington Railroad), the town site was highly valued as Burlington Railroad choose it for the location of a major depot and a “Y” track, or a triangular joining arrangement of a railroad’s mainline and a spur (Village of Morrill website).

Morrill also built a series of irrigation canals in the early 1900s which helped boost both agriculture and population growth. Germans from Russia immigrants formed most of the new residents. German Russians are a distinct group of Germans who lived in Russia near the Volga River after the 1760s and began their immigration onto the Great Plains in the 1870s. Several Morrill people can trace their roots back to these skilled

farmers. The village of Morrill was incorporated in April of 1907, and the first census count of Morrill was taken in 1910. The 1910 population of 346 people would more than double to 772 by the 1920 census, and new buildings for schools, churches, and a variety of businesses were erected and opened (Village of Morrill website).

After the railroad was extended through the Panhandle and the Tri-State (Farmer's) Canal was built, the North Platte Valley became a major center for sugar beet production on the Great Plains (Figure 3.22). In the spring of 1908, the Great Western Sugar Company of Loveland, Colorado began recruiting Germans from Russia to move with their families and farm the sugar beets (along with the help of single Japanese men). By 1910, there were enough beets in the area that a factory was opened in Scottsbluff, 16 miles east of Morrill (Anderson 1935, 22-24).

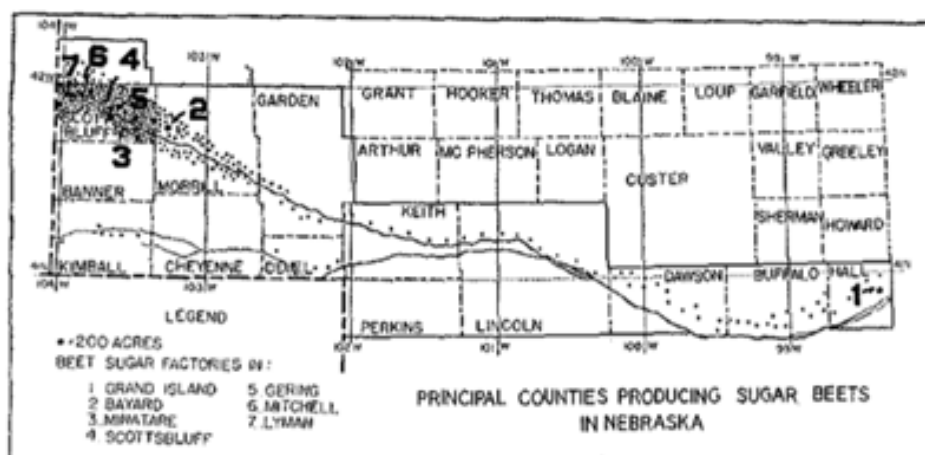


Figure 3.22 Sugar Beet Production in the North Platte Valley 1928-32 (Anderson 1935, 24)

Four more sugar beet factories were opened in the early 1900s in Scotts Bluff County, with locations in Gering, Lyman, Minatare, and Mitchell. Although Morrill itself did not have a factory, the sugar beet business in the area helped the town boom in its early days. The influx of Japanese workers also helped Morrill grow to some extent, but

for the most part the Japanese communities developed in Scottsbluff and Mitchell (Anderson 1935, 22-24).

Along with sugar beets, potatoes became a successful cash crop and Morrill became a key shipping point in the 1920s. The first dry beans in the area would also be harvested in the 1920s. The first dry beans in Morrill were harvested by Chester B. Brown, who started commercially handling dry beans in an old potato warehouse in 1927. This business is now owned by descendants of Robert Kelley, who worked alongside Brown for several years. Kelley would go on to start the Kelley Bean Company in nearby Henry in 1969. In 1982, the Kelley Bean Company would move to Morrill after its acquisition of the original Brown Company (Village of Morrill website).

The Kelley Bean Company and town of Morrill have gone hand in hand in their growth. Several acquisitions over the years have turned Kelley Bean into one of the largest originators and processors of dry beans in the U.S (Figure 3.23). Kelley Bean is also one of the few dry bean processors with a government contract that allows them to send beans to other states in the event of an agricultural crisis. Keeping up with demand has required an expansion of the Morrill packaging facility. The Morrill facility employs roughly thirty people. This does not include the large number of truck drivers who collect and deliver from the facility (Kelley Bean website).



Figure 3.23 Map of Kelley Bean Locations in the United States (Kelley Bean website)

Another of Morrill's major agricultural businesses can trace its roots to the early days of the town: Jirdon Industries was founded in Morrill in 1915 as a lumber yard and feed store business. In 1923, the lumber yard was sold and the business expanded to include crop seed. Over time, the Jirdon Agri Chemical Company would be added which handled fertilizers and agricultural chemicals. Jirdon was one of the first companies to provide liquid fertilizer. Jirdon Industries operated in Morrill until 2005 (Village of Morrill website).

In 2005, Jirdon Industries was sold to WESTCO, which according to their website, "serves the Wyo-Braska Region's producers with a variety of lawn and garden, turf, and feed options." From 2005 to 2015, the Morrill Western Feed Mill was one of seven WESTCO locations that served cow and calf operators in the Nebraska Panhandle and eastern Wyoming. In 2016, the old Jirdon feed mill was purchased, reopened by Sinamco from Minnesota, and rebranded Sinamco Mills, LLC (Western Cooperative Company website).

Morrill is also home to one of the retail locations of the J.R. Simplot Company, one of the largest privately held food and agribusiness companies in the nation. One of over ninety retail locations in the United States and one of only five that are located in eastern Wyoming and the Nebraska Panhandle, Simplot Grower Solutions in Morrill assists local farmers and growers through the sale of agricultural chemicals and fertilizers. While the Morrill branch is relatively small, it is well-established and provides several employment opportunities for laborers and truck drivers (J.R. Simplot Company website).

The town of Morrill also benefits from two railroads (Figure 3.24). The Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railway runs through Morrill on its way to Wyoming. Although the Union Pacific actually runs a few miles south of town, the railroad company has a much larger impact on Morrill. While the BNSF line just runs through town, the Union Pacific has a stop in the area. The Union Pacific uses the South Morrill station as a jumping off point as they switch crews halfway through the train's journey between North Platte and the end of the line in Wyoming, and vice versa. In an interview, Morrill Village Clerk and Treasurer, Janine Schmidt discussed how railway workers help provide revenue for the town's businesses and are the main reason for Morrill having such a luxurious hotel. Located on the eastern end of town, the Travelodge by Wyndham was put up in part by the Union Pacific and features a large pool and fitness center to keep its workers in shape and comfortable between shifts (Janine Schmidt, Telephone Interview, May 2019).

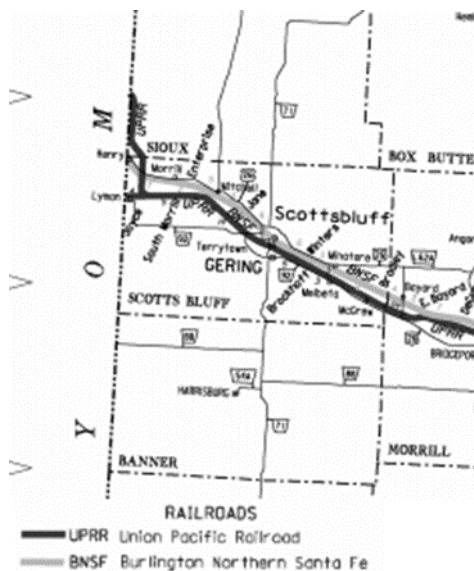


Figure 3.24 Map of Railroads near Morrill (Nebraska Department of Transportation)

Schmidt, who is a former employee of the South Morrill station, also discussed the closing of the Union Pacific mechanical shop at South Morrill in January 2019. The closing of the mechanical shop affected its sixty-eight employees, many of whom moved to North Platte or North Little Rock, Arkansas, where the mechanical shop jobs were relocated. Some stayed in Morrill for other jobs, however. While the shop closing surely impacted business revenues across town, there are still several railroad workers living in Morrill or spending several nights at the hotel. Although it lost the mechanical shop, the South Morrill station will continue to be an important point along the line as workers cannot make it from North Platte to Wyoming in one uninterrupted run due to time restrictions on shifts (Scottsbluff Star-Herald 2018).

Morrill's schools are an excellent indicator of population changes. Beginning with the first graduating class of 1910, the royal blue and gold Lions of Morrill High School have succeeded both academically and athletically. Along with the junior/senior high

school (grades 7-12), the town also has its own elementary and preschool. The Morrill school district covers about 60 miles, but Nebraska's western most high school is hindered by their backs being to Wyoming. Throughout its history, however, the schools of Morrill have grown due to consolidation movements bringing in students from the closing of schools in Henry and Lyman, as well as a handful of other country high schools (Nebraska Historical Society 1994, 698).

Class sizes have shrunk in Morrill in recent decades. The junior/senior high school had had over 300 students in the early 1990s, but only had 143 students in grades 7-12 for the 2018-2019 school year. Fortunately, there are some promising large sized elementary classes. There is also the Tri-Community head start program which draws in children from Henry and Lyman. The success of the head start program is seen in the building of a new daycare center in Morrill (Nebraska Department of Education website).

The changing demographics of Morrill can be seen in its increasing classroom diversity, with the growing number of Hispanic students being indicative of the steady immigration by those looking for work in the town's factories. One interviewee discussed how they graduated with two Hispanic students in the 1970s and how today nearly one-third of the student body is Hispanic. On the Public School Review website, Morrill's junior/senior high school received a diversity score of 0.47, which is much higher than the state average diversity score of 0.27. Morrill's enrollment is 66% White and 32% Hispanic (with 2% identifying as two or more races) (Public School Review website).

The upward trend of Morrill's class sizes is cause for celebration when projecting the future population of the town. The increase in both the quantity and quality of

employment opportunities will help entice several people to stay and persuade new people to move to Morrill.

Morrill's success is largely attributed to its combination of having a large agricultural customer base and its location between Scottsbluff and Torrington, Wyoming. These factors have helped the town become a center for farmers to get goods or repair machinery. Seeing so many farmers in need of repairs in the middle of the harvest season and having to waste precious time making trips to Scottsbluff or Torrington led Karen Ott and her husband to open Horse Creek Tire in Morrill, a tire dealer and repair shop in Morrill. Before opening the shop, Ott also served as a writer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and as a Morrill Public Schools board member. In talking with Ott, her optimism about the future of Morrill was clear as she discussed how the town's best days were yet to come. If you believe your town is the best it's going to be, she said, then it has already failed (Karen Ott, Personal Interview, August 2018).



Figure 3.25 Downtown Morrill (Photo by Author)

Ott discussed the reappearance of the little restaurants and bars that had closed during the 1950s, including a new coffee shop located next door to Horse Creek Tire. She said you don't build something like that if you don't believe in the town and its future. Ott was quick to not only point out the continued success of the railroad and the town's factories, but also the new construction all over town. Of course, much of this construction is related to agriculture, with cattle floats and pivots being built and shipped to several neighboring counties. The growth of the town's business sector goes beyond agricultural goods and services, however, with a new beautician, a nine-hole golf course, and Dollar General store opening in recent years (Karen Ott, Personal Interview, August 2018).

Morrill's impressive variety of stores, services, and activities far exceeds one you would expect to find in a rural town. A physician's clinic and physical therapy office offer care and well-being, while a village police and volunteer fire station offer protection. Other enterprises include a bank, a credit union, a grocery store, a hardware store, an insurance company, a Chevrolet dealership, a Mexican restaurant, and a community swimming pool. Cowboy Country Real Estate is also based in Morrill, although there are not many empty houses in the community (Karen Ott, Personal Interview, August 2018).



Figure 3.26 Morrill Farmer's Market (Photo by Author)

Much of Morrill's sustainability is a result of the dedication of the local community group, which meets every Friday morning to discuss business ideas, events, and possible projects. These include an outdoor movie series in the summer, and horse and sled rides in the winter, as well as bi-annual community clean-up weeks in the spring and the fall. Morrill's community group also started a local farmer's market in the summer on Tuesdays and Saturdays (Figure 3.26). The continued success of the town and its businesses have led to residents staying, as well as new families committing to the town. This commitment has helped not only keep businesses, but also to bring new businesses into Morrill (Karen Ott, Personal Interview, August 2018).

The enthusiasm of Janine Schmidt and Karen Ott for the future of the Morrill seems to be shared by the entire town. The taverns are full, the schools are growing, and the agricultural base remains strong. There are few closed shops and empty houses. New residents continue to be attracted to the town, and new businesses seem to be popping up overnight as Morrill continues to be an intriguing example of a growing rural town in Nebraska.

