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The Collapse of Small Towns on the Great Plains: A Bibliography

by

Nancy Burns

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The Collapse of Small Towns on the Great Plains: A Bibliography

by
Nancy Burns*

The collapse of Great Plains towns is a dominant theme in both history and literature. There is a vast body of information about declining communities, but it is scattered among many different disciplines. This bibliography attempts to consolidate into one source a summary review of some of the information relating to this theme.

In order to provide some precision about the subject covered in the bibliography, definitions of certain terms are offered:

Great Plains:

> The Great Plains are a rolling tableland extending from the foothills on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains (the 4500-foot contour) eastward to the valley of the Mississippi. They stretch approximately 1600 miles from the prairie provinces of Canada to the Rio Grande River, and are divided into two major regions, the tall grass or prairie on the east (the Prairie Plains) and the short grass (the High Plains) on the west.[1]

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[1]Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), pp. 3-9; Carroll D. Clark and Roy L. Roberts, *People of Kansas: a Demographic and Sociological Study* (Topeka, the Kansas State Planning Board, 1936), p. 6; Carl Frederick Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), p. 3.

Community:

A community "is a territorial area, a considerable degree of interpersonal acquaintance and contact, and some special basis of coherence that separates it from neighboring groups."[2]

Rural Community:

"An area of face-to-face association larger than a neighborhood in which a majority of the people use a majority of the social, economic, educational, religious and other services required by their collective life and in which there is general agreement on basic attitudes and behaviors, usually village or town centered."[3]

Small town:

The center of a rural community which generally includes a school, church, general store, post office, and historically a blacksmith shop. Originally a basically self-sufficient community, its institutions may vary in some ways from this list. On the Great Plains, some tiny towns of 50 families or less are just as important in their areas as the larger small town.

Many factors in the physical and social environments of the Great Plains influenced the collapse of its small towns. The available reports do not treat the towns with equal importance. Technology receives the most support in the literature; popular perceptions emphasize the physical environment. Hundreds of other factors are mentioned, but, of these, only a few are analyzed in any detail.

The railroad, automobile, and telegraph are noted by numerous sources, but, of all technological factors, the railroad is mentioned most often and is described as having the greatest impact on rural communities.

Prior to the Civil War, the Plains environment was believed too harsh for serious settlement efforts. "Until the railroads began their drumbeating, the Plains had no propagandists to sing its praises."[4]

[2]Henry Pratt Fairchild, ed., *Dictionary of Sociology* (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1962), p. 52: for a fuller discussion of community definitions, see George A. Hillery, Jr., "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement," *Rural Sociology*, 20 (March, 1955), 111-123.

[3]Fairchild, ed., *Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 263.

[4]Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History 1620-The Present* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), pp. 239-240.

Many Great Plains towns were created in anticipation of the railroad. These "papertowns" were often fraudulent. They lived and died, not on the land, but on the paper creating them. Papertowns were surveyed and platted into blocks and mapped on paper with, usually, no resulting improvements. Townsite promoters grabbed land in a region whenever the railroad penetrated, with the dream of converting a $1.25 acre of land into five or more lots selling for up to $150.00 each. Sometimes a few buildings went up, but the towns never developed. Marrion, South Dakota, was platted in 1872 in the southern part of Turner County. No lots were sold, nor a railroad or post office built. It existed on paper, though, until 1876 when the entire townsite was sold to a farmer in one parcel.[5]

As each new railroad pushed through the Plains, new towns occurred at the temporary terminal points. "The nucleus of these end-of-track communities was the colorful collection of dormitory cars supplied by the railroad to house some of its large crew of workers."[6] Soon, temporary buildings appeared to house persons, often of dubious reputation, attracted by the payroll of the railroad crew. Often when the railroad moved its temporary terminus, the end-of-the-track town moved on too.[7] Garland, Colorado was such a town in 1878, and when the railroad moved west, so did Garland. It was reported that "on every hand we see men tearing down the frail wooden structures with which it is built, and starting westward with them. Soon Garland will be a thing of the past and only battered oyster cans, castoff clothing, old shoes, and debris generally will mark the site of where once stood a flourishing city, with its hotels, its stores, its theatre comique, etc. The citizens appear to take it as a matter of course, and are getting ready to vacate the premises."[8]

If the railroad created the Plains town, inevitably it also destroyed it. The early steam locomotive needed a supply of water and sand about every ten miles to function. Some sort of town emerged at each of these stops. A journey today along Kansas highway 99 south from Emporia, Kansas, illustrates this well. The towns or remnants of towns occur on the route almost exactly

[5]James F. Hamburg, "Papertowns in South Dakota," *Journal of the West, 16* (January 1977), 40.

[6]John W. Reps, *Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 526.

