

GREAT PLAINS HAMLET COUNTY SEATS

by

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Prominent in the contemporary Great Plains settlement landscape are deteriorating towns and counties with declining populations. Also to be seen are abandoned farmsteads, towns, buildings, transportation routes and elevators. This landscape of abandonment is a consequence of the settlement era tendency of communities to adopt, without change, institutions better suited to more humid areas of the country. One humid area institution brought to parts of the Plains unmodified was local government. As Carl Kraenzel states in The Great Plains in Transition, ". . . county, township, school district, incorporated municipality were carried into the Plains without necessary modification for their efficient operation in a semiarid land."¹

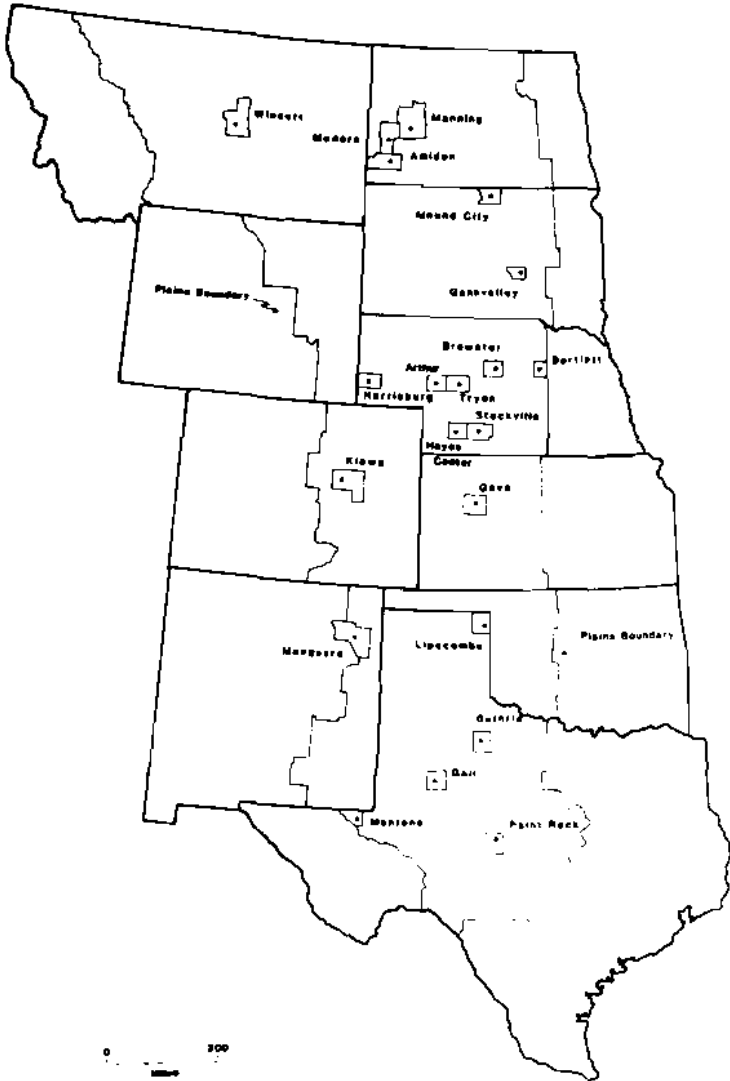
Early in the settlement process counties were formed and sites for county seats selected. Location of the seat of county government was then and continues to the present to be important to the well being of that community. Discussing the importance of the county seat function Fuguitt proposes ". . . the history of the establishment of county seats shows from the first this status has been viewed as an important one, which could give to a small town an extra measure of growth and prosperity."²

Not all county seats grew and prospered. Instances can be found in all regions of the United States where the county seat is neither the central or largest place in the county, and may or may not be the center of county commercial and social activities. In some counties the seat of county government may be the only central place in the county, but due to a complex set of factors it may be so small that most social and economic activity is lacking. In the final analysis the county seat function has proved to be more important for survival of small places than any other central place activity located in the community.