Wakefield



Figure 3.27 Map of Wakefield (Open Street Map)

Wakefield is located in northeast Nebraska on the southern border of Dixon County. Its location straddles the county line so much so that a small part of the town extends into Wayne County. Nebraska Highway 35 runs north-south through Wakefield, ten miles northeast of Wayne and thirty-five miles southwest of South Sioux City. A sign reading “Welcome to Wakefield – Baseball Capital of Nebraska” greets travelers on the highway as they reach the town of 1,451 people (2010 census).

The 2010 census population marked an increase of 423 people from the 1950 census population of 1,027 (Figure 3.28). Since 1950, Wakefield has experienced two censuses with lower populations than their predecessors; from 1970 to 1980, the population declined slightly from 1,160 to 1,125, before declining further to 1,082 in 1990. Following 1990, however, Wakefield’s population would rise sharply in the next twenty years, climbing up to 1,451 for the 2010 census.

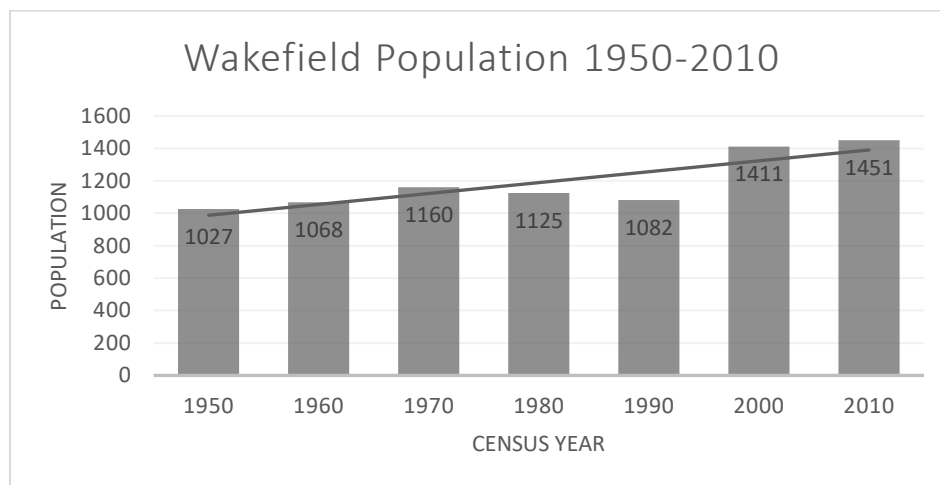


Figure 3.28 Wakefield Population 1950-2010

Wakefield was incorporated in 1881 after the townsite was platted by a railroad surveyor, L.W. Wakefield, and quickly filled with German and Swedish immigrants. The Wakefield website features an optimistic sketch written in the mid-1890s: “The magnificent agricultural region lying west from Sioux City contains no more fertile or beautiful country than that adjacent to Wakefield. For beauty of location, the town is unsurpassed. The town was founded in 1881 and now has about 1,000 inhabitants. All conditions are favorable to the future rapid growth of this town. The buildings compare well with those of much larger towns and there are now many building enterprises of importance in progress or in contemplation. It is indeed a live town, backed by energy and enterprises” (City of Wakefield website).

Because of the area’s abundant water supply and rolling fertile hills, crop and livestock production quickly prospered. Along with the increase in farming came the need for irrigation and well digging, which led to the founding of the Salmon Well Company, which has operated in Wakefield for more than seventy-five years. Other early businesses included the Wakefield Brickyard, which produced many of the bricks used

for the town's buildings and J.O. Milligan Roller Mills, which was built on nearby Logan Creek and became a regional business, drawing various other trades to the blossoming community (City of Wakefield website).

The railroad also played a vital role in young Wakefield as the large amount of stock and grain shipped and vibrant passenger traffic made it one of the busiest rail districts in northeast Nebraska. A combination of being located at the convergence of two branch lines of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha railroad and the large amount of stock and grain shipped and passenger traffic made Wakefield a major railroad hub. Around 1940, trains in and out of the town no longer carried passengers, only freight until 1977, when the last Chicago Northwestern Transportation Company train came through. Today, the depot building is home to museum that celebrates the history and impact of the railroad in Wakefield (City of Wakefield website).

While agriculture was the initial lifeblood of the community, Wakefield has seen an interesting growth in industrial development. Michael Foods (formerly the Milton G. Waldbaum Company) is a prime example of an agribusiness enterprise tailored to the industrial capacities of smaller farming communities. In 1950, Milton Waldbaum began a small egg-processing plant with twenty-three employees. Waldbaum's company would be acquired by Michael Foods in 1988, becoming a branch of one of the world's most successful egg and egg-product companies. While the egg division is the company's primary entity, Michael Foods' (Figure 3.29) expansion into other products has played a key role in their international success. Wakefield owes a great debt to the plant, which has been a source of employment for many people (City of Wakefield website).



Figure 3.29 Michael Foods Egg Products Company (Photo by Author)

Some fifty-three years after its founding, the Michael Foods Egg Products Company employs more than 2,000 people in seven states with approximately 800 people employed in Wakefield today. Along with employing about half of the town, Michael Foods supports Wakefield's charitable organizations and causes that share their commitment to community, including those supporting education, neighborhood improvements, safety services, and youth development. The presence of the company is vital to the continued prosperity of Wakefield (City of Wakefield website).

Today, travelers along Nebraska Highway 35, marked as Oak Street within Wakefield, will see several businesses on both the northern and southern sides of town. These include Michael Foods, Christensen Well and Irrigation, NAPA Auto Parts, and Northeast Tire and Trailer Sales on the north side and Central Valley Ag Cooperative, Farm Bureau Financial Services, McAfee Seeds, and Rose's Transport Inc. on the south

side. In the middle of Wakefield are the Wakefield Physicians Clinic, a Cenex gas station, Dollar General Store, and Oak Street Market, a specialty grocery store.

Two blocks to the west, Main Street runs parallel to the highway. Third Street, which connects the highway to the middle of the business district, features a large sign showing a map of Wakefield along with the locations of some important buildings and businesses. Consisting of four blocks of businesses, downtown Main Street Wakefield is decorated with American Flags and red and blue banners hanging from the streetlights (Figure 3.30). On the southern end of downtown are the Dixon County Sherriff's Office and Wakefield City Clerks Office. Next to this building is the Wakefield Fire Department.



Figure 3.30 Downtown Wakefield (Photo by Author)

Heading north through downtown, there are several businesses and establishments one would not expect to find in a rural town, including an art and antiques store, quilt store, décor and floral shop, and the Little Red Hen Theatre, which offers plays and musicals in a black box theatre. These stores do not stand out, however, as they blend in with the insurance agency, plumbing and welding businesses, wood shop, household goods, and the local bar and grill. Reflecting Wakefield's success, downtown also features a dentistry, bowling alley, separate barber shop and hair styling salon, and a pool hall. On the northern side of downtown, next to the American Legion and memorial to local veterans is the headquarters of the Wakefield Republican, a weekly newspaper distributed on Thursdays. There is also a Mexican restaurant and lounge in the old Wakefield hotel on the northside of town, just a block from a Mexican grocery store. Wakefield's Main Street meets its northern end at the Railroad Depot Museum.

At the northern end of Main Street, First Street runs west to Graves Park. Graves Park is named for Philo Graves, who created the park after planting several walnut trees. Behind the park's gates are basketball courts, a volleyball pit, multiple swing sets and other playground equipment, several tabernacles, RV parking and camping areas, and the Wakefield Family Aquatic Center swimming pool.

The main attraction in Graves Park, and perhaps in all of Wakefield, however, is Eaton Field. Reflecting Wakefield's nickname of "Baseball Capital of Nebraska," Eaton Field is a beautiful baseball field that hosts a variety of local teams and regional tournaments. The field's bleachers are accompanied by chairs donated from historical Major League Baseball parks, including the old Busch and Yankee stadiums, Atlanta

Fulton County Stadium, Milwaukee County Stadium, and Tigers Stadium. Among the bleachers are flower gardens, small water fountains, and picnic tables. Eaton Field is surrounded by a ticket office, two smaller baseball fields, batting cages, and a children's playground. The outfield of Eaton Field doubles as the playing field used by Wakefield's eight-man football team.

While the maroon and white Trojans play football on Eaton Field in the northwest part of town, Wakefield Community Schools is located on the south side in a building shared by the Wakefield's elementary and high school students. This building was opened in 1977 to replace the old school. The Wakefield school district spreads out from the community into both southeastern Dixon and northeastern Wayne counties (Nebraska Historical Society 1994, 772).

Wakefield School demographics are a 51% Latino and 48% Caucasian, with the remaining 1% listed as other. This minority enrollment is much higher than the Nebraska state average of 34%. The diversity score of Wakefield High School is 0.52, which is much higher than the state average of 0.29. In fact, Wakefield High School ranks among the state's top 20 schools in terms of diversity. Wakefield High School's student population of 197 students has grown by 7% over five school years. The upward trend in Wakefield's class sizes are indicative of the town's continued population growth (Public School Review website).

Wakefield is also home to Humpty Dumpty Daycare, which offers quality daycare based on both individual and collective needs, resulting in children with a stronger sense of self and a stronger sense of community. In 2019, the Humpty Dumpty Daycare has

created plans to expand their building to accommodate the growing need for daycare in Wakefield. The Gardner Public Library has also been located in Wakefield since its opening in 2004. The Gardner Public Library contains over 30,000 books, 1300 audio books, and 1400 videos. Library activities include children's holiday reading programs, a summer reading program, story time for preschool students, as well as computer classes and an adult book club (City of Wakefield website).



Figure 3.31 Wakefield Train Depot Museum (Photo by Author)

There are a handful of local organizations that commemorate the past and support the future of the community. One such group is the Wakefield Heritage Organization. Organized in 2000, the Wakefield Heritage Organization is a group of volunteers that is dedicated to preserving and maintaining the community's local history. They currently maintain three heritage sites in and around Wakefield: Frank Hanson's round barn, the Graves Library Museum, and the Train Depot Museum (Figure 3.31). The round barn was constructed in 1915 and restored in 2000 by local students, teachers, and volunteers.

Graves Library Museum pays homage to Philo Graves, one of the earliest and most prominent public figures in Wakefield history. The Wakefield Train Depot was donated to the Wakefield Heritage Organization to be used a museum after spending several decades as a storage unit and office building for Michael Foods (Wakefield Heritage Organization website).

Barb Stout, one of the founders of the Wakefield Heritage Organization, recognizes the importance in maintaining these properties to preserve community history. These properties provide today's Wakefield citizens with important links to the lives of previous generations, with the round barn being symbolic of the community's rich agricultural past, the library recognizing the important contributions of Philo Graves and other public figures, and the train depot museum serving as a reminder of the vital role the railroad played in the foundation and growth of early Wakefield. Stout believes it is important for the local population to know who built their hometown and to feel a bond with those who were proud to be from Wakefield (Barb Stout, Telephone Interview, November 2019).

One of the most active local organizations in promoting the community is the Wakefield Community Club. The Wakefield Community Club is a voluntary organization of individuals and businesses working together to advance the general welfare and prosperity of Wakefield. Events sponsored by the Wakefield Community Club are 4th of July Fireworks, Hot Air Balloon Festival, Taste of Wakefield Christmas Promotion, community improvement projects, the community events calendar, and teacher appreciation meal (City of Wakefield website).

Along with being the manager of the Little Red Hen Theatre, Adam Goos is a board member of the Wakefield Community Club. In an interview, Goos stated that the biggest challenge standing in the way of continued population growth is the need for housing. To help address this problem, the Wakefield Community Club has recently brought in a new economic developer to improve both housing and livability. The Wakefield Community Club was also instrumental in the Wakefield Economic Development Program whose purpose is to retain current businesses, attract new businesses, and provide opportunities in Wakefield (Adam Goos, Telephone Interview, November 2019).

Many of the new businesses that are moving to Wakefield are currently doing so at two sites. The first of these sites is the Hatchery, a business incubator for start-up and expansion of small businesses. The primary benefit of the Hatchery is to provide a low-rent option for entrepreneurs without the capital outlay for purchasing real estate. These start-up businesses can grow for up to two years in the Hatchery while determining their viability and searching for a permanent location. The other site is the Industrial Park, located along Highway 35 in southeast Wakefield. The Industrial Park (Figure 3.32) is zoned for commercial use along the highway and for light industrial in the remaining lots. The Industrial Park is eligible for tax increment financing, which will hopefully attract new businesses to fill the empty lots (City of Wakefield website).