[7]*Ibid.*

[8]John Morgan, "Garland City, Railroad Terminus, 1878," *Colorado Magazine*, 25 (November 1948), 261; cited in Reps, *Cities of the American West*, p. 526.

every ten miles: Olpe, Madison, Hamilton, etc. When steam engines improved and later when the diesel engine came along, fewer stops were necessary for the train's operation. Many small towns, whose only or chief function was servicing the steam locomotives, ceased to have that function and collapsed.[9]

In a large part of the Great Plains, most important communities owe their origins to a railroad townsite company. "The railroads regarded the creation of towns and their promotion as an essential element of business enterprise. Not only did their creation afford splendid opportunties for quick profits from land sales, but their continued existence was vital in the development of passenger and freight traffic."[10] Whether created by the railroad or not, a town's prosperity was usually linked to the railroad. If by-passed by a line, many a town declined. Plum Grove, Kansas, had hopes of becoming a thriving rail center in 1883 when the Missouri Pacific seemed to be headed its way. A switch in plans, however, took the line from El Dorado to Wichita rather than to Newton. In 1885 a branch was built to Newton, but it neatly by-passed Plum Grove. This blow was the beginning of the end for Plum Grove. Proprietors moved to nearby railroad towns or larger cities and others followed. By 1888 the Post Office closed and today only crumbled traces of Plum Grove remain.[11]

Railroads often set out to destroy towns that had been established by a rival line, while creating a new community of their own. General William Jackson Palmer of the Denver and Rio Grande railroad specialized in this practice in the 1870's. Several small Colorado towns fell victim to his technique, including Cleora and Animas City.[12]

Most of the towns that drew their life from the railroad also "died, or, rather stagnated by the railroad. With the coming of the automobile, the towns no longer served as trading centers for the surrounding farms; the farmers drove to the county seat or the city, and the trains no longer stopped at crossroads to pick up farmers—or the towns they had gone to, for that matter."[13]

[9]It is recognized that the eight-to-ten miles interval also applied to early trade centers because of the limits imposed by horse-drawn vehicles. Walter L. Slocum, *Agricultural Sociology: A Study of Sociological Aspects of American Farm Life* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 117

[10]Reps, *Cities of the American West*, p. 547.

[11]Roland H. Ensz, "Plum Grove, Brainerd, Whitewater, and Potwin from 1870-1900," Unpublished Master's Thesis, Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia, December, 1970.

[12]Reps, *Cities of the American West*, pp. 580-83.

[13]Lingeman, *Small Town America*, p. 248.

Until the car and truck became the available means of transportation, no one wanted to travel more than a mile or two by wagon for services. With the advent of the automobile, many changes came to small rural towns.

> One key to the social impact of the automobile on rural America between 1893 and 1929 stems from this idea: a major instrument of change was made available to the average country citizen to do with as he or she pleased. . . .
>
> .....
>
> To understand why rural institutions and values changed as they did, it is as necessary to know how the automobile was adopted as why it was accepted. The motor car was not introduced by government fiat, nor did the town council vote funds for its acquisition. Purchase was an individual act. . . ."[14]

The team haul was no longer the only convenient distance to travel for goods, services or socialization. Small towns were readily passed by for county seat or larger towns. The small rural town became a social and economic vacuum.

With the automobile, another innovation came on to the scene. Suddenly along every rural road there were mailboxes and telephone wires. Rural Free Delivery changed the social landscape for small towns. "Before the RFD was established, there were hundreds of little communities in rural America, most of them identifiable by their local post offices, and people who lived within their boundaries had a sense of belonging and community spirit. . . ."[15] The rural delivery system often meant that families began receiving mail from a town with which they had no ties. This loosening of old, familiar relationships often wiped out long established neighborhoods completely. "In Reno County, Kansas, for example, rural delivery eliminated sixteen post offices in ten years. 'Some of these localities are completely off the map now,' the *Hutchinson News* reported in 1912, 'not even a country store being left to mark their sites. Others still have country stores and maintain their identity but they all now get mail by rural routes.' "[16]

[14]Michael L. Berger, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893-1929* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1979), pp. 205-206.

[15]Wayne E. Fuller, *R F D: The Changing Face of Rural America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 283.

[16]*Ibid.*, who cites *Hutchinson News*, June 19, 1912.

RFD broke the bonds of isolation of the rural communities. The telephone and rural electrification added their splintering effects also. All brought more of the outside world into the farm home and country town. Daily contact with local, national, and worldwide events through daily newspapers, magazines, and radio cut through the isolation which had once made Plains towns unique.

