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## Population Sustainability in Rural Great Plains Towns

ANDREW HUSA

**Abstract:** As researchers look to define a narrative of population decline throughout the region, the rural Great Plains towns that have been able to sustain their populations and attract new residents have seemingly gone unnoticed. This article features case studies from six rural Nebraska towns that address key questions regarding the population sustainability of rural Great Plains towns. Along with a discussion on the significance of geographic location in population growth or decline, this study includes several examples of how rural towns have used their locations to their advantage, created more job opportunities, enticed new residents to move in, and/or dealt with an influx of immigrants in recent decades. The findings included in this study will benefit individuals and groups who are concerned about the vitality of rural communities, as its findings can be applied to efforts not only to sustain current populations but also to attract new residents to rural towns.

**Key Words:** Great Plains, location, Nebraska, population growth, rural

In the American geographical imagination, the rural Great Plains is an empty place that people fly over or drive through as quickly as possible to get from one coast to the other. Those in the Great Plains, however, will tell you that the region is more than a seemingly endless flatland full of corn and cattle and void of people. While rural population in the Great Plains has continued to decline throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many rural towns have diversified their economies by attracting new industries and amenities to sustain their current populations and attract new residents. As rural depopulation endures throughout the region as a whole, special attention should be paid to the rural towns that have increased their populations in recent censuses. These growing rural towns are excep-

tions to the rule, and their successes could provide guidelines to communities with declining populations, and perhaps help them alter their downward trajectories.

While the United States Census Bureau does not explicitly define “rural,” they state that “rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included in an urban area, which is defined as having at least 2,500 people.<sup>1</sup> This census category does not always adequately describe the relative lived experience of a place. Rurality is an elusive concept; how it is experienced as an identity, a place, and a representation varies from person to person. For someone living on a ranch in the Nebraska Sandhills, a community of 2,000 may feel urban, while someone from Sioux Falls, South Dakota (pop. 180,927), may consider nearby Harrisburg (pop.

9,687) to be a rural community. For the purpose of clarity, this study uses the United States Census Bureau cutoff for urban areas to classify communities with populations below 2,500 as rural.

In many areas of the country, especially across the Great Plains, the rural population has plummeted since the early twentieth century. This trend looks to continue into the twenty-first century, as rural population loss endures across the region. While there are some rural areas of the country that are gaining population (e.g., the upper Great Lakes, the Ozarks, the Great Smokies, and the West), population losses have continued between 2010 and 2020 in large segments of the rural Great Plains.<sup>2</sup> In some of the region's counties, the rate of population decline has even accelerated in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> 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 sixty-five and older, and soaring levels of out-migration.<sup>4</sup> While these patterns exist elsewhere in the country, they are especially pronounced in the rural Great Plains.

These conditions have been research foci across various disciplines and by several scholars with interests in both historical and contemporary factors leading to rural out-migration at local, state, and regional scales. The causes and consequences of rural out-migration have therefore been largely documented throughout the Great Plains since people began leaving en masse during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl years. As researchers look to define a narrative of population decline throughout the region, the rural Great Plains towns that have been able to sustain their populations

and attract new residents have seemingly gone unnoticed.

In these narratives, key questions regarding the population sustainability of rural Great Plains towns go unanswered, such as how some have used their locations to their advantage, created more job opportunities, enticed new residents to move in, and/or dealt with an influx of immigrants in recent decades. Furthermore, can the lessons learned from growing rural towns be transferred to towns with declining populations? Or is location the determining factor, with population growth or decline attributed to geographic chance?

This study looks specifically at the state of Nebraska to address these questions. Located in the heart of the Great Plains, Nebraska features several of the previously listed characteristics that in general define rural demographic patterns in the Great Plains, including high youth out-migration levels and subsequent higher percentages of elderly people, and multiple communities and counties with declining populations. Indeed, perhaps no state better exemplifies ongoing rural depopulation in the Great Plains than Nebraska, as seventy-two of the state's ninety-three counties counted their highest populations at the 1930 census or earlier. Following an overview of rural population change over the entire state, with a series of maps depicting which communities grew and which declined between 1950 and 2020, case studies that explore the growth of six rural Nebraska towns are presented. These case studies are then used to examine growing rural towns across the Great Plains as a whole, including a discussion of the significance of their locations and the various reasons behind their growth.