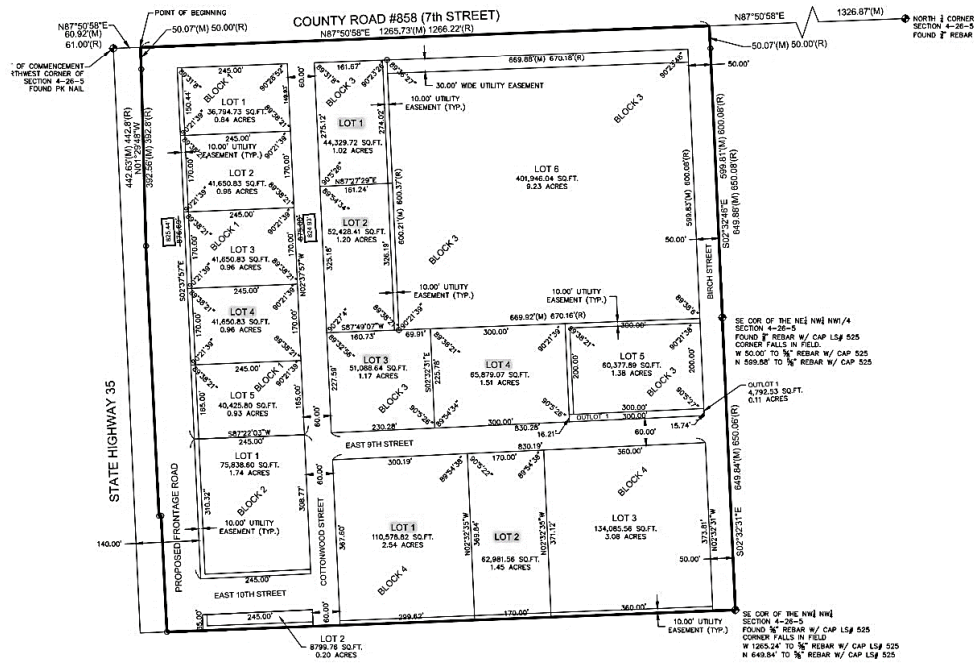


Figure 3.32 Wakefield Industrial Park Lot Map (City of Wakefield website)

The Hatchery and Industrial Park will continue to increase the already diverse options that Wakefield has in employment options. New houses, housing projects, and apartments are being planned to accommodate the town’s growing population. Those who have stuck around, moved in, or returned to start families are met with expanding daycare facilities and schools that are dedicated to their students. More services are being offered by the community to meet the needs of the growing number of families. Having met its first century of challenges, the people of Wakefield will continue to make the town a great place to call home.

Wilber

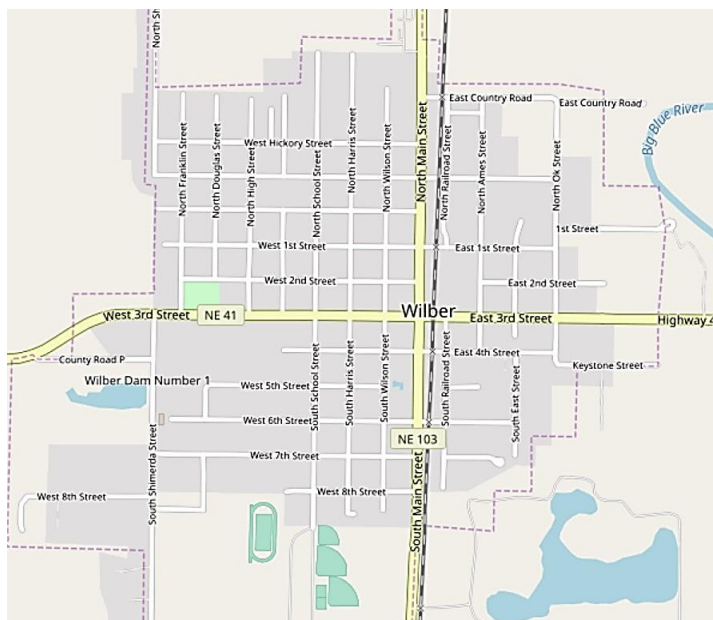


Figure 3.33 Map of Wilber (Open Street Map)

The further south from Lincoln that one travels, the smaller the towns seem to become. There are a few exceptions, however, including the rural community of Wilber, which is located forty miles southwest of Nebraska’s capital city. Known as the “Czech Capital of the USA,” Wilber ranks among Nebraska’s largest rural communities, with a population of 1,855 people in 2010. Despite being smaller than the neighboring town of Crete (population 6960), Wilber has long been the county seat of Saline County.

With the exception of a decline between the 1980 and 1990, Wilber has steadily grown between the 1950 and 2010 censuses (Figure 3.34). Wilber ranked 21st in population growth among Nebraska’s rural communities with an increase of 499 people from 1950 to 2010. Once an ethnic enclave with nearly all of its population made up of Czech immigrants and descendants, Wilber is now one of the most diverse towns in southeast Nebraska.

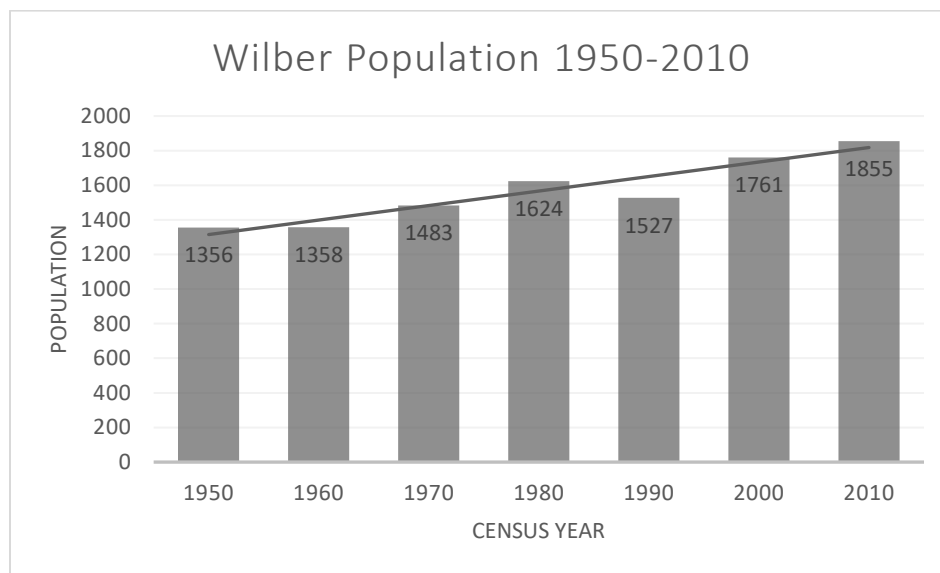


Figure 3.34 Wilber Population 1950-2010

The first Czech (Bohemian) settlers came into the area in 1865. These immigrants were pulled to Nebraska by the Homestead Act of 1862 and the promise of ‘free’ land. A steady stream of advertisements and glowing reports in Czech-language newspapers and magazines were sent back to Bohemia to entice more people to make the move. Several railroad companies also advertised large tracts of land for sale in Czech. Nebraska ranked number one in per capita Czech immigration in the 19th century, and the Wilber area was home to one of the largest concentrations of Czechs (Nebraska Studies website).

The Wilber townsite was platted in 1873 by Charles Dana (C.D.) Wilber, an advance man for the Burlington Railroad and scientific promoter of Nebraska as an author, educator, and entrepreneur. After founding the community in his name, Wilber would become a founding board of director of the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1878 and recipient of an honorary doctor of law degree from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 1880. Other important figures in early Wilber were W.H. Mann and Charles

Harvey, who built a dam and a mill on the Big Blue River and W.C. Henry, who built an elevator (Wilber Chamber of Commerce website).

The town's economy has always been agriculturally based. In addition to grain elevators, flour mills, a brewery, a sawmill, a stockyard, and various meat markets, there was also a hatchery in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, a window factory and a wiener plant were established. Over several decades, the Wilber Farmers Elevator has been enlarged to store over 1.3 million bushels of grain and handles over 2 million bushels a year. In 1975, Smithfield, a hog processing plant was built between Crete and Wilber with 240 employees. Since then, there have been eleven major expansions at the plant plus continual reinvestments to now 550,000 square feet on ninety-three acres (Wilber, Virtual Nebraska website).

E.A. Kral, Wilber resident, writer, and historian, notes that while consolidated agriculture, cost of machines, and price of land led to fewer farm families and people in the countryside, Wilber's location within easy driving distance of various service industries and small factories helped the town survive. The 1950s and 1960s were harsh years for the town, according to Kral, as Wilber lost several of its local manufacturing jobs and employment opportunities as many of the town's earliest businesses closed. The Smithfield plant became a primary employer of Wilber residents after its opening in the 1970s. Kral also discussed the changing culture and population makeup of Wilber. Originally, the Hispanic immigrants who worked at Smithfield chose to live in Crete, but in recent decades there has been an increase in Hispanic residents in Wilber (E.A. Kral, Telephone Interview, August 2019).



Figure 3.35 The Smithfield Plant (Photo by Author)

Smithfield (Figure 3.35) processes nearly 63,000 head of hogs per week, which includes over 2 million pounds of fabricated pork and bacon per week, as well as over 1.5 million pounds of smoked hams, and 1.25 million pounds of fresh sausage per week. It is estimated that 30 to 40 million people eat a Smithfield product every week. Along with providing a solid manufacturing employment opportunity in the area, the Smithfield plant has changed the demographics in much of Saline County, including Wilber. In 2016, Smithfield's 2,710 employees were quite diverse with a makeup of 42% Caucasian, 28% Asian, 22% Hispanic, and 8% Sudanese/Ethiopian. The majority of these immigrants have moved to Crete, but a good share have chosen to call Wilber home, especially in recent decades. The Smithfield plant has been vital in helping Wilber grow its population (Wilber Republican 2016).

Of course, Wilber was built on immigration and still celebrates its ancestral roots. In 1962 the Nebraska Czechs of Wilber group sponsored a Czech Festival. It became an

annual event held the first weekend in August ever since, drawing in 25,000 to 30,000 visitors every year. In 1963, Wilber was proclaimed the "Czech Capital of Nebraska" by then Governor Frank Morrison. Wilber was named the official Czech Capital of the USA in a decree signed by president Ronald Reagan on July 10, 1987, nearly 120 years after the first Czech (then Bohemian) settlers came to the area (Wilber, Virtual Nebraska website).

Today, visitors of Wilber are welcomed to the town with streetlight banners reading "Vítáme Vás", Czech for "We Welcome You". The names of the streets and several of the businesses, including city hall, are written in both English and Czech. To go along with the visual experience, polka music plays nearly year-round out of speakers located on main street, next to the town's Czech museum, cultural center, and heritage room. Even Frank's Smokehouse, regionally famous for their meats, advertises their kolache selection.

The 58th annual 'Wilber Czech Festival' took place in August 2019. Along with the Miss Czech-Slovak US Pageant and a host of arts and crafts shows, dancing, polka bands, beer gardens, and other fun celebrations and events, the festival is well-known for its parade. The festival seems to come to a pause as the parade begins, and attendees fill the sidewalks along the parade route (Figure 3.36). Along with commemorating the town's Czech roots, the parade also celebrates the individuals and groups that make Wilber a special place to live today. Starting at the Legion Memorial Park in the south side of town, parade floats make their way north to 3rd Street, next to the Dvoracek Memorial Library, where they turn east and make their way through downtown Wilber.

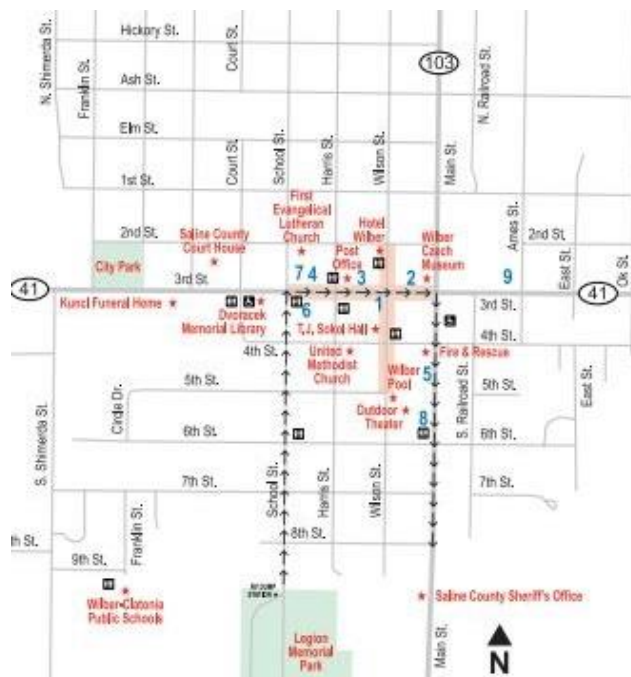


Figure 3.36 The 58th Annual Wilber Czech Festival Parade Route (Nebraska Czechs of Wilber)

As the parade moves west to east down 3rd Street, it passes the Food Město and Shop Qwik grocery stores, the U.S. Post Office, and Downtown Family Vision. In the middle of downtown, near the Wilson Street intersection, sits the Czech Cottage and Czech Craft Shop, which sells hand embroidered traditional Czech clothing and handmade gifts. Next door is the La Herradura Mexican Restaurant, which opened in February 2019. Wilson Street is the location of two well-known Wilber establishments, with the Hotel Wilber one block north and T.J. Sokol Hall one block south of 3rd Street. 3rd Street also features Barnes Drug, Frank's Smokehouse, and the Wilber Meat Market, as well as three bars/taverns: Czech'erd Flag Bar, Fritz's Bar & Grill, and Fox Hole Tavern. Wilber Physical Therapy, Wilber Wellness, and Wilber Chiropractor each share a

building downtown as well. On the corner of 3rd and Main Street/Highway 103 is the Wilber City Hall and Cultural Center, which share a building, and the Czech Museum.