Along with the car and truck, advances in agricultural technology influenced small towns. The steel moldboard plow, tractor, combine, mechanical pickers, irrigation equipment, etc. made it possible to have successful agriculture on the Plains, thereby drastically reducing labor requirements. One person could do the work that took two or more workers before these innovations. Harvesting of various kinds of small grains through the first half of this century was typically performed by threshing rings. Such operations took three or four weeks and neighboring farmers worked together to help each other. Technological changes in farming eliminated such meaningful work exchange. No longer needing to depend on his local community, a farmer had less reason to support or identify with it. Most small communities could not supply the farmer with a place to purchase or repair this sophisticated machinery. Road improvements soon made it easier for farmers to travel to larger markets for both selling and buying. "Accordingly, many small towns that served agricultural needs were no longer able to support themselves."[17] Autwine, Oklahoma was such a town. The center of trade in the days of poor transportation, Autwine started to decline as roads were improved. The bank closed in 1904, followed by a devastating fire in the business section in 1905, a tornado in 1912, and by 1930 the last store and elevator were closed. "Today there is no visible evidence that Autwine ever existed. All land of the former platted area is now used for agricultural purposes."[18]

Along with improvements in agricultural technology came an increase in the size of farms. The Great Plains environment demanded large acreages. The traditional 160-acre family farm had no place here outside of irrigated areas.[19] Consolidation of former 80- or 160-acre farms into large holdings became the rule with tenant farmers being the first to give up the farm for the city.

[17]John W. Morris, *Ghost Towns of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 7.
[18]*Ibid.*, p. 20.
[19]Gilbert C. Fite, "Great Plains Farming: A Century of Change and Adjustment," in *Agriculture in the Great Plains, 1876-1936*, ed. by Thomas R. Wessel (Washington: The Agricultural History Society, 1977), pp. 248-249.

The flat, nearly treeless, semiarid High Plains with their annual rainfall of 15-25 inches or less made farming in the region precarious—subject to the vicissitudes of alternating adequate rainfall and drought. There were other hostile environmental factors here like high winds and extremes of climate like frigid winters and burning hot summers.[20] As Senator James Pearson observed, "In a certain sense the settlement and development of the Great Plains was a triumph of imagination over reality."[21]

Out of this struggle with nature came new ways of farming and new kinds of farmers, such as the suitcase or absentee farmer. "Variable yields and absentee ownership, as well as level land and an uncertain semiarid climate, are essential elements of suitcase farming."[22] These elements are certainly part of Great Plains agriculture, especially the dry land wheat farming that forms the base of so much of its economy.

Another major change that occurred, particularly in the eastern portion of the Great Plains, was the switch from crop production to animal raising. Turning to ranching meant that fewer persons and less intensive land use were required. The new ranching technology meant different social requirements. Fences and barbed wire were necessary, but promoted isolation, and fenced in ranches spelled a restricted outlook.[23] There was a growing tendency for the rancher to identify with his occupation more than as a member of his community.[24]

Increasing farm size and decreasing labor requirements, suitcase farming, and the shift to ranching all meant declining population and erosion of local tax bases. This made it increasingly difficult to maintain adequate financing for public institutions and to maintain a viable community.

Busby, Kansas, in Elk County was an agricultural town that built up slowly during the 1870s and 1880s. Each building was established to serve an actual need in the midst of fertile, well-watered agricultural land. The first blow to Busby was the RFD which caused its post office to close in 1906. When farm size increased and farms became more mechanized, patronage of Busby's

[20]Lingeman, *Small Town America*, p. 239.
[21]James B. Pearson, "The Great Plains Today: Depopulation Poses Its Problems," *Journal of the West*, 6 (January 1967), 6.
[22]Leslie Hewes, *The Suitcase Farming Frontier: A Study in the Historical Geography of the Central Great Plains* (Linccoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. xiv.
[23]Webb, *The Great Plains*, pp. 312 ff.; Kraenzel, *Great Plains in Transition*, p. 130.
[24]Elvin Hatch, *Biography of a Small Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 269.

few businesses dwindled. Although little patronized, the general store clung to life until 1960 when its owner died. The town died with it.[25]

Another important development that foreshortened the life span of many small towns was the rise of the mail order house.[26] Mail order houses hurt the trade in general stores of small towns well before the automobile had its full impact.[27] The growth of automobile ownership along with the RFD only increased mail order business. This was almost the only way rural and small town residents had access to a large variety of goods that the country store could never afford to stock. John Hudson notes, "The importance of Sears and Roebuck for the plains farmer may have been even greater than it was for his middle western counterpart because so many plains trade centers were small, further from distribution centers, and offered a narrower variety of goods. If the frontier had been thirty years later in its sweep across the plains, it seems likely that the number of trade centers would have been smaller and the spacing greater."[28]

Other small towns collapsed because their only function was the extraction of some natural resource. "In the late 1800's and prior to World War II, the felling of trees and the sawing of lumber became a prime economic activity. Cutting, at first, was not done on a selective basis, resulting in numerous sawmill towns that existed for only brief periods or until prime trees had been cut."[29] These towns, like Pine Valley, Oklahoma, were doomed to a limited life as the Plains environment in only capable of supporting forests in very isolated areas.

