The Rural Rebound

by Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale

For most of the 20th century, the story of rural America was an epic of decline. American agriculture prospered, but mechanization and the changing economics of farming drove millions from the land. In the smaller towns and cities, economic opportunity dried up. The rural exodus was a dominant theme in American life and culture, distilled in images of the Okies' flight from the heartland during the 1930s and the great postwar African-American migration from the rural South to Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other northern cities, as well as in novels and films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Last Picture Show*. In a sense, the roots of the decline go even deeper than the current century. In this land that long proudly called itself a nation of farmers, the rate of urban population growth actually began outstripping that in the countryside during the 1820s, the decade when John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson occupied the White House.

Now all of this may be about to change. A variety of powerful social and economic forces appears to be reversing patterns that have prevailed in the United States for a century or longer. They are pushing and pulling significant numbers of Americans into the areas beyond the metropolitan fringes. The first signs of rural turnaround came in the 1970s, when population in the nation's sparsely populated regions suddenly jumped 14 percent, lifted by an unprecedented influx of newcomers and returnees from metropolitan areas. While the news media were quick to herald this "return to the land," some scholars, skeptical that such long-standing trends could be so suddenly altered, dismissed the 1970s experience as a fluke. Then the devastating farm crisis of 1980–86, along with a wave of deindustrialization that hurt

New settlers arrive in Oregon

textiles and other rural industries, put a stop to in-migration. The rural population still managed to grow slightly, but only because rural women bore enough babies to offset out-migration and deaths. In rural America, the 1980s looked a lot like the earlier part of the 20th century: more people moved out than moved in.

But fresh evidence from the 1990s suggests that the 1980s were the anomaly, not the 1970s. Our research shows that between 1990 and 1996, the population of America's rural counties grew by nearly three million, or 5.9 percent. In July 1996, about 53.8 million Americans, or just over 20 percent of the U.S. population, lived in areas officially classified as "nonmetropolitan," here termed *rural*. (To qualify as metropolitan, according to criteria established by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, a county must include an urban area with a population of at least 50,000. Surrounding counties within its orbit, as determined by factors such as commuting patterns, are also classified as metropolitan. There were 837 metropolitan counties in 1993, grouped in more than 300 metropolitan areas.) It turned out that once the unprecedented economic disruptions of the 1980s subsided, growth resumed in the countryside. During the first half of the 1990s, for example, rural areas enjoyed a faster rate of job growth than metropolitan areas did. The rural rebound is for real.

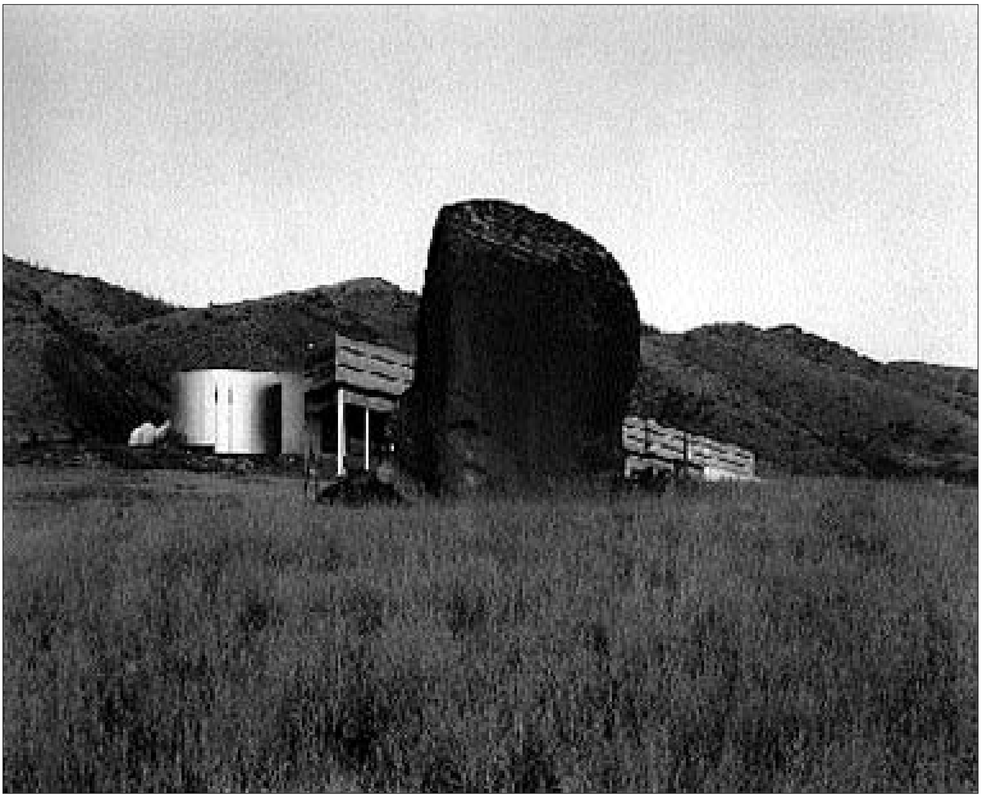
The migrants of the 1990s have settled in the Mountain West, the Upper Great Lakes, the Ozarks, parts of the South, and rural areas of the Northeast. Widespread population losses have occurred only in the Great Plains, the western Corn Belt, and the Mississippi Delta. The counties that have benefited least from the rural revival are generally those that have remained most economically dependent on the two most traditional rural pursuits, farming and mining.