The parade route turns south onto Main Street/Highway 103 and continues past the Farmers & Merchants Bank, the Wilber Fire and Rescue department, a Subway restaurant, the Wilber Municipal Pool, a Casey's General Store, and the Saline County Law Enforcement Center. Many of these were built and/or upgraded in recent years: the Wilber Municipal Pool was opened in 2004 after a donation from a local resident; in 2007, a new addition was added on to the jail; and in 2018, the Wilber Fire and Rescue department obtained a newer fire truck, replacing a 1969 vehicle with a 1993 vehicle.

Being the seat of Saline County has helped Wilber offer some jobs that many other rural towns don't typically provide. Currently, the Saline County Jail employs 30 people. The sheriff's office consists of 12 deputy sheriffs: 1 chief deputy, 2 captains, 3 sergeants, and 6 deputies. There are also various employment opportunities that a county courthouse offers, such as county clerk and treasurer. The Saline County Courthouse is located on a hill in western Wilber, half a block from the city park.

Along with government and safety jobs, Wilber is able to offer plenty of educational positions. Wilber-Clatonia Public Schools (Figure 3.37), home of the green and white Wolverines, is located in southwest Wilber. The school is a major employer in both the town and the surrounding district. The Wilber-Clatonia Public School District was formed in 1970 when Wilber and Clatonia consolidated their school systems. Located in both Saline and Gage Counties, the Wilber-Clatonia Public School District covers an area of 155 square miles. Both the high school and elementary are located in

Wilber. When the new school district was formed, a new high school building was built on south Franklin Street, while the old building to the west was torn down and became a playground area (Nebraska Historical Society 1994, 661-662).



Figure 3.37 Wilber-Clatonia Public Schools (Photo by Author)

Wilber-Clatonia High School (grades 7-12) has an enrollment of 254 students. This number has remained relatively the same over the last decade, following enrollments of approximately 300 students in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Enrollment is expected to rise towards 300 again, however, as Wilber-Clatonia Elementary School (grades PK-6) has 328 students. Much of the school's growth has come from Hispanic students. Minority enrollment (mostly Hispanic) is 14% of the high school and 18% of the elementary student body. The diversity score of Wilber-Clatonia High School is 0.25, which is less than the diversity score of the state at 0.29 (Public School Review website).

Along with providing a strong education, Wilber is also known for its good medical care. This includes a medical clinic, eye doctor, dentist office, and assisted living community. The assisted living community, the Wilber Care Center, is managed by

Nebraska's Rural Health Development, a group that promotes the development of a health care system that assures the availability and accessibility of quality services to meet the needs of people living in rural Nebraska. Located on the north side of town along Main Street/Highway 103, the Wilber Care Center has 60 beds and offers several services, including dementia care (Wilber Care Center website).

Wilber's medical and education facilities are better in quality and quantity than might be expected from a rural town. Having both good education and health care choices makes the town more desirable to new families, which makes having top notch school and health care facilities a major point of emphasis for Wilber mayor, Roger Chrans. A native of Wilber, Chrans has long recognized the town's potential as a point of supply, rather than demand. This is something he attributes to Wilber having a "sweet zone distance" from the cities of Lincoln and Beatrice. Along with the health of the people, Chrans also recognizes how important the health of the town's retail sector is. More job opportunities provide incentives for people to stay in Wilber while motivating more people to move to town. Although Chrans is the mayor, he modestly attributes the growth of the town to its hardworking people (Roger Chrans, Personal Interview, July 2019).

Community members often go out to business fairs and speak to schools as they encourage people to move to Wilber. Local supporters and their donations have helped Wilber maintain and support its businesses, while adding new amenities over the last decade, such as the new medical clinic, fire department, and swimming pool. Just a few years ago, Wilber was able to add an eye doctor, as well as bring in a new dentist who

just finished graduate school, replacing the retired one. These community members are also very welcoming to new residents. Mayor Chrans notes that while Wilber is still a Czech community, all who live there are a part of the community, and “if you’re here, you’re a part of Wilber” (Roger Chrans, Personal Interview, July 2019).

Much of Wilber’s success comes from their ability to attract new people to the town. Wilber’s new dentist, who just moved down after graduating from school in Lincoln, is an excellent example of this. In many rural towns, once a business owner or service provider retires, that business is often closed or that service is no longer provided. The community members were able to convince a young dentist to move to town, however, to take the place of the retired one.

A similar example is the Wilber Meat Market, whose owners announced they were closing the business on November 16, 2019. In this case, however, the business would change hands to a family returning to town. Terry Hynek, owner of the Wilber Meat Market, decided to close the business and move on to other things. Hynek and his wife had been running the business since 2007, after purchasing it from former Wilber mayor and state Sen. Russ Karpisek. Karpisek’s grandparents bought the business in 1967 from the family who had originally established it in the 1890s. Karpisek repurchased the Wilber Meat Market and reopened it before Christmas 2019 (Lincoln Journal Star 2019).



Figure 3.38 Downtown Wilber (Photo by Author)

While the annual Wilber Czech Festival attracts nearly 30,000 visitors to the streets of Wilber every August to celebrate the town and region's Czech roots, it also strengthens Wilber's relationships and fosters community pride by bringing the townspeople together. It is a nice relaxing event for a community whose members work year-round to help Wilber retain and add to its population. A strong collective effort and community pride, providing its inhabitants with impressive education and health care systems, offering a wide array of businesses and services, and having a source of manufacturing jobs in the area bode well for Wilber's continued growth.

Criteria for Success

While every community has its own unique circumstances and personalities, these six case studies provide a variety of answers as to why some rural towns in Nebraska are growing in population. Using examples from the six rural towns of Axtell, Blue Hill, Imperial, Morrill, Wakefield, and Wilber, a list can be made of the characteristics that growing rural towns typically have in common.

First and foremost, all of these communities have strong leaders, dedicated residents and community clubs, and a clear sustainability plan. It starts at the top with strong leaders who believe in the future of their communities, such as Imperial mayor Dwight Coleman and Wilber mayor Roger Chrans. Mayors and city administrators, along with chambers of commerce, are instrumental in bringing businesses and people to their towns. These officials create well-organized plans to guide their communities. Two examples of such plans given in this chapter are the City of Blue Hill Comprehensive Plan and Investing in Imperial's Tomorrow: 2014-2024.

These rural towns also rely on a good farming economy. Although the number of farmers has declined in rural Nebraska, the same amount of crops is being brought to the grain elevators, which tower over the homes and businesses of these towns. The cooperatives serve local farmers and rural business owners, and are often among the leading employers in rural Nebraska towns.

Along with having often-used and well-functioning cooperatives, successful rural towns in Nebraska have become points of supply of agricultural goods and services.

Being able to offer a wide variety of goods and services, including seed, animal feed, veterinary services, and machinery repair, helps satisfy the needs of the surrounding agricultural customer base. One example of this is the opening of the tire shop in Morrill, as discussed by Karen Ott. She and her husband opened a tire dealer and repair shop in town after seeing so many farmers in need of repairs in the middle of the harvest season and having to waste precious time making trips to Scottsbluff or Torrington. Another example is Imperial's John Deere Dealership. By providing a local place to buy farm machinery, their agricultural customers do not have to drive 48 miles to Ogallala or 62 miles to McCook for the service.

These towns also provide diverse employment opportunities, with many offering manufacturing positions to make up for the lost agricultural jobs resulting from the consolidation of larger farms and the declining number of people on small farms. Manufacturing companies like Michael Foods in Wakefield, or Smithfield Foods' near Wilber, help rural communities sustain their populations by providing plenty of job opportunities.

Schools also provide job opportunities in rural communities. Rural communities with schools are also economically and civically more robust. Rural depopulation has led to many of these communities losing their schools through consolidation over the course of the second half of the 20th century. The removal of a school from a community can have a significant negative effect on the social structures and spirit of the community. In addition to educating children, schools also help bring communities together.

Each of the six communities discussed in the third chapter has a school. Through redistricting and consolidation, these communities have expanded their districts, grown enrollment, and been able to keep their doors open. Axtell, whose school system was a pioneer of redistricting in Nebraska, is a prime example of this. In 1952, Axtell was able to consolidate thirteen surrounding districts to strengthen their school. Another good example comes from Wilber, where the Wilber-Clatonia Public School District was formed in 1970, when Wilber and Clatonia consolidated their school systems. Wilber became the location for both the high school and the elementary school, as well as a daycare. All too often, rural students are forced to face long bus rides to neighboring communities for school. This dissuades many parents from raising their children in communities without a school.

Families are also often dissuaded from living in rural communities that lack access to healthcare. Access to healthcare services is obviously critical to good health, and a lack of this access is a growing problem throughout rural Nebraska. Healthcare services are also important to rural communities because they provide several job opportunities. Healthcare service providers are a leading employer in several of these rural communities.

Blue Hill is an example of a rural community who has put an emphasis on providing adequate healthcare options, including the Blue Hill Fitness Center, Mary Lanning Healthcare Blue Hill Physical Therapy, the Blue Hill Clinic, and the Blue Hill Care Center. Another example is the Chase County Hospital and Clinics in Imperial.

Along with being the town's second largest employer, this hospital is one of the only providers of 24/7 emergency services in southwest Nebraska.

Another common feature of these six rural communities is that many of them have assisted living facilities. The role of rural towns as retirement communities is vital and will only grow, as baby boomers age and retire. Perhaps the best example of this is the Axtell Mosaic at Bethphage Village, which serves people with intellectual disabilities. Along with providing housing for a great number of people, The Mosaic in Axtell employs some 200 people, of which nearly a quarter live in Axtell. Axtell is also home to the Windmill Estates, a low income elderly, disabled, or handicapped dwelling unit. Similar units exist in Blue Hill (Westgate Manor), Imperial (Imperial Manor-Parkview Heights), and Wakefield (Wakefield Village). Many of these communities also offer low income housing units, such as the Czech Village in Wilber.

Good and affordable housing is key to sustaining the current population and in attracting new residents. Many rural communities struggle with meeting the need for new housing. Some towns, such as Axtell, have purchased several lots adjacent to their city limits in order to build new houses. Axtell has done this twice, in fact, adding land for housing in the 1970s and in the 2010s. Rural communities once restricted to one side of the railroad tracks, such as Morrill, or one side of the highway like Blue Hill, have expanded outwards and built housing in new areas in recent decades as they continue to grow.

Along with offering attractive housing, several of these rural communities also offer incentives for businesses. One example is the Cornerstone Commercial Park in

Imperial, which provides incentives to new businesses, including economic development loans, tax increment financing, and discounts on land purchase inside the site. Another example is the Hatchery and Industrial Park in Wakefield. The Hatchery acts as a business incubator, offering small start-up businesses a low-rent, temporary option while they grow and search for a permanent location. Businesses which open within Wakefield's Industrial Park are eligible for tax increment financing. Both Imperial and Wakefield have expanded their commercial/industrial lots in recent years, helping to bring new businesses into their communities.

Many growing rural towns also have high-speed internet access. High-speed internet, or broadband, breaks down distance barriers, allowing rural residents to participate in economic and civic life far beyond their geographic region, and also allowing businesses in isolated areas to compete with their big-city counterparts. When given access to affordable broadband, rural businesses once restricted to local markets can expand their market reach across the region. Broadband also provides access to education and health care for rural residents who are otherwise forced to travel long distances for further education and medical services.

Companies that offer broadband access, such as Allo Communications, have been instrumental in the sustainability of rural Nebraska towns. Founded in Imperial in 2002, Allo Communications has helped bring new businesses to the community. Allo has also impacted the community's population, as more people have moved to town to take advantage of Imperial's high-speed internet while they work at home. Other examples of influential internet companies in these towns include Glenwood in Blue Hill, a leading

provider of broadband in south central Nebraska, and BNT Broadband, a new fixed wireless internet service provider in northeast Nebraska. Each of these companies helps attract new residents through offering broadband access.

New residents are also attracted to rural towns through the parks and recreation opportunities they provide. Providing appropriate park infrastructure is a key component in a parks and recreation department's ability to improve the physical fitness of a community. Through recreation opportunities like baseball/softball teams, fitness programs, and bike trails, and amenities such as playgrounds and swimming pools, each of these rural towns provides locations for organized physical activities, for youth, adults, and seniors alike, raising the overall quality of life in the community.