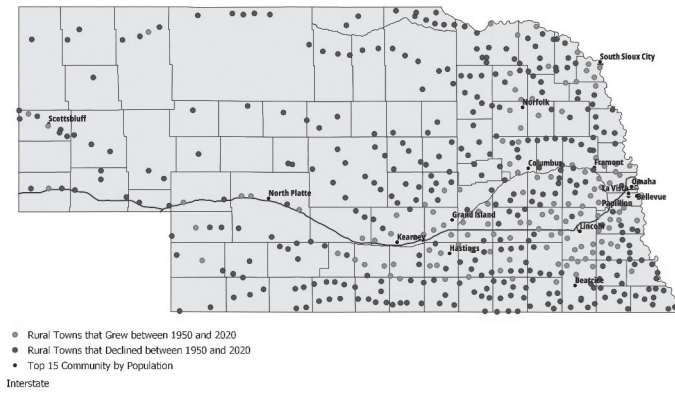


Fig. 1. Map of Nebraska rural communities' growth or decline, 1950–2020. (Map by author.)

### Mapping Population Growth in Rural Nebraska Towns

In order to find which rural Nebraska towns have grown in population, changes between the 1950 and 2020 censuses were examined. The 1950 census was chosen for comparison of population growth as it was the last census in which Nebraska had a predominantly rural population. The 2020 census was chosen as it was the most recent decennial census to be taken. According to United States Census Bureau figures, Nebraska's rural population dropped from just over 53 percent of the total population of the state in 1950 to less than 27 percent in 2020.

It is important to note the differences between the two censuses. Nebraska's population was 1,325,510 at the 1950 census, approximately 600,000 less than it would be in 2020. The urban population was a much smaller percentage in 1950, comprising roughly 47 percent of Nebraskans, compared to over 73 percent in 2020. There were ten fewer urban

communities in 1950 as well, as Ashland, Aurora, Central City, Gretna, Hickman, La Vista, Minden, Ralston, Waverly, and Valley each grew from below to above 2,500 people between the two censuses. Meanwhile, one community, Superior, declined from above to below 2,500 people between 1950 and 2020. As this study focuses solely on towns below 2,500 people, these communities have been excluded from the map of population growth or decline (Fig. 1) as they were not under

2,500 in both the 1950 and 2020 censuses.

Of the 477 rural towns shown in Figure 1, 130 grew in population between the 1950 and 2020 censuses. Out of these 130 rural towns, only five gained more than 1,000 people. Each of these five is located near a larger urban community, with Milford close to Lincoln; Bennington, Springfield, and Yutan close to Omaha; and Dakota City close to South Sioux City. As Lincoln and Omaha continue to grow (by approximately 100,000 residents combined between 2010 and 2020), so too do many of their neighboring communities. Three of these neighboring communities, Hickman near Lincoln, and Ashland and Valley near Omaha, went from below to above 2,500 residents between the 2010 and 2020 censuses.

Using a proportional symbol map (Fig. 2), it is evident that the rural towns that have grown the most are satellite or commuter towns, the suburbs and exurbs of the large urban centers of Nebraska. Along with those near Lincoln and Omaha, several of the satellite or commuter towns of other larger urban communities, such

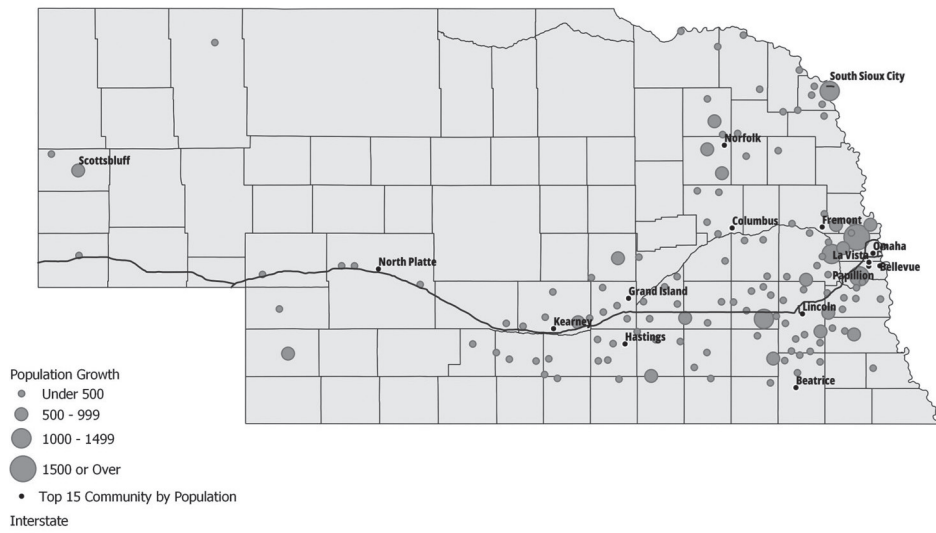


Fig. 2. Proportion symbol map of Nebraska rural towns with population growth, 1950-2020. (Map by author.)

as those located near Gering and Scottsbluff in the northwest, those near Norfolk and South Sioux City in the northeast, and those near the Tri-Cities of Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney in central Nebraska, have grown between 1950 and 2020.