The discovery of such minerals as petroleum, zinc, gold, coal and others caused boom towns, many of which inevitably became ghost towns. As one example, Wamego, Oklahoma, an oil town, boomed and died within a sixty-day period, even though it is said to have attained a population of over one thousand.[30]

The most obvious economic problem small towns endured on the Great Plains, as well as all over the nation, were the periods of depression during the 1890s and 1930s.

[25]Daniel Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas* Vol. 1(Topeka: Daniel Fitzgerald, 1976), 48-49.

[26]John C. Hudson, "The Plains Country Town," in *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, ed. by Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 102.

[27]Berger, *Devil Wagon*, p. 210.

[28]Hudson, "The Plains Country Town," p. 102.

[29]Morris, *Ghost Towns*, p. 7.

[30]*Ibid.*

The severe droughts of the 1890s linked with economic depression brought grave dislocations to the High Plains communities.[31] The agricultural boom came to a halt and "thousands of broke and starving settlers fled the region."[32]

The vanishing markets of the 1930s and lack of alternative opportunities for employment have been cited often as contributing factors to rural community collapse. "Every state in the tier directly north of Texas lost population between 1930 and 1940. . . .Wind, dust storms, drought (1934-1937), [and] devastating crop pests" added their own deadly touches to the national economic woes affecting Great Plains towns.[33] Decreasing purchasing power and depopulation adversely affected local businesses and social institutions. If enough of these failed, the town failed.

Social and cultural changes contributed to the decline of small towns in their own special ways. Settlers of the Plains came from diverse cultures and social backgrounds. "No groups coming from different civilizations and animated by different social ideals have reacted to frontier life in identical fashion."[34] Therefore, the kind of town that developed depended on the kind of people who established and developed it.

Primarily, people discontented with their lives made up the pioneers coming to settle the Plains, some even hoping to get away from the world as they knew it and lead isolated lives. These were the settlers that moved each time the frontier moved, never feeling rooted in any one spot. Small towns were propelled toward decline by the transient settler.

The timber, mining, and railroad communities previously discussed attracted another type of Plains transient that became a cultural phenomenon of this region. These towns, along with cattle drive towns, saw many drifters and losers pass through. No cohesive, unified community could develop from such a citizenry.

Even among many Plains farmers there was little attachment to land or locality. Ancestral attachment to a community or a piece of land, as in the European example, did not exist and the horizon seemed endless. Encouraged by speculators, many a settler of the Great Plains hoped for a quick rise in his property's value, but, if

[31]A.B. Hollingshead, "The Life Cycle of Nebraska Rural Churches," *Rural Sociology*, 2 (June 1937), 187.

[32]Fite, "Great Plains Farming," pp. 246-247.

[33]Otis Durand Duncan and Emit Frederick Sharp, "Rural Sociological Research in the Wheat Belt," *Rural Sociology*, 15 (December 1950), 341.

[34]Carl O. Sauer, "Historical Geography and the Western Frontier," in *Trans-Mississippi West*, ed. by James F. Willard and Colin B. Goodykoontz (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1930), pp. 282-83.

things did not work out, there was plenty of room to try again. They believed in a neverending frontier.[35]

Early pioneers, vanguards of the general population advance, lived grim and isolated lives. At first, farm homes on the Great Plains were far apart. Lacking telephones and decent roads for good transportation, the typical rural resident learned to think of things in terms of his own individuality or, at best, his extended family. This sort of psychology developed a resultant set of individualistic institutions, namely, the church, the school, and the country store. Increasing technology did much to break down this individuality.[36]

When rural free delivery was proposed, it was hopèd that the service would provide enough outside contact that people would be content to stay on the farm. "Paradoxically, the rural values that they had hoped to retain were in part the product of isolation."[37]

"As community isolation breaks down and class stratification grows, members of the community begin to conceive of themselves as part of nationwide groups—members of associations of teachers, businessmen, hairdressers, etc.—and loyalty to these vague but powerful national bodies replaces loyalty to the community."[38]

Isolation, which bred or fostered individualistic attitudes, was responsible for the generally loose structure of Plains towns, a structure which allowed communities to die from a lack of collective discipline and cohesiveness. Ironically, the breaking through of these bonds of isolation also destroyed small towns.