Several of these rural towns have added a new amenity in recent years: a public golf course. Rural golf courses and country clubs are typically open to anyone, allowing all skill sets and economic levels to play the course. These courses keep the community active, both physically and socially. Examples from the growing rural towns include Ash Hollow Public Golf Course in Blue Hill, the Imperial Country Club, Logan Valley Golf Course in Wakefield, and Rolling Green Golf Course in Morrill.

These towns also provide several sources of entertainment. Examples from these towns include the Imperial Theatre, which plays movies on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays; the Little Red Hen Theatre in Wakefield, which offers plays and musicals; and the Wilber Czech Museum, which features Czech artifacts related to the heritage and culture of the Czech pioneer settlers in Nebraska.

While all of these rural towns look towards the future, they also commemorate their past and celebrate their present situation. These celebrations help bring together the community while supporting local businesses and putting the town on display to potential residents. Wilber's Czech Festival is an excellent example, attracting nearly 30,000 visitors to the town every August. Another large annual event is the Chase County Fair & Expo in Imperial. It is among the largest county fairs in western Nebraska. There are also the alumni reunions and heritage celebrations which, for example, Axtell hosts every summer, and community-wide holiday celebrations like Blue Hill's annual Easter Egg and 4th of July Festival. Other community celebrations include events similar to those found in Morrill, where community leaders host an outdoor movie series in the summer, and horse and sled rides in the winter.

Finally, each of these rural towns offers an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. For the most part, these rural towns were founded and settled by one cultural group, such as the Swedish in Axtell, Germans from Russia in Morrill, and Czechs in Wilber. Residency in these towns have not been limited to descendants of these initial settlers, however, as each has exemplified multiculturalism in welcoming new individuals and groups to the community. Having an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere goes a long way in attracting new residents.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS FROM THE NEBRASKA ROOTS MIGRATION SURVEY

This chapter discusses statewide rural residential decision making and place attachment in rural Nebraska. Using data collected by the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey, this chapter investigates the motivations for people to live in rural Nebraska. This chapter is divided into several sections, comparing data across groups of respondents, including comparing rural and urban respondents, female vs male rural residents, different age groups of rural residents, and accounts of hometown descriptions from declining and growing rural towns.

The Nebraska Roots Migration Survey

The purpose of the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey research is to better understand the factors that influence Nebraskans to stay, leave, or move back to Nebraska. To take the survey, a respondent had to be over the age of 19 and had to have been a resident of Nebraska when they attended high school. From February 4 to March 2, 2019, the survey was distributed via social media. It yielded 1,827 responses, including at least one response from each of Nebraska's ninety-three counties.



Figure 4.1 The Nebraska Roots Migration Survey Logo

Methods and Data Analysis

The Nebraska Roots Migration Survey did not seek a representative sample of Nebraskans, but the high numbers allow for comparisons between groups of respondents. The survey was originally designed by a team of Vermont researchers and conducted as the “Vermont Roots Migration Survey.” The questions for the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey were edited from their original Vermont versions, formatted, and then uploaded onto Lime Survey, a cloud-based software used to design and distribute the survey. The survey opened on February 4, 2019.

Over the course of three weeks, the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey gathered 1,827 fully completed responses. When the survey concluded on March 2, the data collected were downloaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The quantitative data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical analysis program. Qualitative data, which included respondents’ narratives, were coded thematically using the Dedoose software package. The text was first analyzed for themes developed from the statistical analysis. In the second round of coding, nuances related to the original themes and emergent codes were identified. The analysis therefore was driven by the findings from the quantitative analysis and the analysis of narratives was conducted to bring a “biographical approach” to understandings of how complex residential and mobility decisions are made by individuals within the context of their particular circumstances.

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

The Nebraska Roots Migration Survey had more female respondents than male. Just over three-fifths (61.2%, n=1106) of the respondents were female. Males comprised 35.7% of respondents (n=653), while Trans or Non-Binary comprised 3.4% of respondents (n=63). Less than one percent of respondents preferred not to answer this gender question, or categorized themselves outside of the options provided.

The survey yielded responses from people ranging in age from 19 to 92 years. The average (mean) age of respondents was 55.5 and the median age was 38. The age that appeared most often among respondents was 27. The highest percentage of respondents were aged 30-39 (25.8%), the second highest percentage of respondents were aged 20-29 (21.5%), and the third highest percentage were 40-49 (16.2%).

Other key demographic characteristics of survey respondents include:

93.1% of respondents self-identified as “white.”

89.3% identified as heterosexual or “straight.”

62.2% were married or in a civil union; 16.2% identified as single.

34.3% reported having no children; 36.8% had one or two children.

31.53% identified as Protestant; 20.4% identified as Catholics.

18.94% had an income in the \$100,000-\$149,999 range; 12.7% had an income of \$150,000 or more.

35.52% had attained a Bachelor’s degree; 18.17% a Master’s degree; 12.53% had some college, but no degree.

Residential Categorization

Along with being categorized as rural or urban, survey respondents were divided into three residential categorizations: Stayers, Leavers, and Returnees. Stayers are those people who have lived in Nebraska since high school, with the exception of schooling, military service, or living outside of the state for less than a year at a time. Leavers are those people who left the state to reside elsewhere and have not returned to live in Nebraska. Returnees are those people who left the state to live elsewhere for a year or longer and who returned to Nebraska to reside.

Of the 1,827 total responses to the survey, over half were stayers (n=1,024), less than one-quarter were leavers (n=446), and one-fifth were returnees (n=357). Of the 835 rural responses to the survey, over three-fifths were stayers (n=517), nearly one-fifth each were leavers (n=162) and returnees (n=156).

Rural vs Urban

Drawing on results from an online survey of the mobility of people who grew up in Nebraska, the first section of this chapter shows the differences in values between those who grew up in a rural versus urban setting, as well as the different considerations that must be made by both rural and urban residents in the decision to stay, leave, or return. The findings from the survey are provocative in their suggestion that those who grow up in rural areas may develop a different set of values and social and place-based attachments than their urban peers.

Of the 992 urban responses to the survey, nearly half were stayers (n=507), over one-quarter were leavers (n=284), and over one-fifth were returnees (n=201). Figure 4.2 shows the breakdown of survey respondents between rural and urban and between the three residential categories.

	Stayers	Leavers	Returnees	Total
Rural	517	162	156	835
Urban	507	284	201	992
Total	1024	446	357	1827

Figure 4.2 Breakdown of Survey Respondents (Rural vs Urban)

Why People Stay in Nebraska

Many of the survey respondents were stayers. There were 517 rural and 507 urban respondents who live in Nebraska now and who have mainly lived in Nebraska all their lives (lived no more than a year outside of the state). Along with rural having ten more responses from stayers than urban, rural also had a larger percentage, as the 517 rural stayers comprised 60% of the total rural respondents while the 507 urban stayers comprised 51% of the total urban respondents. Although the number of rural and urban stayers is relatively even, the survey shows the rural population seems to be more likely to stay compared to their urban counterparts (Figure 4.3).

	Total %	Rural %	Urban %
I plan to stay in Nebraska in the future	72.80	80.27	65.29
I would like to retire outside of Nebraska	14.20	10.44	18.15
I would like to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time elsewhere	20.00	17.41	22.68
I will likely move outside of Nebraska but return later	8.10	3.68	12.62
I plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point	9.20	4.64	13.81

Figure 4.3 Future Plans of Nebraska Stayers (Rural vs Urban)

According to the survey results, rural stayers were much more likely to remain in the state, as 80.27% said they planned to stay in Nebraska, compared to only 65.29% of urban stayers. When asked about potential plans to leave the state in the future, a higher percentage of urban stayers said that they are likely to move outside of Nebraska, but return later, or that they plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point.

After asking respondents to list their future residential plans, the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey asked the stayers to select all the factors that influenced them to remain in Nebraska from a list of potential factors. Figure 4.4 shows the factors and the percentage of total, rural, and urban stayers that selected each as a factor that influenced them to remain in Nebraska.

	Total %	Rural %	Urban %
I have stayed in the state to live near family	73.90	76.21	71.60
I enjoy living in Nebraska	73.00	77.95	68.05
I appreciate Nebraska's culture/community	54.20	60.93	47.34
I like Nebraska's rural hospitality	53.20	65.57	40.63
I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska	47.90	56.09	39.45
I like Nebraska's landscape (natural environments)	44.30	50.48	38.07
My work is based in Nebraska	42.50	43.13	42.01
I have never wanted to live permanently outside of Nebraska	33.50	42.36	24.46
I've visited other places and decided Nebraska was the best place for me	18.50	18.96	18.15
I would like to leave Nebraska but haven't had the opportunity	15.40	9.48	21.50
My partner didn't want to leave Nebraska	15.10	17.02	13.21
I needed to care for family members in Nebraska	11.90	11.41	12.43
Nebraska offers me activities and opportunities that don't exist elsewhere	8.60	8.70	8.48

Figure 4.4 Influential Factors in the Decision to Stay in Nebraska (Rural vs Urban)

Factors most selected in the decision to stay in Nebraska included respondents enjoying living in Nebraska, staying to live near family, and appreciating the culture, community, and hospitality of the state. Similar to the Vermont Roots Migration Survey results, stayers showed a high level of agreement about why they stayed (Morse and Mudgett 2018). The results of the survey display some very pronounced differences

between rural and urban stayers, however. Rural stayers are more likely to enjoy living in Nebraska and less likely to want to leave the state. Those who grew up in rural towns appear to be more contented, enjoy the landscape more, and more strongly express appreciation for Nebraskan culture than their urban counterparts. Several of the written responses from rural stayers reflect these values:

“Born and raised in small-town Nebraska, I’ve never wanted to leave. My family lives in Nebraska and I love the generosity and overall friendly nature of fellow Nebraskans.” - A female from Albion on rural hospitality.

“I grew up in a small rural town and have a lot of pride in what I do. I feel that that describes a large number of Nebraskans, especially from the rural communities.” - A male from Pierce discussing his community pride.

“Nebraska has some of the most kindest and down-to-earth people you will ever meet in it. They don’t say “Nebraska Nice” for nothing, it is true.” - A female from Stuart on rural hospitality and the state motto.

“Nebraska has things you can’t put a price tag on. Beautiful sunrises and sunsets, the landscapes, the sounds of nature, the great people of this state, the opportunities for young and old, peace.” - Landscape appreciation felt by a woman from Verdigre.

“Wanted to raise my children near family and continue the heritage my parents, grandparents, and great grand-parents created in this community.” - A male from Liberty discussing raising his children and family and community pride.

Urban stayers placed a higher value on Nebraska’s low cost of living, low population density, and growing diversity. Many of these written responses mentioned the small town feel of Nebraska’s large towns and cities, including both Lincoln and Omaha. One respondent referred to Omaha as a *“little big city”* and another wrote that *“Omaha offers many amenities, but still has a small town feel.”* Lincoln was referred to as both a big and small town, with one respondent saying *“it’s not too small and not too big. You can get a big town feel and drive ten minutes and be in the country.”* Another respondent referred to their hometown as *“the big small town of Lincoln.”*

Both rural and urban stayers placed a high value on family in their decision to remain in Nebraska: the most chosen factor for both rural and urban stayers was “I have stayed in the state to live near family.” This is also evident in many of the written responses when respondents were asked to describe why they chose to stay in Nebraska in their own words. The following list shows some examples of written responses related to family ties from both rural and urban respondents:

“Close to my family and it is familiar. I feel like now that I have a family, I owe it to my children to raise them near their extended family, who all live in Nebraska.” - Beatrice, population 12,459.

“Family is one of my most deep-seeded values and to leave the state would mean to leave almost all of my family, and thus, those values. I couldn't picture not being in Nebraska, where I am close to my family.” - Filley, population 132.

“All of my immediate family lives here and I assist with taking care of my grandfather. I enjoy the closeness of my family and currently wouldn't feel comfortable leaving them and my responsibilities to them behind.” - Lincoln, population 258,379.

“My family is here and I want to stay close to them. I appreciate the people. They say it takes a village to raise a family and I really think that is true. My small town is always there.” - Blue Springs, population 331.

These results reflect many of the findings from the aforementioned Vermont (Morse and Mudgett 2017) and Montana (Erickson, Sanders, and Cope 2018) studies, with the principal influences on the decision to stay being rural place-based factors, family ties, community attachment, and community satisfaction. The survey results also match what William Wetherholt found in his dissertation, *Exploring Rootedness in the Very Rural Great Plains Counties of Kansas and Nebraska* (2016). Rural stayers in Wetherholt's research placed high values on place-based factors, such as rural lifestyle and the freedoms it affords, and community attachment and involvement, including a sense of pride and feeling of acceptance (Wetherholt 2016).

Why People Leave Nebraska

The survey captured responses from 446 people who grew up in Nebraska and now live out of state. There were 162 rural and 284 urban respondents who live outside Nebraska and have not returned there to live permanently since they left the state. The survey shows that more urban than rural respondents made the choice to leave the state and not return, both in the total number of leavers and percentage of total respondents. Figure 4.5 shows the selection of a wide range of circumstances, personal preferences, and conditions that have influenced the decision to leave Nebraska.