Some rural towns, especially those in the Tri-Cities area, may also be experiencing population growth due to their proximity to Interstate 80. While the construction of the interstate in the 1950s and 1960s hurt many rural towns by bypassing them and was a factor in their population decline, it has generally helped rural towns 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, the route of Interstate 80 has kept them on the map and provided ample job opportunities and economic success.

Many of Nebraska’s growing rural towns are located in the eastern half of the state, near several of the aforementioned urban centers. This is especially true of those that have gained the most population. A map of the top twenty rural towns in terms of population growth between 1950 and 2020 (Fig. 3) supports this notion. Each of these twenty rural towns are located within forty miles of one of Nebraska’s fifteen largest communities. Additionally, only Terrytown, which is sandwiched between the urban communities of Gering and Scottsbluff, is located west of the 100th meridian.

The rural towns of western Nebraska have especially struggled to retain their populations since 1950. Although the state still had more rural than urban residents at the time of the 1950 census, nine counties in western

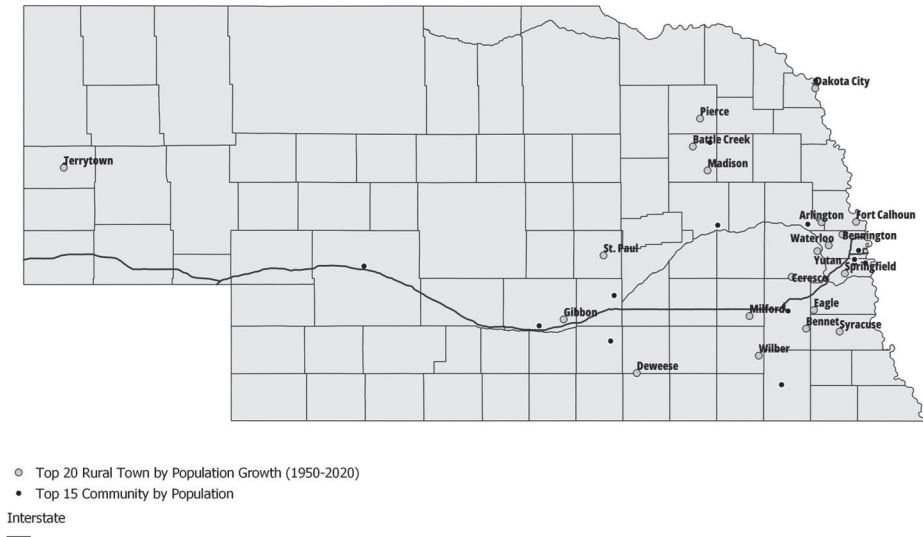


Fig. 3. Map of the top twenty Nebraska rural communities in population growth, 1950–2020. (Map by author.)

Nebraska reported fewer than two people per square mile. The number of western Nebraska counties with fewer than two people per square mile increased to eleven in 1960 and fourteen in 1970. Seventeen western counties dropped below two people per square mile by 2020, while thirteen more had less than five people per square mile. In fact, apart from some counties along the Platte River valley and Interstate 80, all the counties in western Nebraska now have less than ten people per square mile.<sup>5</sup>

The maps included in this section show that growing rural towns are often within close proximity of Nebraska's larger urban communities and/or Interstate 80. This is especially true in eastern Nebraska, where most of the growing rural towns are located. These maps help to answer some of the important questions regarding the population sustainability of rural Great Plains towns, including the significance of their locations and how they may use this to

their advantage. Throughout the Great Plains, several rural towns have taken advantage of being satellite or commuter towns to larger urban communities. They have taken on new roles as bedroom communities, or those where people live but commute to work in larger urban communities. Others have taken advantage of their locations along the interstates and other major highways that cross the region, opening up truck stops, fast-food chains, and hotels to provide new jobs and to keep money flowing into their communities.