This paper examines a distinctive part of the Great Plains settlement landscape, the hamlet county seat town.³ These are the smallest of the small county seats and places whose continued existence is the result of their specialized function. Hamlet county seats are those places that perform at least the rudimentary functions of county government, but have populations of 250 or less (Figure 1). Of particular interest here is the community in general, which may include characteristics of the whole county and the economic, social and governmental activities or functions found in the small county seat town, plus any other factors in the community or county that contribute to survival of the hamlet.

Data for the study are drawn from several census sources, from the 1984 Rand McNally Commercial Atlas & Marketing Guide, from a short questionnaire sent to and returned by either the County Clerk or other knowledgeable persons in each of the

Figure 1
GREAT PLAINS
HAMLET COUNTY SEATS



counties under investigation and finally from personal interviews and observation.⁴

The contemporary Great Plains settlement landscape has been created by a set of complex processes occurring over a significant period of time. Although initial motivation for selection of a specific site for the county seat and county organization may be complicated, county areal size, county population size and change, and population density are significant factors in the settlement landscape today.

As is the pattern throughout the region, most counties considered here had maximum populations either prior to or in the 1930 Census and only Loving County, Texas, among the twenty-one counties, had a peak population after 1930 (Figure 2). The smallest loss among all counties in the most recent census occurred in Kiowa County, Colorado most likely due to the proximity of western parts of the county to the Denver metro area.

Because they are unincorporated, historical population data for eight of the smaller county seats are unavailable. Where data are available, though, maximum populations in hamlet county seats occur in the census of either 1940 or 1950 and, once again, decline in each decade to the present. The most extreme case of population loss occurred in Stockville (Frontier County), Nebraska where in 1900 the town had a population of 269 but by 1980 had declined to 45, a loss of 83 percent.

Among the remaining places, twelve hamlet county seats lost population ranging from 11 to 73 percent between the decade of maximum population and 1980, and only one, Paint Rock, Texas, increased in population in the most recent decade.

In the twenty-one counties with hamlet county seats population density is low and ranges from .1 person per square mile in Loving County, Texas to 4.0 in Lipscombe County, Texas (Figure 3) and the average among all counties considered here is 1.85 people per square mile. In the overall distribution about one-third of the counties have densities less than 1.0 with another one-third less than 2.0 persons per square mile.

For the most part counties with hamlet county seats are small in areal extent and located in areas where livestock grazing or mineral extraction is the main economic activity. County size ranges from 475 square miles in Buffalo County, South Dakota to 2122 square miles in Harding County, New Mexico with the median size among all counties 914 square miles.

The significance of declining county population, small and declining county seat population, small counties and low population density is twofold: first, smaller Great Plains counties are expensive to operate, generally inefficient and would probably benefit from consolidation. Second, and closely associated with the first, larger central places, in this case county seats, cannot develop and be maintained due to small county populations and low population density of the