	Total %	Rural %	Urban %
My occupation (work) is located outside Nebraska	50.40	48.77	51.41
I can earn more money outside of Nebraska	34.50	36.42	33.45
I want to live in an area with greater cultural diversity	33.40	24.07	38.73
I prefer to live in a larger urban area	25.30	19.14	28.87
My partner does not want to live in Nebraska	22.90	25.93	21.13
Nebraska's weather is intolerable	16.60	12.96	18.66
I can't do my favorite recreational activities or hobbies in Nebraska	15.00	11.11	16.90
I never enjoyed living in Nebraska and always planned to leave	10.80	10.49	10.92
It would not be possible to do my work in Nebraska	9.40	5.56	11.62
My extended family lives outside Nebraska	6.90	7.41	6.69
Nebraska's cost of living is too high	3.10	2.47	3.52

Figure 4.5 Influential Factors in the Decision to Leave Nebraska (Rural vs Urban)

When asked why they left Nebraska, several leavers, both rural and urban, put an emphasis on the availability of more opportunities outside the state in their written responses. These opportunities include more career choices and the possibility of higher incomes. Rural leavers did not mention higher incomes as much as their urban counterparts; rather, rural leavers expressed a desire for more career options outside of the agricultural options associated with Nebraska's rural towns.

Both rural and urban leavers cited that their decision to leave was based in part by the opportunity to experience new cultures in areas with more diversity. The urban

leavers in particular placed a high value on living in an area with greater cultural diversity. Urban leavers also placed an emphasis on career advancements, increased diversity, and more progressive politics as factors in their decision to leave.

The survey also asked leavers to identify the kinds of attachments and connections they maintain with the state of Nebraska or to people living there. A high percentage of leavers, both rural and urban, return to visit family and friends. A very low percentage of leavers haven't been to Nebraska in years and do not plan to return. Figure 4.6 shows a list of leavers' attachments to the state and the percentage of each selected.

	Total %	Rural %	Urban %
I visit family in Nebraska	86.50	84.57	87.68
I visit friends in Nebraska from time to time	53.80	46.91	57.75
I have considered moving back to Nebraska but have not attempted to do so	28.00	29.63	27.11
I occasionally vacation in Nebraska	11.70	12.96	10.92
I would like to move permanently to Nebraska but haven't found the right opportunity	10.80	9.88	11.27
I plan to retire to Nebraska	5.60	4.94	5.99
I, or my family, own a camp or second home in Nebraska that I visit	4.48	6.17	3.52
I visit during hunting season	3.59	4.32	3.17
I haven't been to Nebraska in years and do not plan to visit	2.50	3.70	1.76

Figure 4.6 Leavers' Attachments to Nebraska (Rural vs Urban)

Homesickness and Nostalgia

Two hundred eighty-nine (64.8%) of the leavers stated that they miss or feel homesick for Nebraska. There was a slightly higher urban percentage (65.85%) compared to rural (62.96%). Although a higher percentage of urban leavers expressed homesickness and nostalgia, the written responses for what leavers missed about Nebraska featured several, often evocative, references to the state's rural landscape:

“Wide open spaces, crop smells, wind, sunshine, and family.” - A Wisconsin woman who grew up in rural northeast Nebraska.

“The sunsets and the smell of the sagebrush in the summer.” - A former Gering resident who now lives in Idaho.

“My family, the culture, the land. There is something about the state that will always be home to me.” - Texas resident originally from the small town of Juniata.

“I miss the simplicity, the slower pace, the wildness of the Sandhills, the common-sense stick to it attitude. Nebraska Football.” - A Pennsylvania-based Cornhusker fan who grew up in Valentine.

“Family, friends, size, pace of life, open land, friendliness, familiarity.” - A Lincoln native in Texas.

“My family and the smells of summer! I miss the sweet corn and vegetables. I miss the rolling hills of green.” - A woman who grew up in Broken Bow.

“What a hilariously small text box for this question! People, places, nostalgia for times past and unrecoverable.” - A former resident of Omaha now residing in Oregon.

The survey reveals that although they no longer reside in the state, many leavers still feel a connection with Nebraska. Many of these leavers express their place attachment to Nebraska by discussing their enduring connections to the state. A quick analysis of the factors selected and written responses from Nebraska’s leavers show that place attachment and mobility can be complementary, as discussed by Holly Barcus and Stanley D. Brunn (Barcus and Brunn 2010).

Why People Return to Nebraska

The survey captured 357 responses from returnees to the state. There were 156 rural and 201 urban respondents who live in Nebraska now but have lived outside of Nebraska (for more than a year at a time). Although there were nearly fifty more urban respondents in this category, rural and urban returnees both comprised 20% of their respective totals. The data presented in Figure 4.7 show that rural returnees are more

likely to be content with their decision to return to Nebraska and are more likely to remain in the state in the future. Urban returnees were more likely to say that they plan to move out of Nebraska again.

	Total %	Rural %	Urban %
I plan to remain in Nebraska	48.20	55.77	42.29
I would like to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time somewhere else	23.80	22.44	24.88
I would like to retire outside of Nebraska	17.60	17.31	17.91
I plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point	10.60	8.97	11.94
I would like to permanently move out of Nebraska now but don't yet have the opportunity	10.10	3.21	15.42
I will likely move outside of Nebraska but return again	5.90	2.56	8.46

Figure 4.7 Future Plans of Nebraska Returnees (Rural vs Urban)

The plurality of both rural and urban returnees moved back to Nebraska to be near family. Those who grew up in rural hometowns were more likely to return to Nebraska. Rural returnees were more likely to have missed family, Nebraska's culture/community, and the state's rural hospitality. Rural returnees were also more likely to say that they always wanted to return to Nebraska. Figure 4.8 shows the factors most selected in influencing a person's decision to return to Nebraska.

	Total %	Rural %	Urban %
I missed my family	50.70	56.41	46.27
I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska	32.50	35.26	30.35
I appreciate Nebraska's rural hospitality	26.90	35.90	19.90
I missed Nebraska's culture/community	26.30	31.41	22.39
I always wanted to return to Nebraska	23.90	28.21	20.40
I missed friends	21.60	23.08	20.40
I viewed my time away from NE as temporary and always knew I would return	20.40	18.59	21.89
I found a new job opportunity that allowed me to move to Nebraska	19.90	22.44	17.91
I missed the Nebraska landscape	16.50	17.31	15.92
I returned to care for a family member (aging parents for example)	15.40	14.74	15.92
Things didn't work out where I was living previously	14.60	11.54	16.92
My work brought me back to Nebraska	13.40	14.10	12.94
My partner wanted to move to Nebraska	13.40	13.46	13.43
I wanted to retire to Nebraska	7.60	9.62	5.97
I enjoy Nebraska's recreational activities	5.30	3.85	6.47

Figure 4.8 Influential Factors in the Decision to Return to Nebraska (Rural vs Urban)

Several rural returnees also cited that they missed the connections that a small community brings, such as family, friendliness, and neighborliness. Several of the respondents, both rural and urban, decided to move back to Nebraska to raise their children in much the same way they had been raised. Many returnees also cited the slower-paced life and freedom found across Nebraska, especially in its rural towns. These values, especially the pull of family, are reflected in the written responses:

“My husband and I always knew we wanted to return to Nebraska. We wanted to raise our family in a small town, in a small school, where everyone knows everyone. You know, when it comes to raising a family, it takes a village. We also wanted our kids to be close with their grandparents, aunts/uncles, and cousins.” - A woman who returned to Broken Bow on the importance of family and community connections.

“I missed my children and myself being around my family. I also missed the freedom you have in a rural community. I live on 2 acres in town a block away from the pool. My kids can be outside and running free and I don't worry.” - An Ansley returnee on the safety and freedoms offered in a small town.

“I was always in love with the Sandhills area. I always felt safe here. I missed the land - it feels like home, familiar, like I belong. I like the sense of neighborliness - people helping each other out. I like the peace and quiet and lack of population, lack of traffic, small town/rural lifestyle.” - A deep appreciation for the physical landscape and neighborliness felt by a returnee in central Nebraska.

“The pull of family and friends is strong - most of my family lives here, and they will likely never leave.” - A male who returned to Omaha reflecting on family values.

“While other locations were fun and great experiences, there came a time when my exploratory life phase was over, my education was complete, and I knew, more than anything, I wanted to return “home” to Nebraska, to be near family and friends, to have that support system and raise a family much the way I was raised.” - A woman from rural Holt County on what compelled her to come back home.

Nearly 25% of the returnee respondents had returned to towns of under 2,500 people. While this percentage may appear low, it is critical that some of Nebraska's small towns are able to add/regain population in a state and region that has long been characterized by its widespread and enduring rural depopulation. These returnee

responses show a level of attachment to rural Nebraska that was not weakened even after having moved out of the state for at least one year. The strong pull of family and dedication to their hometown is evident.

Rural vs Urban Conclusions

The results of the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey, especially the written responses, show an emotional bond between a person, their hometown, and the state. Several of these respondents show rootedness, as they have become familiar with, and attached to, Nebraska and their hometowns in their youths. This strong rootedness appears to have been formed mainly through family ties. Most respondents, regardless of whether they are stayers, leavers, or returnees, have family members living in Nebraska. Of the 1,827 total responses, 1,694 (92.7%) have family members living in Nebraska. In many cases, respondents stated that they were fifth or sixth-generation Nebraskans, and many of them grew up in the same town as their ancestors and still hold tight to their ancestral roots.

Family rootedness is evident in several of the written responses, such as *“My ancestors came to Nebraska to live before Nebraska was even a state. We have deep roots here.”* and *“I’m the 6th generation to live in my county. I’m deeply rooted here and have pride in my community and my family history here. The majority of my family still lives in a 100-mile radius.”* Familial ties are the primary influence in a person’s decision to stay in Nebraska, as well as the main attachment that leavers continue to have with the state and the main pull factor for Nebraska returnees, especially those who want to start

families and raise their children in the same settings that they were raised in. These ties are the main attachment several Nebraskans have to their past and present hometowns.

The social network and culture of small communities or urban neighborhoods is another factor in the bond a person has with Nebraska. Several respondents cited hardworking attitudes, community pride, familiarity with neighbors, and of course living next to friends and family in their decisions to stay in Nebraska. This local attachment is the result of local relationships that have developed over time. Family ties and general familiarity lead to a strong sense of belonging to a community. Nebraska's rural hospitality and culture and community were cited by several respondents. Several of the written responses show that place attachment and social interactions are related. One responder wrote that "*Nebraska people care about others in a way that you don't find consistently throughout other states.*"

Physical place attachment is not as big a factor compared to the Vermont Roots Migration Survey, which featured several responses related to the natural beauty of Vermont's lakes and mountainous landscape. The lure of Nebraska's Sandhills cannot be ignored, however, as several respondents cited the physical beauty of the sprawling sand dunes that cover much of the north-central portion of the state. The physical ties appear to be primarily aesthetic, with respondents discussing the positive emotions and thoughts evoked by the physical landscape. It seems that there may be a stronger physical place attachment among leavers, rather than stayers, as many of the written responses including the Sandhills and Nebraska's physical beauty can be found in the "Homesickness and Nostalgia" section above.

The results of the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey show several bonds between the state and its inhabitants, and indicate that rural Nebraska is a place that people happily choose to stay in or return to, and one that is missed by many who leave it. At the same time, the results of the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey also show the difference in values between rural and urban residents, as well as the different considerations that must be made in both rural and urban settings in the decision to stay, leave, or return to a place. Next, the differences between females and males, and different age groups, in residential decision making in rural Nebraska are explored.

Gender and Rural Residential Decision Making

This section breaks down the differences between rural respondents and residential decision making based on gender. Of the 835 rural respondents, 526 (63%) identified as Female, 280 (33.5%) as Male, and 29 (3.5%) as Trans or Non-Binary, preferred not to answer, or categorized themselves outside of the options provided. The results from respondents who identified as gender fluid, transsexual, bi-sexual, or who preferred not to say their gender were removed for the sections comparing and contrasting stayers, leavers, and returnees, as their numbers were too low to do a robust statistical analysis of their responses as a group (Figure 4.9).

	Male	Female	Trans/Non-Binary/Other	Total
Stayers	164	345	8	517
Leavers	60	92	10	162
Returnees	56	89	11	156
Total	280	526	29	835

Figure 4.9 Breakdown of Survey Respondents by Gender

Gender and the Decision to Stay in Rural Nebraska

There were 517 rural stayer responses, including 345 females and 164 males. Females made up the highest percentage (66.7%) between the two gender groups. Females also made up a higher percentage within groups, as 65.6% of the total female respondents identified as rural stayers, compared to 58.6% of the total males.