These maps do not answer several other important questions, however, and may lead observers to believe that growth is simply a matter of geographic chance rather than a matter of installing successful policies. Location is a significant factor, but where a town is located cannot solely explain its growth or decline. To further investigate the varied reasons behind population growth in rural towns, they must be explored at a local scale. The following analysis

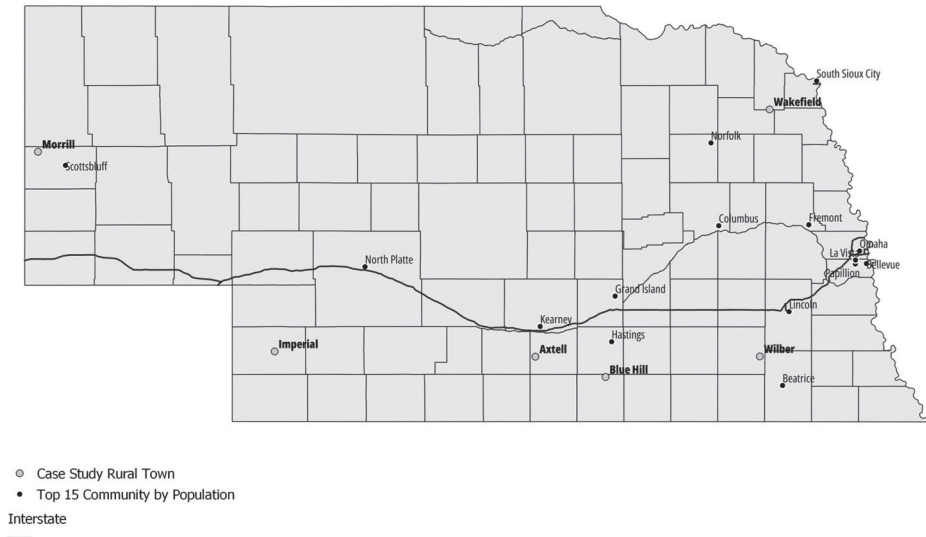


Fig. 4. Map of selected rural towns for case studies. (Map by author.)

includes individual case studies from six rural Nebraska towns.

### Case Studies of Growing Rural Nebraska Towns

This section focuses on the rural Nebraska towns of Axtell, Blue Hill, Imperial, Morrill, Wakefield, and Wilber as individual case studies. 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 Nebraska towns that have gained population between 1950 and 2020. Figure 4 shows the location of these six rural towns and Table 1 shows their 1950 and 2020 census data, along with their population growth between the two censuses. These case studies include information about each community's demographic, economic, historical, and social characteristics found through traveling to these towns and conduct-

ing interviews with local residents. Following these case studies is a discussion on the common characteristics shared by growing rural Great Plains towns, which also serves as a list of characteristics that could be adopted by declining towns across the region to help sustain their populations and possibly even attract new residents.

#### *Axtell*

Axtell is located in south-central Nebraska, approximately eighteen miles south of Kearney. Axtell lies along US Highway 6/34, near the middle of two urban communities: thirteen miles east of Holdrege and ten miles west of Minden. US Highway 6/34 runs along the south side of town, while Main Street and the heart of Axtell runs perpendicular to the highway. Axtell, also known as the Windmill City, was home to 732 people in 2020, more than double its population in 1950 (Table 1).



	Population		Gain
	1950	2020	
Axtell	352	732	380
Blue Hill	574	805	231
Imperial	1,563	2,068	505
Morrill	849	934	85
Wakefield	1,027	1,522	495
Wilber	1,356	1,937	581

Table 1. Population of selected rural towns for case studies, 1950 and 2020, and population gain.

Settled in 1873 by immigrants who came directly from Sweden, as well as migrants from Swedish communities in Iowa who were attracted by the advertisements of the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad, Axtell was named after the engineer of the first train to pass through the village in 1885. 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 via railroad from the farming community. Today, the Axtell Co-op is one of the community's largest employers.<sup>6</sup>

Other large employers are the Axtell Mosaic at Bethphage Village and Axtell Community School. The Axtell Mosaic was formed as the Bethphage Inner Mission Association in 1913 as a home for people with developmental disabilities. The Axtell Mosaic at Bethphage Village continues its mission today, and in doing so employs several people from Axtell while also boosting the community's businesses through buying groceries and other supplies locally.<sup>7</sup> The Axtell Community School, 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 wa-

ter tower and paw prints painted on the roads near the school. Axtell was a pioneer of re-districting 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 re-districting effort in Nebraska.<sup>8</sup> This vote assured a quality education for all children in Axtell and the surrounding area that is still present today.

When asked about the biggest reason for Axtell's growth, Vicki Nelson, Axtell's village clerk, told the author that the community's success hinges on its location, as she acknowledged 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 Mosaic, the school, and the farmer's co-op. Looking toward the future, she mentioned the recent opening of a taproom, Thunderhead Brewing (based in Kearney), and noted that the town was considering a new agronomy business.<sup>9</sup>

### *Blue Hill*

The rural town of Blue Hill is located along US Highway 281 in northern Webster County. Blue Hill is located between the urban communities of Hastings, eighteen miles to the north, and Red Cloud, the Webster County seat, twenty miles to the south. It is approximately twenty-five miles north of the Nebraska-Kansas border. Blue Hill was home to 805 people at the 2020 census, a remarkable increase from its 1950 population of 574 (Table 1).