Figure 2

POPULATION CHANGE 1900-1980
GREAT PLAINS HAMLET COUNTY SEATS AND COUNTIES

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
STATE									
County									
County Seat									
COLORADO									
Elbert	3101	5331	6980	6580	5460	4477	4708	3903	6850
Kiowa	----	----	148	185	195	173	195	235	206
KANSAS									
Gove	2441	6044	4748	5643	4793	4447	4107	3940	3726
Gove	162	196	132	241	284	206	228	172	148
MONTANA									
Petroleum	----	----	----	2045	1083	1026	894	675	655
Winnett	----	----	316	408	399	407	360	271	207
NEBRASKA									
Arthur	----	----	1412	1344	1045	803	680	606	513
Arthur	----	----	----	----	----	176 (1)	165	175	124
Banner	1114	1444	1435	1676	1403	1325	1269	1034	918
Harrisburg	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	85
Blaine	603	1672	1778	1584	1538	1203	1016	847	867
Brewster	----	----	----	----	----	69 (2)	44	54	46
Frontier	8781	8572	8540	8114	6714	5282	4311	3982	3647
Stockville	269	232	196	186	238	181	91	61	45
Hayes	2708	3011	3327	3603	2958	2404	1919	1530	1356
Hayes Center	----	----	----	229	314	361	283	237	231
McPherson	517	2470	1692	1358	1175	825	735	623	593
Tryon	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	162
Wheeler	1362	2292	2531	2335	2170	1526	1297	1054	1060
Bartlett	----	----	132	133	176	145	125	193	144
NEW MEXICO									
Harding	----	----	----	4421	4374	3013	1874	1348	1090
Mosquero	----	----	----(3)	401	705	567	310	244	197
NORTH DAKOTA									
Billings	975	10186 (4)	3126	3140	2531	1777	1513	1198	1138
Medora	----	----	----	----	----	----	133	129	94
Dunn	----	5302	8828	9566	8376	7212	6350	4895	4627
Manning	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	45
Slope	----	----	4940	4150	2932	2315	1893	1484	1157
Amidon	----	----	145	141	102	82	84	54	43
SOUTH DAKOTA									
Buffalo	1790	1589	1715	1931	1853	1615	1547	1739	1795
Gann Valley	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	100
Campbell	4527	5244	5305	5629	5033	4046	3531	2866	2243
Mound City	----	----	----	165 (5)	195	177	144	164	111
TEXAS									
Borden	776	1386	965	1505	1396	1106	1076	888	859
Gail	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	150
Concho	1427	6654	5847	7645	6192	5078	3672	2937	2915
Paint Rock	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	193 (6)	256
King	490	810	655	1193	1066	870	640	464	425
Gutherie	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	250
Lipscombe	790	2634	3684	4512 (7)	3764	3658	3406	3486	3766
Lipscombe	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	125
Loving	33	249	82	195	285	227	226	164	91
Mentone	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	50

(1) Arthur, Nebraska incorporated in 1944

(2) Brewster, Nebraska incorporated in 1946

(3) Mosquero, New Mexico incorporated in 1921

(4) County boundary changed to include a larger area

(5) Mound City, South Dakota incorporated in 1927

(6) Pain Rock, Texas incorporated, no date given

(7) County boundary changed in 1930 due to relocation of the 100th meridian

counties. The resulting pattern, then, is one of small county seats expensive to operate and with no reason except the government function for continued existence. The initial added expense, though, of funding or moving to a new county seat plus additional cost due to greater distances required for travel, may outweigh the benefits of consolidation.⁵

With just the right combination of sparse population and size there may develop situations where counties contain but a single town, in this case the county seat. Figure 4 illustrates the nine Great Plains hamlet county seats that are the only towns in their respective counties. For the purposes of this study single town counties (or one-town counties) are those where there is no second place in the county with a population in excess of 100. These counties and county seats represent a unique phenomenon in the Great Plains and probably in the entire United States. The total population in these counties ranges from 91 in Loving County, Texas to 1356 in Hayes County, Nebraska. County population is also small. Hayes County, once again, has the highest density with 1.9 persons per square mile, but fully seven have densities of 1.0 or less and two are less than .5 persons per square mile. The lowest density of population among the counties under consideration here is .1 persons per square mile in Loving County, Texas.

The number and variety of functions or activities found in Great Plains hamlet county seats are of special interest here. Studies of towns by Stafford, Thomas and Brush in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin revealed gasoline filling stations, churches, grocery or general stores and elementary schools to be the most frequently occurring amenities. As Brush said of hamlets in southwestern Wisconsin, ". . . only grocery stores and elementary schools are typical of hamlets; taverns, filling stations, and churches are common."⁶ Although no attempt was made to compile an exhaustive list, the questionnaire was designed to determine basic characteristics of functions and activities in order to compare Great Plains hamlet county seats with towns in other parts of the United States. Specific questions were asked about schools, grocery stores, convenience stores, service stations, agricultural businesses, medical facilities, banks, insurance agencies, and churches.

At the time each community reached maximum population the types of economic activity and services found in Great Plains hamlet county seats were comparable with other United States villages and towns. Most provided the basic goods, services and social functions necessary for an agricultural economy, but today after several decades of population decline striking changes are in evidence.