A higher percentage of males cited that they enjoy living in the state. In connection, when asked about future plans (Figure 4.10), males were more likely to say that they plan to stay in Nebraska in the future. Males were also more likely to say that they have never wanted to live permanently outside of Nebraska. When asked about future plans, however, the percentages of males and females who cited that they plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point were similar.

	Total %	Female %	Male %
I plan to stay in Nebraska in the future	72.80	78.26	84.76
I would like to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time elsewhere	20.00	18.26	15.85
I would like to retire outside of Nebraska	14.20	11.59	8.54
I plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point	9.20	4.93	4.27
I will likely move outside of Nebraska but return later	8.10	3.77	3.66

Figure 4.10 Future Plans of Nebraska Rural Stayers (Female vs Male)

When selecting factors that influenced them to stay in rural Nebraska (Figure 4.11), the biggest discrepancy between females and males was in whether or not they like Nebraska's rural hospitality, with males being more likely to like it. Males were also more likely to appreciate Nebraska's rural culture/community and like the physical landscape, or natural environment. This is similar to Cary DeWit's findings in his research on differences among genders and sense of place in the Great Plains (DeWit 2004). Females were more likely to stay because their work is based in Nebraska. While

a similar percentage of males and females both stayed in the state to live near family and to care for family members, males were more likely to want to raise their children in Nebraska.

	Total %	Female %	Male %
I have stayed in the state to live near family	73.90	74.49	78.66
I enjoy living in Nebraska	73.00	76.52	81.10
I appreciate Nebraska's culture/community	54.20	58.84	65.24
I like Nebraska's rural hospitality	53.20	60.29	75.61
I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska	47.90	53.04	61.59
I like Nebraska's landscape (natural environments)	44.30	46.96	57.32
My work is based in Nebraska	42.50	45.80	38.41
I have never wanted to live permanently outside of Nebraska	33.50	39.42	48.17
I've visited other places and decided Nebraska was the best place for me	18.50	16.52	24.39
I would like to leave Nebraska but haven't had the opportunity	15.40	10.72	7.32
My partner didn't want to leave Nebraska	15.10	18.26	15.24
I needed to care for family members in Nebraska	11.90	11.59	11.59
Nebraska offers me activities and opportunities that don't exist elsewhere	8.60	8.70	9.15

Figure 4.11 Influential Factors in the Decision to Stay in Rural Nebraska (Female vs Male)

Gender and the Decision to Leave Rural Nebraska

There were 162 rural leaver responses, including ninety-two females and sixty males. Females made up the highest percentage (56.8%) between the two gender groups. Males made up a higher percentage within groups, as 21.4% of the total male respondents identified as rural leavers, compared to 17.5% of the total females.

Two of the biggest discrepancies between male and female respondents are found in the influential factors in the decision to leave Nebraska (Figure 4.12). A much higher percentage of males chose to leave the state because their occupation (work) is located outside Nebraska. Along the same lines, males were more likely to leave the state because they could earn more money outside of Nebraska. Males were also more likely to choose to leave because they prefer to live in a larger urban area. Females were more

likely than males to leave because their partner does not want to live in Nebraska. This information could be used to supplement Robert Shepard's research into why young women migrate away from rural areas (Shepard 2014).

	Total %	Female %	Male %
My occupation (work) is located outside Nebraska	50.40	42.39	61.67
I can earn more money outside of Nebraska	34.50	29.35	46.67
I want to live in an area with greater cultural diversity	33.40	21.74	26.67
I prefer to live in a larger urban area	25.30	16.30	23.33
My partner does not want to live in Nebraska	22.90	29.35	21.67
Nebraska's weather is intolerable	16.60	14.13	13.33
I can't do my favorite recreational activities or hobbies in Nebraska	15.00	7.61	13.33
I never enjoyed living in Nebraska and always planned to leave	10.80	8.70	13.33
It would not be possible to do my work in Nebraska	9.40	2.17	11.67
My extended family lives outside Nebraska	6.90	7.61	6.67
Nebraska's cost of living is too high	3.10	2.17	3.33

Figure 4.12 Influential Factors in the Decision to Leave Rural Nebraska (Female vs Male)

When asked to identify the kinds of attachments and connections they maintain with Nebraska and people living there, a high percentage of rural leavers said that they return to Nebraska to visit family and friends. Males were more likely than females to return to visit family and friends. However, females who have left the state were more likely to feel homesickness and nostalgia. Much of this homesickness and nostalgia shows a deep appreciation for their childhood spent in rural Nebraska. Figure 4.13 shows a list of rural leavers' attachments to rural Nebraska.

	Total %	Female %	Male %
I visit family in Nebraska	86.50	80.43	88.33
I visit friends in Nebraska from time to time	53.80	42.39	50.00
I have considered moving back to Nebraska but have not attempted to do so	28.00	26.09	36.67
I occasionally vacation in Nebraska	11.70	13.04	10.00
I would like to move permanently to Nebraska but haven't found the right opportunity	10.80	9.78	11.67
I plan to retire to Nebraska	5.60	5.43	5.00
I, or my family, own a camp or second home in Nebraska that I visit	4.48	7.61	5.00
I visit during hunting season	3.59	5.43	1.67
I haven't been to Nebraska in years and do not plan to visit	2.50	4.35	3.33
Do you ever feel homesickness for Nebraska?	64.80	69.57	60.00

Figure 4.13 Leavers' Attachments to Rural Nebraska (Female vs Male)

Gender and the Decision to Return to Rural Nebraska

There were 156 rural returnee responses, including eighty-nine females and fifty-six males. Females made up the highest percentage (57%) between the two gender groups. Males made up a higher percentage within groups, as 20% of the total male respondents identified as rural returnees, compared to 16.9% of the total females.

The biggest variations in factors selected by females and males in the decision to return to Nebraska (Figure 4.14) were related to work and family. Males who moved back to Nebraska were more likely to cite a work-related factor, including “My work brought me back to Nebraska” and “I found a new job opportunity that allowed me to move to Nebraska.” Conversely, female returnees were much more likely to cite family-related factors, including “I missed my family” and “I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska.”

	Total %	Female %	Male %
I missed my family	56.41	66.29	46.43
I appreciate Nebraska's rural hospitality	35.90	39.33	35.71
I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska	35.26	46.07	23.21
I missed Nebraska's culture/community	31.41	31.46	32.14
I always wanted to return to Nebraska	28.21	28.09	32.14
I missed friends	23.08	25.84	21.43
I found a new job opportunity that allowed me to move to Nebraska	22.44	15.73	35.71
I viewed my time away from NE as temporary and always knew I would return	18.59	15.73	25.00
I missed the Nebraska landscape	17.31	19.10	14.29
I returned to care for a family member (aging parents for example)	14.74	15.73	16.07
My work brought me back to Nebraska	14.10	8.99	23.21
My partner wanted to move to Nebraska	13.46	14.61	14.29
Things didn't work out where I was living previously	11.54	14.61	8.93
I wanted to retire to Nebraska	9.62	7.87	12.50
I enjoy Nebraska's recreational activities	3.85	3.37	5.36

Figure 4.14 Influential Factors in the Decision to Return to Rural Nebraska (Female vs Male)

When asked about their future plans (Figure 4.15), the plurality of both female and male returnees cited that they plan to remain in Nebraska, with females being slightly more likely to choose this option. Males were more likely to want to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time somewhere else.

	Total %	Female %	Male %
I plan to remain in Nebraska	55.77	61.80	55.36
I would like to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time somewhere else	22.44	17.98	28.57
I would like to retire outside of Nebraska	17.31	17.98	16.07
I plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point	8.97	8.99	10.71
I would like to permanently move out of Nebraska now but don't yet have the opportunity	3.21	3.37	3.57
I will likely move outside of Nebraska but return again	2.56	3.37	1.79

Figure 4.15 Future Plans of Nebraska Returnees (Female vs Male)

The factors selected by females and males in their decision to stay, leave, or return to Nebraska show a disparity between work and family values. Rural males were more likely to make residential decisions based on work, while rural females were more likely to make theirs based on family. Males were also more likely to cite attachment to the landscape, including Nebraska's rural hospitality, and small town culture and community.

Age and Rural Residential Decision Making

This section breaks down the differences between rural respondents and residential decision making based on age. Respondents were divided into four age groups: Under 30, 30-49, 50-69, and 70 and Over. Of the 835 rural respondents, 147 (17.6%) were aged under 30, 377 (45.1%) were between 30-49, 244 (29.2%) were between 50-69, and sixty-seven (8%) were aged 70 and over (Figure 4.16).

	Under 30	30-49	50-69	70 and Over	Total
Stayers	117	228	142	30	517
Leavers	16	78	48	20	162
Returnees	14	71	54	17	156
Total	147	377	244	67	835

Figure 4.16 Breakdown of Survey Respondents by Age

Age and the Decision to Stay in Rural Nebraska

Of the 517 rural stayers, 117 (22.6%) were aged under 30, 228 (44.1%) were 30-49, 142 (27.5%) were 50-69, and thirty (5.8%) were 70 and over. Figure 4.17 shows the influential factors in the decision to stay in rural Nebraska and the future plans of Nebraska rural stayers. The plurality of stayers from each age group reported that they enjoy living in Nebraska and plan to stay in the state in the future. The younger respondents were more likely to say that they want to leave Nebraska at some point in the future.

The older respondents were more likely to cite family values in their decision to stay in the state, while younger respondents were more likely to stay in Nebraska because their work is based in the state. Those aged under 30 were less likely to want to raise in children in Nebraska. They were also less likely to like Nebraska's landscape (natural environments). Those aged 30-49 were more likely to want to leave the state, but haven't had the opportunity. Those aged 50-69 were more likely to cite Nebraska's rural hospitality and culture/community in their decision to stay. Those aged over 70 placed a high value on both family and the state's rural hospitality.

Influential Factors in the Decision to Stay in Rural Nebraska					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
I enjoy living in Nebraska	77.95	80.34	74.56	80.99	80.00
I have stayed in the state to live near family	76.21	70.94	76.32	80.28	76.67
I like Nebraska's rural hospitality	65.57	56.41	62.28	85.92	63.33
I appreciate Nebraska's culture/community	60.93	58.97	58.77	69.72	43.33
I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska	56.09	47.01	56.14	64.08	53.33
I like Nebraska's landscape (natural environments)	50.48	40.17	50.44	59.86	46.67
My work is based in Nebraska	43.13	47.01	45.18	39.44	30.00
I have never wanted to live permanently outside of Nebraska	42.36	37.61	40.35	51.41	33.33
I've visited other places and decided Nebraska was the best place for me	18.96	12.82	18.42	25.35	16.67
My partner didn't want to leave Nebraska	17.02	15.38	19.74	15.49	10.00
I needed to care for family members in Nebraska	11.41	9.40	12.72	11.97	6.67
I would like to leave Nebraska but haven't had the opportunity	9.48	6.84	12.72	7.04	6.67
Nebraska offers me activities and opportunities that don't exist elsewhere	8.70	5.98	10.09	10.56	0.00
Future Plans of Nebraska Rural Stayers					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
I plan to stay in Nebraska in the future	80.27	81.20	76.75	85.92	76.67
I would like to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time elsewhere	17.41	19.66	17.54	16.20	13.33
I would like to retire outside of Nebraska	8.32	8.55	8.33	9.15	3.33
I plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point	4.64	1.71	6.58	3.52	6.67
I will likely move outside of Nebraska but return later	3.68	2.56	4.39	3.52	3.33

Figure 4.17 Age and the Decision to Stay in Rural Nebraska

Age and the Decision to Leave Rural Nebraska

Of the 162 rural leavers, 16 (9.9%) were aged under 30, seventy-eight (48.1%) were 30-49, forty-eight (29.6%) were 50-69, and twenty (12.3%) were 70 and over.

Figure 4.18 shows the influential factors in the decision to leave rural Nebraska, leavers' attachments to rural Nebraska, and homesickness and nostalgia.

The plurality of respondents from each age group made the decision to leave Nebraska because their occupation (work) is located outside of the state. Those aged 50-69 were more likely to cite the ability to earn more money outside of the state and that it was not possible to do their work in Nebraska in their decision to leave. They were also more likely to say that they never enjoyed living in Nebraska and had always planned to leave.

Younger leavers were more likely to cite wanting greater cultural diversity in their decision to leave Nebraska. Older respondents were more likely to select not being able to pursue their favorite recreational activities or hobbies in Nebraska, and finding the weather intolerable. Those aged 30-49 and 50-69 were more likely to leave rural Nebraska because they wanted to move to an urban area.

When asked about their attachments to the state, older respondents were more likely to visit family and friends in Nebraska. They were also more likely to have considered moving back to Nebraska. Those aged 30-49 were the most likely to cite homesickness and feelings of nostalgia. Younger respondents were more likely to say that they haven't been to Nebraska in years and do not plan to visit.