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. One of Blue Hill's most significant businesses, the Glenwood Telephone Company, opened in 1901. Today, the Glenwood Telephone Company provides telecommunications services to Blue Hill and several other communities in the immediate area. It is also one of the community's largest employers.<sup>10</sup>

In recent decades, Blue Hill has put an emphasis on improving community health. Along with a public swimming pool and nine-hole golf course, the Blue Hill Fitness Center also helps residents stay in shape with aerobic, cardio, and strength resistance equipment. The Blue Hill Fitness Center is also home of Mary Lanning Healthcare Blue Hill Physical Therapy, which provides physical and occupational therapy and rehab. Located downtown is the Blue Hill Clinic-MLMH, 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. There is also the Blue Hill Care Center, a sixty-two-bed skilled nursing facility.<sup>11</sup>

Along with its strong support of health care, the community has also put an emphasis on its school system. 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 Blue Hill Schools' website (as of 2019) lists a staff of sixty-three, making it the town's largest employer. Both the Webster County Early Learning Center and New Beginnings Preschool are also located in Blue Hill.<sup>12</sup>

In an interview with the author, Susan Kohmetscher, the deputy city clerk of Blue Hill, attributed Blue Hill's growth to its role as a bed-

room community for commuters to Hastings and Red Cloud. While many of these people prefer the employment opportunities offered in these two larger urban communities, they want to live in a rural setting, which Blue Hill provides. Blue Hill's amenities and strong school system are added enticements for commuters to call the town home. Kohmetscher also 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.<sup>13</sup>

### *Imperial*

Imperial is located at the junction of US Highway 6 and State Highway 61 in the southwest corner of Nebraska, approximately twenty-four miles east of the Colorado border and thirty-nine miles north of the Kansas border. The closest urban communities are Ogallala, forty-eight miles to the north, and McCook, sixty-two miles to the southeast. Imperial is the county seat of Chase County and one of only three incorporated towns in the county. Imperial was home to 2,068 people at the 2020 census, a growth of just over 500 people since 1950 (Table 1).

Since its founding in 1885, Imperial has become a strong agricultural community and serves as a sales and service hub for southwest Nebraska. Imperial's retail area extends approximately 15 miles north, 25 miles east, 37 miles southeast, 30 miles to the south, 30 miles southwest, and 24 miles west to the Colorado line. Imperial's sustained growth is attributable to a diverse manufacturing and service base and to energetic planning.<sup>14</sup>

The largest employers in Imperial (as of

2019) are Chase County Schools, 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.<sup>15</sup>

Allo Communications was founded in Imperial in 2002. Allo provides high-speed internet, or broadband, 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.<sup>16</sup>

In an interview with the author, Mayor Dwight Coleman said that Imperial will continue to grow as a result of more young adults returning to the big family farms surrounding the community, as well as new residents moving in to take advantage of broadband internet that allows them to work from 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.<sup>17</sup>

### *Morrill*

Spread out along US Highway 26 in the extreme western reaches of Nebraska's Panhandle, just seven miles from the Wyoming border, is the rural town of Morrill. Morrill's success is largely attributed to its combination of having a large

agricultural customer base and its location between Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and Torrington, Wyoming. These factors have helped the town become a center for farmers to get goods or repair machinery. Morrill was home to 934 people at the 2020 census, a slight increase from its 1950 population of 849 (Table 1).

Morrill was first settled with the name of Collins in 1886 by Germans from Russia immigrants. 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 in the Great Plains. Along with sugar beets, potatoes and dry beans became successful cash crops in Morrill. 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 it acquired the original Brown Company. The Kelley Bean Company and town of Morrill have gone hand in hand in their growth as several acquisitions over the years have turned Kelley Bean into one of the largest originators and processors of dry beans in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Another major local agricultural business can trace its roots to the early days of the town: Jirdon Industries was founded in Morrill in 1915 as a lumberyard and feedstore. In 1923 the lumberyard 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. In 2016 the old Jirdon feed mill was purchased, reopened by Sinamco from Minnesota, and rebranded Sinamco Mills, LLC.<sup>20</sup>

The town of Morrill also benefits from two railroads. The Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railway runs directly through Morrill. Although the Union Pacific railway runs a few miles south of town, they have a much larger impact on the community. 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 speaking with the author, Janine Schmidt, Morrill village clerk and treasurer, 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.<sup>21</sup>

While meeting with Morrill resident Karen Ott, it was discussed that much of the town'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 have included an outdoor movie series in the summer, horse and sled rides in the winter, and biannual community cleanup 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. The continued success of the town and its businesses has led to residents staying, as well as new families and new businesses committing to the community.<sup>22</sup>

### *Wakefield*

Wakefield, also known as Nebraska's Baseball Capital, 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. The 2020 census population of 1,522 marked an increase of over 400 people from 1950 (Table 1).