Churches are the most frequently occurring institution in Great Plains hamlet county seats in the 1980s (see Figure 5). There are a total of 39 churches and only two of twenty-one hamlets are without at least one active church. One of the most unusual church buildings in the region is found in Arthur, Nebraska where the Pilgrim Holiness Church is built of baled rye straw (see Figure 6). Church walls are about two feet thick stuccoed on the outside and plastered on the

Figure 3
 AREA AND POPULATION DENSITY
 COUNTIES WITH HAMLET COUNTY SEATS

	AREA	DENSITY
<u>COLORADO</u>		
Elbert	1851	3.7
<u>KANSAS</u>		
Gove	1072	3.5
<u>MONTANA</u>		
Petroleum	1652	.4
<u>NEBRASKA</u>		
Arthur	711	.7
Banner	747	1.2
Blaine	714	1.2
Frontier	976	3.7
Hayes	713	1.9
McPherson	859	.7
Wheeler	575	1.8
<u>NEW MEXICO</u>		
Harding	2122	.5
<u>NORTH DAKOTA</u>		
Billings	1152	1.0
Dunn	1993	2.3
Slope	1219	.9
<u>SOUTH DAKOTA</u>		
Buffalo	475	3.8
Campbell	732	3.1
<u>TEXAS</u>		
Borden	900	1.0
Concho	992	2.9
King	914	.5
Lipscomb	933	4.0
Loving	670	.1

inside.⁷ Baled hay building construction in the Nebraska Sandhills, an area almost completely devoid of other suitable building materials, coincides with settlement during the early part of the twentieth century.⁸

As might be expected service stations are second on the ranked list of activities in hamlet county seats, with twenty-three in eighteen communities. Most every town has one service station, although one place contains four. It is not uncommon to find a service station that also provides a few staple grocery items.

Grocery stores are found in thirteen of the communities. In most cases these stores are small, carry a narrow range of products and would be classed as convenience stores if found in larger places.

And finally, a total of twelve cafes are found among eleven of the hamlet county seats. As is the case with most activities, cafes are small and serve a limited menu. Several eating establishments, such as in Mosquero, New Mexico and Mentone, Texas, are found in conjunction with taverns.

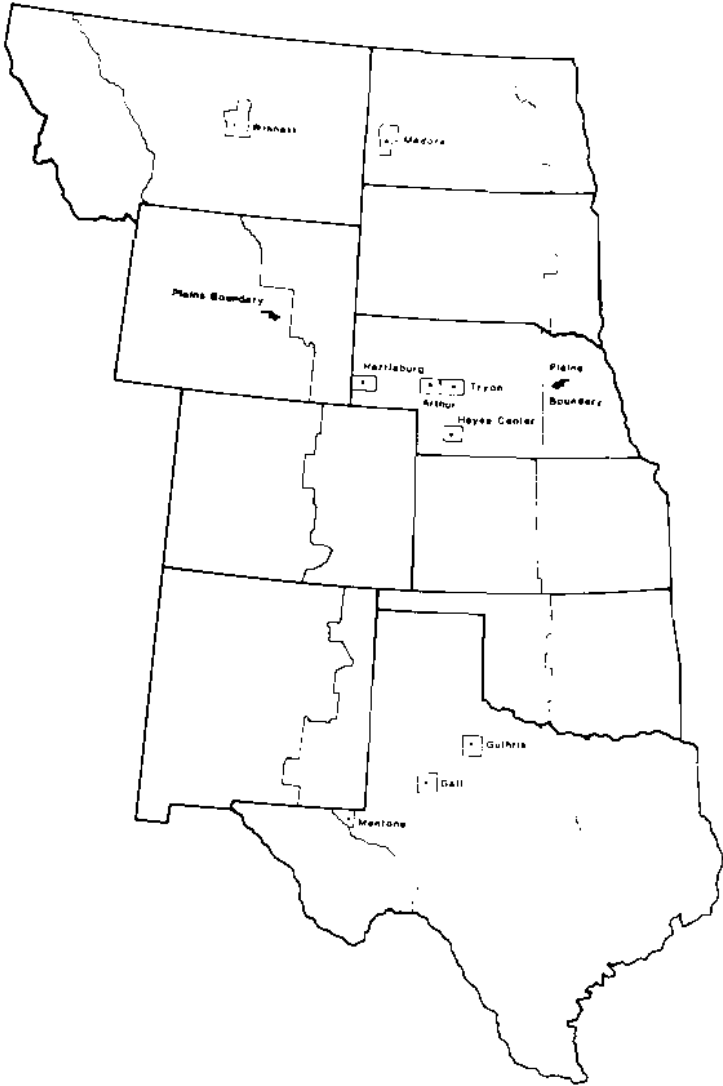
The numbers of service stations and churches are similar to studies by Brush, Thomas and Stafford. In both Iowa and southern Illinois the most frequently occurring activities were first filling stations and then churches. For Great Plains hamlet county seats in 1984 the order was just reversed, more churches than gas stations. Stafford's Illinois study, though, only considered places smaller than 5,000 where average community size was 552, all much larger than the 250 upper limit for hamlets considered here. Thomas, on the other hand, studied only incorporated Iowa places with fewer than 2500 people and since Brush's study of southwestern Wisconsin dealt with all central places he did not limit community size: hamlets in his study ranged from 20 to 300 in size.⁹