"Too many towns were built on the Great Plains. If any generalization about Plains towns has been documented adequately, it would have to be this one. . . .Plains towns were based on a transportation technology consisting of railroads, teams, and wagons just as surely as today's gargantuan shopping centers are based on the family automobile. When transportation shifted from horse power to reliance on the internal combustion engine, the settlement pattern of the Plains (and other areas) was antiquated."[39]

For the past fifty years there has been an almost continuous movement from rural and small-town units to large cities and towns. The young people leave seeking more social contacts and greater job opportunities. "In most of the small, isolated towns

[35]Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), Chapter I.
[36]Augustus W. Hayes, *Rural Community Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), p. 12.
[37]Berger, *Devil Wagon*, p. 209.
[38]Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in America History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 303.
[39]Hudson, "Plains Country Town," p. 108.

usually 60 percent or more of the inhabitants are past fifty years of age. . . . Most will live out their lives in the town because it is 'home' and they can live cheaper there than in a city or larger town. They look forward to a non-changing life style and the nearby cemetery. With each death the town moves nearer to extinction."[40]

Community decline, as measured by population loss, has been most significant only since declining manpower needs in agriculture occurred. The decreased need for farm labor meant not ony hired hands were unnecessary, but there was less need for a farmer to have a large family or to keep his children on the farm.

The typical process of decline is for young adults to leave the community in large numbers after high school and not return. Many of these working-age people are drawn to city jobs by the regularity of the pay. A weekly paycheck no matter what its size is more appealing than waiting until harvest to have any money. "As successive classes of young people leave, the average age of the community rises and the age structure becomes rather distorted so that after a while, the number of people in their 50's or 60's may come to exceed the number in their 20's or 30's. The birth rate begins to fall because of the shortage of young adults, and the population then ages even faster."[41]

Transportation advances, declining farm labor needs and simultaneously occurring urbanization certainly facilitated leaving the small town. Urbanization, the process of city growth, "commonly connotes population increase in the city, resulting from both internal growth and immigration, as well as spatial expansion of the city."[42]

Relocation and centralization of many business and community functions led to decline of the smaller towns. "Since World War I we have had the paradoxical situation that the faster our national population has grown, the faster and mor extensively our small communities have declined."[43]

All the Great Plains states have had birth levels more than sufficient to replace the parental population. But the rural areas did

[40]Morris, *Ghost Towns*, p. 8.
[41]Calvin L. Beale, "Quantitative Dimensions of Decline and Stability Among Rural Communities," in *Communities Left Behind: Alternatives for Development*, ed. by Larry R. Whiting (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), p. 15.
[42]Melvin G. Marcus and Thomas R. Detwyler, "Urbanization and Environment in Perspective," in *Urbanization and Environment: The Physical Geography of the City*, ed. by Thomas R. Detwyler and Melvin G. Marcus (Belmont, Calif,: Duxbury Press, 1972), p. 6.
[43]Beale, "Quantitative Dimensions," p. 3.

not develop conditions that permitted retention of this potential population growth.[44]

In a sparsely populated area like the Great Plains, a sizeable out-migration can reduce the population base to the point that maintaining public financing is difficult. This is particularly so in the area of education.[45] From the beginning of the century, most educators held the opinion "that the small size of open-country and village schools greatly limited the quality of rural education. . . . The development of the passenger motor vehicle, especially the school bus, enabled those who advocated larger school districts to implement consolidation plans that had long been proposed. . . . Part of a general townward trend, the consolidated school district allied open-country farmers with village and town merchants on a topic of mutual interest—the education of their children."[46]

There is an awareness of the discontent of many urban-minded country parents and their attitudes affecting their children. In 1916 Groves wrote, "The faculty of any agricultural college is familiar with the farmer's son who has been taught never to return to the farm after graduation from college." The urban-oriented "preacher and teacher add their contribution to rural restlessness."[47]

As rural schools lose their base of support and consolidate, parents of school age children begin to migrate out of the small towns where schools closed. Abbeyville, Kansas, once had as many students in its high school as it now has in the entire town. By 1959, there were only twenty students in the entire four high school grades. That year spelled the end for Abbeyville High with a new consolidated school available several miles away. The closing of its school was one more element of decline for the town which today is a shadow of its former self.