Wakefield was incorporated in 1881 and quickly filled with German and Swedish immigrants. Because of the area's abundant water supply and rolling fertile hills, crop and livestock production quickly prospered.<sup>23</sup> While agriculture was the initial lifeblood of the community, Wakefield has seen a 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 such as Wakefield.

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. Today, the Michael Foods Egg Products Company employs more than 2,000 people in seven states with approximately 800 people employed in the Wakefield location. Along with employing many of the town's residents, 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.<sup>24</sup> The presence of the company

is vital to the continued prosperity of Wakefield.

One of the most active local organizations in promoting the community is the Wakefield Community Club, a voluntary organization of individuals and businesses working together to advance the community's general welfare and prosperity. Along with being the manager of the Little Red Hen Theatre, Adam Goos is a board member of the Wakefield Community Club. In speaking with the author, 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 founding the Wakefield Economic Development Program, whose purpose is to retain current businesses, attract new businesses, and provide new opportunities in Wakefield.<sup>25</sup>

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 look to continue to make the town a great place to call home.

### *Wilber*

The farther south from Lincoln that one travels, the smaller the towns seem to become. There are a few exceptions, however, including the rural town of Wilber, which is located forty miles southwest of Nebraska's capital city. De-

spite being smaller than the neighboring urban community of Crete, Wilber has long been the county seat of Saline County. Known as the "Czech Capital of the USA," Wilber had a population of 1,937 in 2020, an increase of over 500 people since 1950 (Table 1).

The Wilber townsite was platted in 1873 in an area that had been settled by Czech (Bohemian) immigrants who took advantage of the land offered by the Homestead Act of 1862.<sup>26</sup> The town's economy has traditionally been based in agriculture. Over several decades, the Wilber Farmers Elevator has been enlarged to store over one million bushels of grain and handles over two million bushels a year. In 1975, Smithfield, a hog processing plant, was built between Crete and Wilber, initially employing 240 people. Since its opening, there have been eleven major expansions at the plant, which now covers 550,000 square feet on ninety-three acres.<sup>27</sup> 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. Originally, immigrants from Mexico and Central America who worked at Smithfield chose to live in Crete, but in recent decades, incoming immigrants have increasingly chosen to live in Wilber.

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 thirty people. The sheriff's office consists of twelve deputy sheriffs: one chief deputy, two captains, three sergeants, and six deputies. There are also various employment opportunities that a county courthouse offers, such as county clerk and treasurer. Along with government and safety jobs, Wilber offers several education and healthcare employment opportunities. Wilber-

Clatonia Public Schools, home of the green-and-white Wolverines, is a major employer in both the town and the surrounding district. Wilber also features a medical clinic, eye doctor, dentist's office, and assisted living community.<sup>28</sup>

Wilber's education and healthcare facilities are better in quality and quantity than might be expected from a rural town. Having both good education and healthcare choices makes the town more desirable to new families, which makes having top-notch facilities a major point of emphasis for Wilber mayor, Roger Chrans. In sitting down with the author, Mayor Chrans spoke of Wilber'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, he 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 the town. Mayor Chrans modestly attributes the growth of the town to its hardworking people.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, 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 sustain and add to its population. A combination of strong collective effort and community pride, the provision of impressive education and healthcare systems, a wide array of businesses and services, and a nearby source of manufacturing jobs in the area bode well for Wilber's continued growth.

## Discussion

While every community has its own distinct circumstances and personalities, these case studies provide a variety of answers as to why some rural towns are growing in population. Using examples from the six rural Nebraska towns of Axtell, Blue Hill, Imperial, Morrill, Wakefield, and Wilber, a list can be made of the characteristics that growing rural Great Plains towns typically have in common. Along with providing examples of reasons why some rural towns are growing, this discussion also provides a list of characteristics that could be adopted by, and adapted to, rural towns with declining populations.

First and foremost, these communities have strong leaders, dedicated residents and community clubs, and clear sustainability plans. 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 people and businesses to their towns. These officials create well-organized plans to guide their communities. Two examples of such plans are the City of Blue Hill Comprehensive Plan and Investing in Imperial's Tomorrow: 2014–2024. As a bedroom community, Blue Hill's plan focuses on the ability to offer quality affordable housing while also stressing the need to annex new land in order to meet forecasted residential growth demands. Imperial's plan, on the other hand, focuses more on promoting and growing a diverse economic base with the lure of their broadband internet infrastructure.