Knowledgeable residents in each county seat were asked to provide information about specific activities in their community. Answers revealed few professional services such as doctors, veterinarians, attorneys or financial institutions. Although most places contain the same basic activities, a surprising variety does occur among all twenty-one communities. Manning, North Dakota, for example, with a population of 45 has a boat and snowmobile dealership while Paint Rock, Texas with a population of 250 has a rug factory.

There is evidence from previous studies that public schools are common to small places. In Great Plains hamlet county seats there may or may not be a school in operation, although most did, at the time of peak population, contain public schools (Figure 7). In Loving County, Texas, for example, all schools are now closed with students bussed to neighboring counties.

In several other instances a school is not located in the county seat because another town is larger and the school is located in the larger place. Harding County, New Mexico, is an example of this situation. When the county was formed,

Figure 4
HAMLET COUNTY SEATS
IN
ONE-TOWN COUNTIES



Mosquero was named the county seat and Roy was given the high school. Today Mosquero high school students are bussed 18 miles to Roy.

In those counties with a countywide school system, the high school may be in the county seat and elementary schools scattered around the county (Figure 8). In McPherson County, Nebraska the county high school is located in Tryon, the county seat, and eight elementary schools are found around the county.

And finally, there may be one combined elementary and secondary school in the county, as in Banner County, Nebraska where the school is located in the county seat of Harrisburg (Figure 9). In this case students are either bussed daily from around the county or attend school in another district closer to home.

Due to lack of adequate housing and long commuting distances involved some school districts continue to provide housing for teachers and other employees. Examples can be found in Gail and Guthrie, Texas and Harrisburg, Nebraska.

A closer examination of two different but typical Great Plains hamlet county seats reveals the difficulties hamlet county seats have surviving today. Stockville, Nebraska is the county seat of Frontier County but a second town in the county is much larger and dominates county social and economic activity. Mentone, Texas, on the other hand, is the only central place in Loving County, but is so small and county population is so small that little in the way of any social or economic activity is found in the community or county.

Frontier County, Nebraska was organized in 1872 with Stockville, probably because of its central location, as the county seat. The community flourished and by 1900 had 269 inhabitants.¹⁰ At this time the community contained at least eighteen businesses, two churches, a school, dentist, doctor, and IOOF hall. Some of the businesses found in Stockville at that time include two banks, several attorneys' offices, two cafes, two general stores and a newspaper.¹¹ The town was a thriving central place in Frontier County.

In the late 1880s the main line of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad to Denver was built through Frontier County passing through Curtis but missing Stockville by about ten miles. Even though the county seat continued to be an important central place until about 1940, Curtis' functioning as the county transportation center began to draw activity away from Stockville. By 1980 Curtis contained 1014 people while Stockville's population had dwindled to 45.

Stockville continues as the county seat of Frontier County, but for all intents and purposes Curtis is the county central place. Countywide elections in 1920, 1930 and 1951 failed to produce the needed 60 percent approval to move the county seat to Curtis.¹² Regarding the current Frontier County situation a longtime Curtis resident made the following statement.