Another institution significant to Plains towns was the church. Authors suggest that just as there were too many towns on the Great Plains, there were also too many churches. Intense church competition had a disintegrating effect on the community. Each church influenced only its members and no one group had the power to organize the town. Rather than working together, they became a constant source of community tension. Such small churches usually could not afford permanent ministers and were serviced by a minister shared with nearby towns.[48]

Sometimes ministers did seek out new converts to their church; however, conservative, suspicious old timers resented the innovative new people. If a church was successful in enlisting new rural citizens, it discovered it had organized a fight.[49]

With personal transportation readily available, rural church members could seek alternatives to the small town church. Decreasing church attendance, if not membership, reduced the economic support of a church. Church closings or consolidations reflected further community decline.[50]

"Everywhere, even in the most prosperous areas, the small town was undercut by the big changes in American life—the auto and superhighway, the supermarket, and the market center, the mail-order house, the radio and TV, the growth of national advertising, the mechanization of farming—so that it turned its face directly to the centers of technology."[51]

The country store quickly fell victim to all of these changes. "There can be no escaping the fact that certain functions have practically disappeared from the small town, that others have been steadily declining, and that business failures or removals have left many a vacant building along Main Street."[52]

With all the drains of population and institutions, small towns must struggle to survive. They can not afford to give the older, disadvantaged or less educated citizens needed assistance and care. Health facilities and physicians are hard to lure to a town that is on the decline.

Small towns as sources of influence and power have declined. "In an earlier America, the decisions that expressed the American will were largely made by small-town lawyers, bankers, merchants, editors. As merchandising, transport, and recreation shifted, the locus of power shifted."[53]

The most common power shift to affect Great Plains towns was the selection of a county seat. County seat fights between growing

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[45] Pearson, *Great Plains Today*, p.7.

[46] Berger, *Devil Wagon*, p. 171.

[47] Ernest A. Groves, "Psychic Causes of Rural Migration," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 21 (March 1916), 624.

[48] Berger, *Devil Wagon*, pp. 127-128; Berger also points out, citing Edward Eastman's study, that there were also some rural communities with no churches at all, so there was this other extreme — a complete lack of institutional religion. "Either extreme...had a disintegrating effect on the community" (p. 127).

[49] Rockwell C. Smith, *People, Land and Churches* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), pp. 39-40.

[50] Berger, *Devil Wagon*, pp. 132-134; also see Hollingshead, "Nebraska Rural Churches."

[51] From Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York, Simon and Shuster, 1957), Vol. 1, in *Rural America*, ed. by Susanne Fremon and Morrow Wilson (New York: The H.W. Wilson, Co., 1976), p. 123.

[52] Clark and Roberts, *People of Kansas*, p. 169.

[53] Fremon and Wilson, eds., *Rural America*, p. 128.

towns were often vicious and bloody. This violence occurred, perhaps with some reason, as the loser of these battles almost always faded out of existence.

Although the Stevens County fracas was perhaps the most bitter in Kansas, one of the bloodiest county seat fights occurred in the 1880's between Coronado and Leoti in Wichita County, Kansas. Western Kansas towns often hired cowboys and others to stuff ballot boxes and fought bitter political fights. Both of these two towns had newspapers that never missed an opportunity to malign the other town and both wanted to be the county seat. An election date was set, but Coronado claimed the election was illegal and postponed it. When Leoti claimed the postponement was illegal, tempers flared and a gunfight ensued. Before it was over, three people were dead and many wounded. Leoti finally won the election and offered free lots to any Coronado resident wanting to move to the "real" county seat. The offer was accepted and Coronado literally moved to Leoti.[54]

Sometimes county seats were established but could not hold on to the power. From the moment of its selection, other nearby towns challenged the town's right to be county seat. "Occasionally the removal of the county seat was accomplished without judicial approval; eager villagers armed with hunting guns, enthusiasm, and sometimes firewater, helped themselves to county records, often under a cover of darkness, and took them back to their own town, papers floating away from the saddlebags or from the piles on the wagons. Many early-day Nebraska community records seem to have disappeared."[55] If the original county seat wasn't physically destroyed in these moves, the loss of political prestige significantly contributed to its demise.

Community functions came to depend on government subsidies and agriculture also followed this route. "Expansion and prosperity characterized Great Plains farmers during the World War I decade, but the 1920s brought severe problems. Increased wheat production had thrown supply and demand out of kilter. With wartime and relief demands ended and production continuing high, wheat prices skidded to unprofitable levels. By 1921 wheat had declined to less than $1 per bushel. . .about half the figure realized in 1918."[56] Government payments were all that

[54]Janice Rombeck, "Some Towns Only Memories," *Wichita Eagle-Beacon* (January 28, 1979), p. 13H.
[55]Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Nebraska* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 107.
[56]Pite, "Great Plains Farming," p.249.

most farmers had to see them through. With the benefits the government provided, also came increasing government regulations. The more rural residents came to depend on and be regulated by state or federal government, the less they needed or used their local community.

Another factor involved here was the County Agricultural Agent employed by the government to guide the farmer. The County Agent provided advice and education on conservation practices, what and how to plant, equipment and every aspect of crop and animal raising. Not only did the County Agent provide another reason to by-pass the smaller towns for the county seat, but, as rural residents relied more and more on him, they turned away from their neighbors. As these farmers and ranchers turned more to sources outside their communities the cohesion of the community became strained.