Successful rural towns rely on a good farming economy. The cooperatives that rise above rural towns serve local farmers and business



owners, and are often among the leading employers in rural Great Plains towns. Along with having often-used and well-functioning cooperatives, successful rural towns in the Great Plains 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 a 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 neighboring urban communities.<sup>30</sup> Another example is Imperial's John Deere dealership. Because they provide a local place to buy farm machinery, their customers do not have to drive forty-eight miles to Ogallala or sixty-two miles to McCook for the service.

Growing rural 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.

These manufacturing positions also play a central role in attracting new residents. Manufacturing companies, particularly food processing plants, have increasingly drawn immigrants from Mexico and Central America to the rural Great Plains. As the meatpacking industry has restructured and established plants in Great Plains communities, it has attracted immi-

grants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. These immigrants have stimulated local economies that are increasingly lacking consumers. As Barcus and Simmons note, "this new stream of in-migration holds hope for changing the trajectory of depopulation."<sup>31</sup>

One notable example can be found in Garden City, Kansas. The local expansion of meatpacking has reinvigorated the southwest Kansas community and helped its population nearly triple since 1950. This growth has led to the construction of new schools, stores, restaurants, a mall, housing developments, and mobile home courts. Neighboring rural towns, such as Holcomb and Lakin, have also seen their populations grow in recent censuses due to the expansion of the meatpacking industry in the area and subsequent influx of immigrants.<sup>32</sup>

Schools are another key provider of job opportunities in rural Great Plains towns. Rural towns with schools are also economically and civically more robust. Rural depopulation has led to many rural Great Plains towns losing their schools through consolidation over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. These communities are at a loss as they forfeit the benefits of having a school. The removal of a school from a community can have a significant negative effect on the social structures and spirit of the community.<sup>33</sup>

Each of the six rural Nebraska towns presented as case studies have their own school system. 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 solidify enrollment numbers.<sup>34</sup> Another good example comes from Wilber, where the Wilber-Clatonia Public School District was formed in 1970, when Wilber and neighboring Clatonia consolidated their school systems. Wilber became the location for both the elementary and high schools, as well as a daycare.<sup>35</sup> In this example, Wilber has a significant advantage over Clatonia in sustaining their population. All too often, rural students are forced to face long bus rides to neighboring communities for school, which dissuades many parents from raising their children in a community without a school.

Families are also often dissuaded from living in communities that lack access to health care. Access to healthcare services is obviously critical to good health, and a lack of this access is a growing problem throughout the rural Great Plains. Healthcare services also provide job opportunities and are often among leading employers in rural Great Plains towns. Blue Hill is an example of a rural town that 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.<sup>36</sup> Another example is the Chase County Hospital and Clinics in Imperial. Along with being the town's second-largest employer, they are one of the only providers of 24/7 emergency services in southwest Nebraska.<sup>37</sup>

Another common feature found in growing rural towns are assisted living facilities. The role of rural towns as retirement communities is vital and will only grow, as baby boomers age and retire. Axtell, for example, is home to the Windmill Estates, a low-income elderly, disabled, or handicapped dwelling unit. Sim-

ilar 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. A related example can be found at Axtell's Mosaic at Bethphage Village, which serves people with intellectual disabilities. Along with providing housing for a great number of people, Mosaic in Axtell employs some 200 people, of which nearly a quarter live in Axtell.

Good and affordable housing is key to sustaining the current population and in attracting new residents. Many rural Great Plains towns 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.<sup>38</sup> Rural towns once restricted to one side of the railroad tracks, such as Morrill, or one side of the highway, like Blue Hill, have expanded outward and built housing in new areas in recent decades as they continue to grow.

Along with offering attractive housing, several of these rural towns also offer financial incentives for businesses. One example is the Cornerstone Commercial Park in Imperial, which provides economic development loans, tax increment financing, and discounts on land purchase inside the site to new businesses.<sup>39</sup> 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 that open within Wakefield's Industrial Park are eligible for tax increment financing.<sup>40</sup> Both Imperial and Wakefield have



expanded their commercial and industrial lots in recent years, helping to bring new businesses into their communities. Financial incentives for new residents may be offered as well. For example, in 2012 Kansas implanted the Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) program to encourage college-educated adults to move to the state's rural counties by offering student loan repayment assistance or 100% state income tax credit. Research has shown, however, that this program has been limited in attracting new residents.<sup>41</sup>

Along with financial incentives, some rural towns are able to highlight their high-speed internet access in enticing businesses and young adults to move to rural towns. High-speed internet 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 towns. As mentioned previously, since its founding 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 from home. Other examples of influential internet companies found in the case studies include Glenwood in Blue

Hill, a leading provider of broadband in south-central Nebraska, and BNT Broadband, a new fixed-wireless internet service provider that serves Wakefield and several other northeast Nebraska communities.