Figure 5



Typical church in hamlet county seat. Harrisburg, Nebraska.

Figure 6



Church constructed of baled hay. Arthur, Nebraska.

We in Curtis naturally believe efficiency would be increased should the County Seat be located here, rather in Stockville. Small-town jealousies, however, have prevented its move in at least three county-wide elections--defeated each time. Now, most Curtis businessmen and residents are not interested in stirring up the hornets nest again. The 10 mile drive is on a paved road.¹³

Today Stockville consists of a few occupied dwellings, a number of abandoned buildings, the courthouse, a tavern, an electric and repair shop, and the county fair grounds (see Figure 10). Stockville's population has declined steadily since the census of 1940.

The situation in Mentone (Loving County), Texas is somewhat different. Loving County was organized from parts of an adjacent county in 1887. The county was named for Texas cattleman Oliver Loving who was instrumental in mapping the Goodnight-Loving, Shawnee and Western cattle trails.¹⁴ Today Mentone is about six blocks square with a handful of occupied homes and many others that are abandoned. An abandoned school and old church are also found in the community (see Figure 7).

Only three county functions are carried on at the courthouse with others borrowed from or shared with neighboring Reeves County. The County Clerk, Treasurer and one other office is located in the courthouse. The County Judge and Attorney travel from Reeves County weekly or as the need arises.

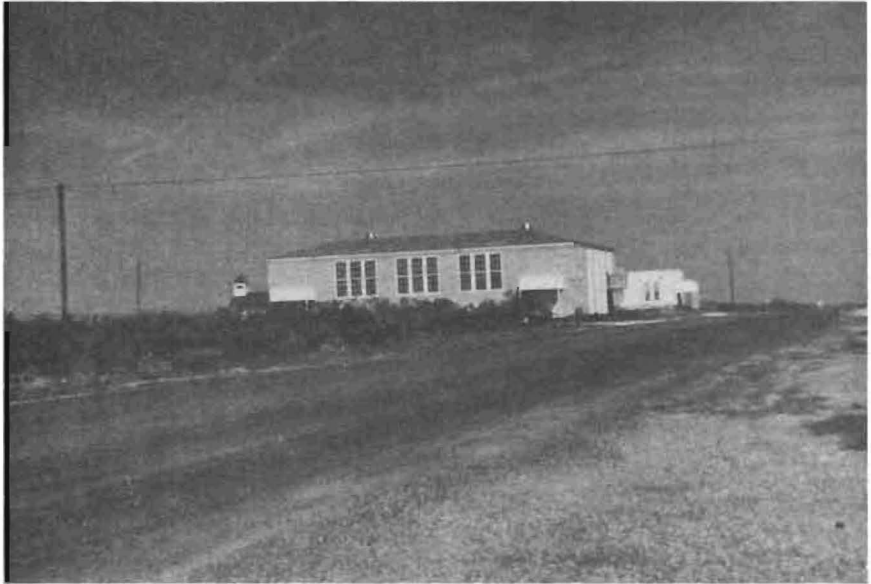
When asked about economic activity in the community, a local Mentone resident responded, ". . . we have one postoffice (4th class), one beer joint and one service station." That same citizen also said ". . . the roads are not maintained (we have only two paved roads in the County), we have no water or gas system." And finally when quizzed about community governmental organization it was stated, the County Judge does not live in Loving County and could care less."¹⁵

Hamlet county seats are a unique part of the Great Plains settlement landscape. These small places generally developed as service centers but continue to exist only because of their specialized function.

Great Plains counties with hamlet county seats tend to be small in areal size, with a small and declining population, and a very low density of population. All of which contribute to the occurrence of hamlet county seats. In extreme cases the county seat may be the only place in the county but still a hamlet.