The political factor having the greatest effect on the collapse of the small town was most probably war. All wars involving the United States had an influence on Plains towns.

The Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854 brought both Free State and Pro-Slavery groups to Kansas hoping to settle and create a large enough vote to decide the slavery policy here. Bloody battles often took place between the two groups. In towns which were evenly divided on the slavery question, destruction was inevitable. In Iowa Point, Kansas, one night a Free State home or business would be burned out, then the next night a Pro-Slave one. No small town could survive as a flourishing community under those circumstances.[57]

After the Pro-Slavery cause was destroyed, towns devoted solely to it, such as Rising Sun, Kansas, were abandoned.[58] Young men returned from the war to find their towns exhausted and dying.

World War I and World War II were drains on the population of rural communities. Military service and wartime construction and factory work pulled workers, especially the young ones, from the neighborhoods. As wages in defense-related industries skyrocketed, the small town garage, hardware or general store could not compete. Many small town businesses closed because of declining profits. With the majority of the male population in the military or working in defense industries, other enterprises began

[57]Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas*, 1, 11. Iowa Point, Kansas, is a good example of the tenacious death throes of collapsing small towns. It finally expired with one building and a closed post office in 1933. *Ibid.*, 1, 12.
[58]Daniel Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas*, Vol. 2 (Topeka: Daniel Fitzgerald, 1979), 223.

to decline in the rural community: social institutions and entertainment spots, sports events, movies, and cafes.[59]

American myths about the Plains emphasize the role the environment played in the destruction of towns. Long time residents tend to dwell on the impact of natural disasters on Plains communities. Even though they seem to think of it first, the environment appears to be directly responsible for only a small percentage of small towns ceasing to exist.

Dust storms, tornadoes, insects, floods, and prairie fires are the main environmental enemies of the Plains towns. All of these factors are related in some way to a lack of regular and sufficient rainfall. Drought was the scourge of the Plains.

The drought of 1860 forced one-third of the population of Kansas to flee to the East and brought famine to those determined to remain. Again in the 1880s drought caused many farmers to give up and move out of the region. During this dry period settlers were also plagued with invasions of grasshoppers, migrating in such numbers they blocked out the sun. These Rocky Mountain hoppers migrated for great distances and reproduced in large numbers. Very sensitive to climatic conditions, they appeared to thrive most satisfactorily under arid conditions. They preferred crops, but fence posts, hoe handles, clothes and clotheslines were acceptable fare.[60] Small town farmers unable even to support themselves and their families could not long support their communities.

It was not the environment however, but the human perception and use of the land that doomed the pioneers and their towns. Humid area culture and farming practices had been used on the Plains since the first days of settlement. Farming had become increasingly scientific, but had not satisfactorily adapted to the semiarid nature of this region. Farmers had ignored the fact that land should be idle, mulched, and allowed to store moisture in alternate years. Creeping drought, resulting in little plant growth, brought on dust blowing as the winds of a dry period mounted in intensity.[61]

A large roller had been recorded in 1930 near Big Springs, Texas.[62] The 1930s became the decade of the great dust storms, and

[59]Douglas Ensminger, "The Impacts of the War on the Rural Community," *Social Forces*, 22 (October 1943), 78.

[60]Kraenzel, "Great Plains in Transition," p. 39; see Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: Land of Contrasts* (St. Charles: Forum Press, 1974), pp. 131-134.

[61]Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1937), pp. 39 ff.

[62]*Ibid.*, p.43.

many farmers were so devastated by wind erosion that they had no choice but to move from the plains area, thereby decreasing income for their small towns.

Foss, Oklahoma, was once a thriving community with the usual trading establishments, two banks, hotels, and an opera house. Dust and the resulting loss of rural residents when farmers moved out in the 1930s was the beginning of the end for Foss. Today weeds fill the streets and only a few old-timers still live in its scattered houses.[63]

Violent tornadoes have destroyed large sections of some towns in a matter of minutes. After a tornado has torn a town apart, it is difficult for it to recover. "Even though some small places have tried to rebuild, they have had great difficulty in attaining their former economic status."[64] In 1908 Lugert, Oklahoma, was an important local trade center for the Orient Railroad line. In 1912 most of the town blew away in a tornado. A few businesses rebuilt but the majority simply abandoned the town. By 1940 the federal government condemned the town as part of the land needed for the Altus-Lugert Lake.[65]

Torrential spring rains, almost as likely in the Plains as drought, caused flooding of small towns near rivers and creeks. In 1926, Neosho Falls, Kansas, suffered a disastrous flood on the Neosho River in which one person was killed and thousands of dollars in damage was done. This event began the decline and eventual demise of Neosho Falls.[66]

Frazer, Oklahoma, is fairly typical, also, of Great Plains towns that succumbed to the environment. Established in 1885 as a stopping place for cowboys on the cattle drives, in 1886 drought, dry grass and a little carelessness set the stage for a prairie fire that burned out all the rural residents right up to the edge of the town. Frazer did survive for a few more years until the rains of 1891 drenched the area. Nearby Bitter Creek went on a rampage and with a neighboring stream completely flooded Frazer. "When the flood subsided it was found that the town was demolished. Buildings had either been wrecked or swept away. The people never returned, but moved to a new and higher location and renamed their town Altus."[67]

[63]Morris, *Ghost Towns*, p. 86.