Elsewhere in the Great Plains, the significance of rural broadband is seen in North Dakota's drive to provide gigabit fiber internet access to even the state's most remote communities. In the 1990s several local companies across the state came together to purchase rural telephone exchanges that were largely neglected by regional provider US West (now CenturyLink). These exchanges would form the foundation for broadband internet throughout the state. Over the last three decades, these local companies have invested in their communities, deployed some of the most extensive fiber networks in the country, and turned North Dakota into a rural broadband oasis. Today, more than three-quarters of rural North Dakotans have access to fiber broadband, compared to less than one-fifth of rural residents nationally.<sup>42</sup> This increased broadband access has allowed small businesses to expand their consumer base, improved education and healthcare access for rural residents, and helped farmers take advantage of the latest advances in agricultural technology. Broadband access has also allowed these rural towns to keep and attract workers who rely on internet access to carry out their daily responsibilities.<sup>43</sup>

New residents may also be attracted to rural towns through the parks and recreation opportunities they provide. Providing appropriate park infrastructure is a key component in improving the physical fitness and overall well-being of a community. Through recreational opportunities like fitness programs, bike trails, baseball and softball teams, and

amenities such as playgrounds and swimming pools, rural towns are able to provide organized physical activities for youth, adults, and seniors alike, raising the overall quality of life in the community.

Several of the rural towns included in the case studies 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 case studies 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 the case studies include the Imperial Theatre, which plays movies on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays; the Little Red Hen Theatre in Wakefield, which hosts plays and musicals; and the Wilber Czech Museum, which features artifacts and displays related to the culture and heritage of the Czech (Bohemian) pioneer settlers of Nebraska.

While these rural towns look toward the future, they also commemorate their past and celebrate their present situation. These celebrations help bring communities together while supporting local businesses and putting the towns on display to potential residents. Wilber's Czech Festival is an excellent example, attracting nearly 30,000 visitors to the town every August. Another example is the annual Chase County Fair and Expo in Imperial, which 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 com-

munitywide holiday celebrations like Blue Hill's annual Easter Egg and Fourth of July Festivals. 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, growing rural towns offer an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. For the most part, rural Great Plains towns were founded and settled by one cultural group, such as the Swedish in Axtell, Germans from Russia in Morrill, and Czechs (Bohemians) in Wilber. Residency in these towns has not been limited to descendants of these initial settlers, however, as each has exemplified multiculturalism in welcoming new individuals and groups to their communities. As the diversity of several rural Great Plains towns continues to change, as noted in the discussion of food-processing plants, an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere goes a long way in attracting new residents.

## Conclusions

Location plays a significant role in the population growth or decline of rural Great Plains towns, but as the case studies from Nebraska and examples from around the region show, there are myriad reasons why some towns have been able to grow despite enduring rural depopulation throughout the region. Just as important as a town's location in population sustainability is its ability to offer diverse employment opportunities, strong schools, accessible health care, affordable housing, financial incentives for new businesses and residents, broadband internet access, parks and recreation opportunities, and an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. Each of these play an

important role in sustaining current populations and attracting new residents, including young adults and immigrants.

The findings collected in this study are consequential for rural geographers and migration experts who study regions where rural depopulation has endured. The outcome of this research will be of interest not only to the scholarly community but also to those who work in or with rural communities. This research will benefit individuals and groups who are concerned about the vitality of rural communities, as its findings can be applied to efforts to not only sustain current populations but also attract new residents to rural towns.

Local, state, regional, and national demographers, scholars, economists, and journalists must recognize the importance of the voices of those who call the rural Great Plains home and must no longer overlook this population in migration studies. In doing so, narratives on Great Plains' demographic trends can shift the focus from widespread rural depopulation to the rural towns that are growing. While the depopulation of the rural Great Plains as a whole can be expected to continue, we can also expect a substantial number of people to continue planting their roots in several of the region's rural towns.

While the rural Great Plains may occupy an empty space in the American geographical imagination, it is anything but. The rural towns that dot the region are rich in social interaction and places to which residents are deeply attached. They are places where many people have been happy to make a home. With the help of dedicated and enthusiastic residents, the Great Plains will see many of its rural towns sustain their populations, some of which will continue to grow.

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