Influential Factors in the Decision to Leave Rural Nebraska					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
My occupation (work) is located outside Nebraska	48.77	56.25	38.46	60.42	55.00
I can earn more money outside of Nebraska	36.42	37.50	29.49	50.00	30.00
My partner does not want to live in Nebraska	25.93	31.25	30.77	20.83	15.00
I want to live in an area with greater cultural diversity	24.07	25.00	23.08	29.17	15.00
I prefer to live in a larger urban area	19.14	12.50	17.95	25.00	15.00
Nebraska's weather is intolerable	12.96	6.25	16.67	14.58	0.00
I can't do my favorite recreational activities or hobbies in Nebraska	11.11	6.25	8.97	16.67	10.00
I never enjoyed living in Nebraska and always planned to leave	10.49	6.25	10.26	16.67	0.00
My extended family lives outside Nebraska	7.41	6.25	7.69	8.33	5.00
It would not be possible to do my work in Nebraska	5.56	0.00	2.56	14.58	0.00
Nebraska's cost of living is too high	2.47	0.00	2.56	2.08	5.00
Leavers' Attachments to Rural Nebraska					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
I visit family in Nebraska	84.57	75.00	82.05	87.50	95.00
I visit friends in Nebraska from time to time	46.91	31.25	46.15	47.92	60.00
I have considered moving back to Nebraska but have not attempted to do so	29.63	31.25	25.64	39.58	20.00
I occasionally vacation in Nebraska	12.96	18.75	11.54	8.33	25.00
I would like to move permanently to Nebraska but haven't found the right opportunity	9.88	18.75	7.69	12.50	5.00
I, or my family, own a camp or second home in Nebraska that I visit	6.17	0.00	8.97	4.17	5.00
I plan to retire to Nebraska	4.94	0.00	6.41	6.25	0.00
I visit during hunting season	4.32	0.00	6.41	2.08	5.00
I haven't been to Nebraska in years and do not plan to visit	3.70	6.25	3.85	4.17	0.00
Homesickness and Nostalgia					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
Do you ever feel homesickness for Nebraska?	62.96	62.50	70.51	60.42	40.00

Figure 4.18 Age and the Decision to Leave Rural Nebraska

Age and the Decision to Return to Rural Nebraska

Of the 156 rural returnees, fourteen (9%) were aged under 30, seventy-one (45.5%) were 30-49, fifty-four (34.6%) were 50-69, and seventeen (10.9%) were 70 and over. Figure 4.19 shows the influential factors in the decision to return to Nebraska and the future plans of Nebraska returnees. Older returnees were more likely to have always wanted to return to Nebraska, as well as wanting to retire in the state.

Familial ties played an important role for several returnees in making the decision to move back to Nebraska. Younger returnees were more likely to cite missing family and friends in their decision to return to Nebraska. Younger returnees were also more likely to have found a new job opportunity that allowed them to move back to the state. Older returnees were more likely to cite appreciating Nebraska's rural hospitality, missing the state's culture/community, and missing its landscape in their decision to return. Older returnees were also more likely to have had a partner who wanted to move back to Nebraska. They were also more likely to have returned to care for a family member.

When asked about their future plans, older returnees were more likely to say that they plan to remain in Nebraska. Very few people aged 70 and over had any plans to leave the state in the future. Younger returnees, on the other hand, were more likely to say that they plan to move away permanently at some point. A low percentage from each age group said that they will likely move outside of Nebraska in the future, but return again.

Influential Factors in the Decision to Return to Nebraska					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
I missed my family	56.41	71.43	60.56	50.00	47.06
I appreciate Nebraska's rural hospitality	35.90	14.29	32.39	42.59	47.06
I wanted to raise my children in Nebraska	35.26	35.71	35.21	38.89	23.53
I missed Nebraska's culture/community	31.41	14.29	30.99	40.74	17.65
I always wanted to return to Nebraska	28.21	14.29	25.35	33.33	35.29
I missed friends	23.08	35.71	25.35	22.22	5.88
I found a new job opportunity that allowed me to move to Nebraska	22.44	28.57	32.39	7.41	23.53
I viewed my time away from NE as temporary and always knew I would return	18.59	14.29	16.90	20.37	23.53
I missed the Nebraska landscape	17.31	0.00	14.08	25.93	17.65
I returned to care for a family member (aging parents for example)	14.74	14.29	9.86	18.52	23.53
My work brought me back to Nebraska	14.10	21.43	9.86	16.67	17.65
My partner wanted to move to Nebraska	13.46	7.14	8.45	20.37	17.65
Things didn't work out where I was living previously	11.54	14.29	12.68	11.11	5.88
I wanted to retire to Nebraska	9.62	0.00	2.82	14.81	29.41
I enjoy Nebraska's recreational activities	3.85	7.14	1.41	5.56	5.88
Future Plans of Nebraska Returnees					
	Total %	Under 30 %	30-49 %	50-69 %	70 and Over %
I plan to remain in Nebraska	55.77	35.71	53.52	59.26	70.59
I would like to live part-time in Nebraska and part-time somewhere else	22.44	35.71	21.13	27.78	0.00
I would like to retire outside of Nebraska	17.31	14.29	21.13	18.52	0.00
I plan to move permanently away from Nebraska at some point	8.97	14.29	12.68	3.70	5.88
I would like to permanently move out of Nebraska now but don't yet have the opportunity	3.21	14.29	4.23	0.00	0.00
I will likely move outside of Nebraska but return again	2.56	7.14	2.82	0.00	5.88

Figure 4.19 Age and the Decision to Return to Rural Nebraska

The results by age group show a discrepancy between those who plan to stay in Nebraska and those who plan to leave. Younger people were more likely to plan on leaving the state, while older people were more likely to stay. Younger stayers are less likely to remain in Nebraska, younger leavers are less likely to move back to the state, and younger returnees are more likely to leave again. Younger leavers were also less likely to cite homesickness and nostalgia as an influencing factor.

Rural Hometown Descriptions

The Nebraska Roots Migration Survey also asked respondents to describe their hometowns in their own words. These descriptions included positive, negative, and neutral characteristics. This section compares some of the written descriptions of rural hometowns that are declining in population with those that are growing. As the second chapter, this section uses the 1950 and 2010 censuses to track declining or growing populations in rural Nebraska towns.

Rural Hometowns with Declining Populations

Although these towns are shrinking, those who live in them had several positive things to say, reflecting the high likelihood that rural stayers are content in their decision to stay in Nebraska. The written responses in this section, however, include references to the towns' declining populations. Many older respondents recalled what their hometowns looked like in their youth and were able to compare them to now. Many younger respondents described the landscape that they grew up in. Following are ten, often poignant, written descriptions from rural hometowns with declining populations:

Sadly, in last 20 year all of the businesses have closed. We currently have to drive over 20 miles for groceries, fuel, etc. – Alexandria.

Small Ag community with under 200 people. Like a lot of communities similar to it, it is a safe place to raise a family but it is dying as the younger generations leave. – Anselmo.

A small town that is trying to stay alive. It has the opportunity to see growth, with the involvement of the agriculture business nearby. – Bartlett.

It was starting to become more barren as the years went on as people were moving to bigger cities. – Blue Springs.

Very small farming community. No school no grocery store. No opportunities for non-farming people unless you are willing to commute about an hour. – Campbell.

Had all the basics of a post office, grocery store, bank, pool, convenient store and Ag based businesses but nothing more than that. – Cedar Rapids.

My hometown of Lebanon is very small, with just a park and church. It was positive to be very close to our neighbors, but hard because we had to travel 30 miles to the nearest town with any work opportunities and 15 miles to school. – Lebanon.

Small (1300 population), great environment in which to grow up, not a lot of opportunities for kids once graduated from high school – Ravenna.

A shrinking small town, very few businesses, majority of folks commute to work, limited housing. – Sargent.

A nice, close knit community when I was young...lost our elementary school, then the grocery store, then the bar. It all fell apart. – Ulysses.

Rural Hometowns with Growing Populations

The written responses in this section include references to the rural towns with growing populations. Again, there was a good mixture of descriptions of these towns with past and present comparison, as well as descriptions of their contemporary landscapes. Following are ten written descriptions from rural hometowns with growing populations:

Population under 500, progressive for a rural community: doctor office, dentist, pharmacy, store, etc. – Adams.

A small community with a lot of heart. Very supportive of the kids and anything the town does. – Brady.

Bedroom community of about 500 people. It was a fairly nice place with almost entirely middle class residents, most of whom commute to Lincoln to work. Cortland is pretty safe and welcoming. It's diverse in age and people. – Cortland.

Small village, rural but within short driving distance of the tri cities. Decent job opportunities. – Doniphan.

Farming community, population about 450, Post Office, several churches, K-12 school, grocery, drug, doctor, creamery, variety, gas station, cafe, bank, hardware, library, community building, auto repair, mortuary, grain mill, lumber yard, theater, etc. – Elmwood.

Imperial is a very progressive city that fostered growth, leadership development and retention of talented graduates. – Imperial.

Primarily a farming community, but also a meat packing plant that opened when I was in the 6th grade. By the time I graduated from high school, there was a growing population of Mexican people. The community adapted to this change relatively well. I would say that the families that lived in Madison had been there for generations, otherwise. I loved the opportunity to participate in multiple activities and get very involved in the community. – Madison.

Typical small town with a mainly mid to low income level. Three churches, three schools, a Legion Post and a vibrant main street made up the "social scene". Mainly German with a few Bohemian, Polish and Anglo families mixed in. It has a very agrarian economy, with only a few light manufacturing or service jobs available. Families usually had two to six children and typically more than one generation living in close proximity. – Osmond.

Pierce was a very tight knit community and had very good teachers. Pierce is a bedroom community of Norfolk and Norfolk had a lot of well-paying jobs. – Pierce.

Highly agricultural community with an egg processing plant. 1200 people in town, 40 in my graduating class. Lucky to have community supporters to keep the town alive. Many "young" people in their 30s have moved back to work and to raise their families. – Wakefield.

The descriptions from residents in rural towns with declining population included references to several businesses that had closed down, lack of opportunities, and people moving away. Residents from growing rural towns referred to diversity in businesses and

in population. These descriptions included community members who strongly support their hometowns and who are welcoming to new residents.

Next, the postscript will discuss how the data from the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey presented in this chapter, along with the lessons learned from the six case studies of individual rural Nebraska towns, may be used in studying the population sustainability of rural Nebraska towns.

POSTSCRIPT

This dissertation answers four questions central to population sustainability in rural Nebraska towns: Which rural towns are growing in Nebraska? Where are these growing rural towns located? Why are these rural towns growing? And, what are the motivations for people to live in rural Nebraska? Additionally, the series of maps depicting population change in rural Nebraska towns between 1950 and 2010, the six case studies of individual rural Nebraska towns, and the results and analysis of the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey reinforce and expand upon the literature reviewed in the first chapter.

Using a series of maps to depict population change in rural Nebraska towns in the second chapter helps to answer the first questions, which rural towns are growing and where they are located. The population trends shown in these maps are like those found by scholars investigating rural America as a whole. The third chapter provided local examples of contemporary population recruitment and retention strategies in Nebraska rural towns, as well as examples of initiatives and organizations that support and promote the sustainability of rural communities. The fourth chapter contributed to the growing literature on rural residential decision making and place attachment. This research aligns with other rural migration scholarship that has demonstrated that family is an important factor in residential decision making. The findings from the Nebraska Roots Migration Survey are provocative in their suggestion that those who grow up in America's rural areas may develop a different set of values and social and place-based attachments than their urban peers.

The outcome of this research will be of interest not only to the scholarly community, but also to those who work in/with rural communities. Rural migration research will benefit individuals and groups who are concerned about the vitality of rural communities, as mobility research sheds light on the reasons why people choose to stay in or leave small towns. This dissertation supports other research that demonstrates strong place attachment among residents of rural communities. These residential preference data, which include both the positives and negatives of living in a rural community, can be applied to efforts to not only to sustain the current population of rural communities, but to attract new residents. This information is consequential for rural geographers and migration experts who study a region such as the Great Plains, where rural depopulation has endured, but deep-rooted attachment to place remains.

The state and national demographers, scholars, economists, and journals must recognize the importance of the voice of rural stayers and must no longer overlook almost one-third of the state's total population in migration studies. While the depopulation of rural Nebraska can be expected to continue being a problem, we can also expect a substantial number of people to continue planting their roots in the small towns and countrysides of Nebraska.

While Nebraska occupies an empty space in the American geographical imagination, it is anything but. Although the entire Great Plains region may appear as "placeless" or even a "non-place" to those who fly over or drive through it as quickly as possible to get from one coast to another, research with people who have grown up and live now in Nebraska suggests that its rural communities are rich with social interaction,

and places to which residents are deeply attached to. They are places where many people have been happy to make a home. They are places that, with the help of dedicated and enthusiastic residents, will see many of its rural towns sustain their populations, some of which will continue to grow.

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