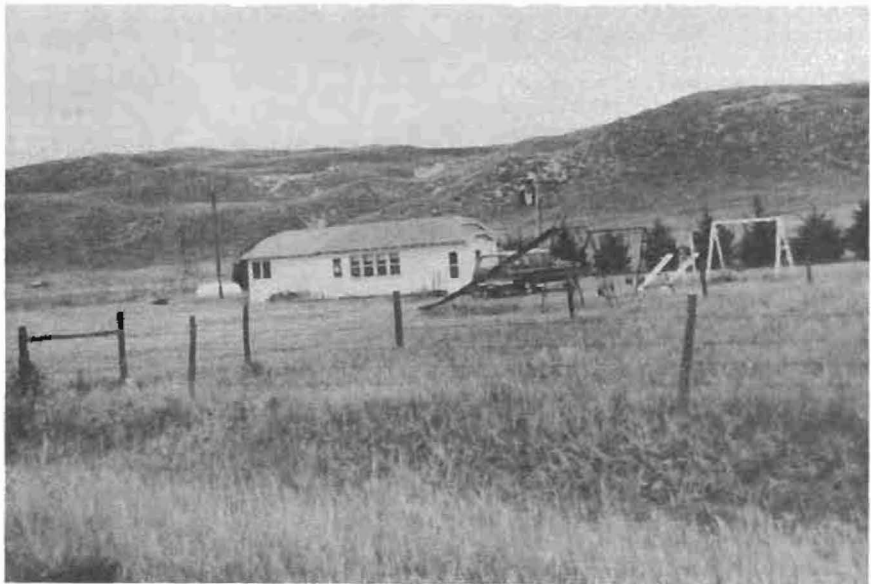
Whereas most of the county seats considered here at one time provided a broad range of goods and services to the surrounding area (perhaps the county), the function of the contemporary hamlet county seat has changed and now the only significant activity is government. Most common to hamlet county seats in the Great Plains are churches, service stations, grocery stores and cafes, a significant departure

Figure 7



Abandoned school in Mentone (Loving County), Texas.

Figure 8



County elementary school in the Nebraska Sand Hills.

from the time when the places had their maximum population; but, with the exception of schools, similar to small places throughout the county.

Building abandonment is found in all hamlet county seats in the Great Plains region. Unoccupied houses and businesses are found in each.

The contemporary significance of Fugitt's statement that county seat status ". . . could give to a small town an extra measure of growth and prosperity" has special significance for the smaller Great Plains county seats.¹⁶ Although in recent decades there has been little growth and limited prosperity, the places owe their continued existence to the functions of county government they perform.

Figure 9



Banner County, Nebraska school.

Figure 10



Abandoned business in commercial section of Stockville, Nebraska.

NOTES

1. Carl F. Kraenzel, The Great Plains in Transition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 171.
2. Glenn V. Fuguitt, "County Seat Status as a Factor in Small Town Growth and Decline," Social Forces, 44 (December, 1965): 246.
3. Albert J. Larson and A. P. Garbin, "Hamlets: A Typological Consideration," The Sociological Quarterly, 8 (Autumn, 1967).
4. Rand McNally, 1984 Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide (New York: Rand McNally and Company), 1984; U.S. Bureau of the Census, County and City Data Book, 1983, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1983; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Number of Inhabitants, 1980, All Plains States, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1981.
5. R. Scott Wilkinson, personal letter to author 24 October 1984.
6. John E. Brush, "The Hierarchy of Central Places in Southwestern Wisconsin," The Geographical Review, 43 (July, 1953), 385.
7. "Out of Old Nebraska," The Index, 7 March 1985.
8. Walter P. Webb, The Great Plains (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), 422.
9. Howard A. Stafford, "The Functional Bases of Small Towns," Economic Geography, 39 (April, 1963); Brush, "The Hierarchy of Central Places in Southwestern Wisconsin;" Edwin N. Thomas, "Some Comments on the Functional Bases for Small Iowa Towns," Iowa Business Digest (1960).
10. Robert Van Pelt, "Stockville, Nebraska: An Inland County Seat Town, About 1900," Nebraska History, 65 (Fall, 1984), 330.
11. *Ibid.*, 334 and 340.
12. *Ibid.*, 341.
13. Wilkinson, personal letter.
14. This information taken from a local road sign.
15. Mentone, Texas Postmistress interviewed by author August 22, 1984.
16. Fuguitt, "County Seat Status As A Factor in Small Town Growth and Decline," 246.