[64]*Ibid.*, p. 7.

[65]*Ibid.*, p. 127.

[66]Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas*, 2, 21-22.

[67]Morris, *Ghost Towns*, p. 89.

There was another type of settlement that collapsed because of the environment: the settlement that was totally inappropriate for the Great Plains. Runnymeade, Kansas, was such a place. It was an attempt on the part of some English aristocrats to set up a proper British town. Cricket and riding to hounds were more important to them than tilling the soil. They held regular fox hunts, substituting coyotes and prairie dogs for fox. These settlers built a large hotel where they lived in a club-like atmosphere. They provided great entertainment for nearby farmers, but they lacked the stamina and leadership to be successful at Plains agriculture. The colony soon fell apart with the colonists returning, for the most part, to England.[68]

The French colony of Silkville should have had a better chance, as mulberry trees will grow well in Kansas. A French philanthropist established the colony in 1869 with the idea of raising silkworms on the mulberry leaves. A three-story house provided living quarters for the colony which also had a school, cheese factory, ice house, lodge hall and various other buildings. The colony did flourish for a few years but workers were attracted by the independent lifestyles of the homesteaders in the vicinity and began to drift out of the colony. By 1888 Silkville was abandoned.[69]

A Jewish agricultural colony was established in 1882 along Pawnee Creek in Kansas. It was called Beersheba. Twenty-four families led by Rabbi Isaac Wise of Cincinnati built dugout shelters and a sod synagogue. Blizzards, drought, and springtime flooding of their sunken homes forced them to abandon their enterprise. They left their dirt town and moved out of this region within a few years.[70]

Octagon City, Kansas, was proposed as a settlement in 1856 by people who had founded the Vegetarian Kansas Emigration Company the year before. They were firmly a part of the vegetarian diet movement, a popular reform program of the time. They did not limit potential Octagon City settlers to vegetarians only, however, but did insist on strict temperance and anti-slavery principles. Each octogan-shaped settlement was to include a store, church, and school, and there were further ambitious plans for saw and grist

[68]Fitzgerald, *Ghost Towns of Kansas*, 2, 208-211.

[69]Garrett R. Carpenter, "Silkville: A Kansas Attempt in the History of Fourierist Utopias, 1869-1892," *Emporia State Research Studies*, 3, No. 2 (December, 1954); Charles C. Howe, *This Place Called Kansas* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), pp. 202-205.

[70]Margaret Whittemore, *Historic Kansas: A Centenary Sketchbook* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1954), p. 112.

mills, an agricultural college and model farm. About 100 Easterners arrived at a site on the Neosho River (about six miles south of present Humbolt) to find a store and eight roads and that's all. No other structures were ever erected. These people made an attempt to survive here, but within a year the colony was abandoned.[71]

Whatever the factors involved, thousands of small towns have disappeared from the Great Plains, over 6,000 from Kansas alone.[72] Whether this is desirable or undesirable, it has influenced the way of life of every remaining resident of the Plains states.

No one factor can be pointed to as the cause of small town collapse on the Great Plains. A combination of factors are involved, both external and internal. The major part of the literature related to this theme focuses on the external reasons for the decline of communities. While these external factors are certainly involved, perhaps there has not been sufficient investigation of the internal factors which play an important role.

Coming from a variety of ethnic and historical backgrounds, settlers of the Great Plains brought a variety of beliefs and value systems with them to this area. The environment of the Plains demanded adaptive measures; some pioneers were able to respond to this need, others could not. Why did some succeed, while others failed? What qualities did the successful town builder possess? What attitudes and organizational structure did successful towns have in common? How much influence did the beliefs and values of unsuccessful settlers have upon the collapse of their towns? While those questions have been touched upon, a review of the literature suggests more internal analysis is needed. It is hoped that the better we can understand the history of this region the better the citizens of the Great Plains can plan their future.

[71]Russell Hickman, "The Vegetarian and Octagon Settlement Companies," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 2 (Autumn, 1955), 513-551; also see Reps, *Cities of the American West*, p. 446.

[72]Fitzgerald, Ghost Towns of Kansas, 2, v.

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