What the United States experienced between 1970 and 1996—and is continuing to experience, according to recently released Census Bureau data—is population "deconcentration." People are gradually moving away from larger, more densely settled places toward lightly settled areas. This is not simply a reversal. Americans are not returning to farming, nor even in very large numbers to small towns, much as some may dream of it. They are scattering across the landscape in "farmettes," trailer parks, houses along country roads, and even in subdivisions much like those in suburban America. The new arrivals are a mixed lot: retirees, blue-collar workers seeking jobs in the new factories, "lone eagle" professionals using the new information technologies to conduct business from remote locations, disenchanted urbanites seeking refuge from urban life, and many others. For the most part, they are attracted to rural areas by a desire for what they see as a better way of life. Economic necessity was a powerful factor in the earlier rural exodus. Now economic and technological change is allowing many Americans to choose where they will live.

Early in the 20th century, a clear-sighted observer might have discerned the beginnings of the trend toward suburbanization that would, along with the rural exodus, define so much of national life in the ensuing decades. The emptying out of the countryside, the swelling of the cities, the rise of the suburbs, and the decline of the urban cores as centers of population and economic activity all define important parts of the economic and social history of the 20th century. Will deconcentration prove to be as powerful a force in the next century? A hundred years from now, will we see a nation of people and businesses dispersed across the landscape? It is simply too soon to tell. Nobody can predict how strong or long lasting the current of movement toward rural America will be. Yet no matter how far the current carries and what it may mean for the nation as a whole, it is already plain that rural America itself will, in some important ways, never be the same.

Rural America is a deceptively simple term for a remarkably diverse collection of places and things: vast swaths of plains planted in wheat and corn, auto plants scattered around the outskirts of towns strung along Interstate 75 in Kentucky and Ohio, ultramodern

> Kenneth M. Johnson *is a demographer and professor of sociology at Loyola University in Chicago.* Calvin L. Beale *is senior demographer of the Economic Research Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the author of* A Taste of the Country *(1990).*

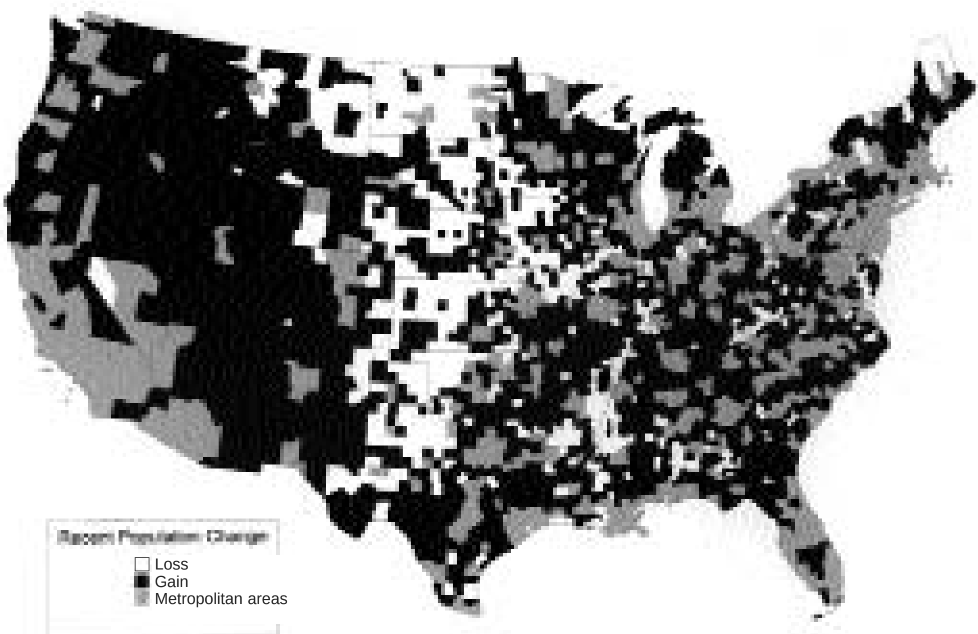


Corporate America is finding new homes in the countryside, especially as executive "lifestyle" preferences are weighed along with economic factors in deciding where to build plants and offices.

catalog distribution centers on former country lanes, small villages on sparkling northern lakes, the cool, mountainous timberland of the Pacific Northwest, and the flat and humid vastness of Florida's Everglades. Certainly no single county among the 2,304 classified as nonmetropolitan in 1993 has felt the influence of all the powerful forces driving the rural revival. But most of the counties experiencing growth in the 1990s have one very important characteristic in common. Dickinson County, Kansas, is as good a place to look for it as any.

During the 1980s, this Great Plains farming county, with 515,000 acres of wheat, sorghum, and hay, the boyhood home of Dwight D. Eisenhower, was hit harder than most other rural counties by the farm crisis, with its soaring interest rates, overproduction, and falling crop prices. Despite its advantages—a county seat, Abilene, that is a service and retail center with 6,000 people, and an interstate highway that runs right through the county's middle—Dickinson suffered a six percent population loss during the decade. Yet between 1990 and 1996 the county's population grew by five percent. What happened? In 1994, the Russell Stover company gave the county an enormous lift when it opened a sizable new candy factory that employs some 600 workers making Whitman's samplers, pecan delights, and other treats. Land was

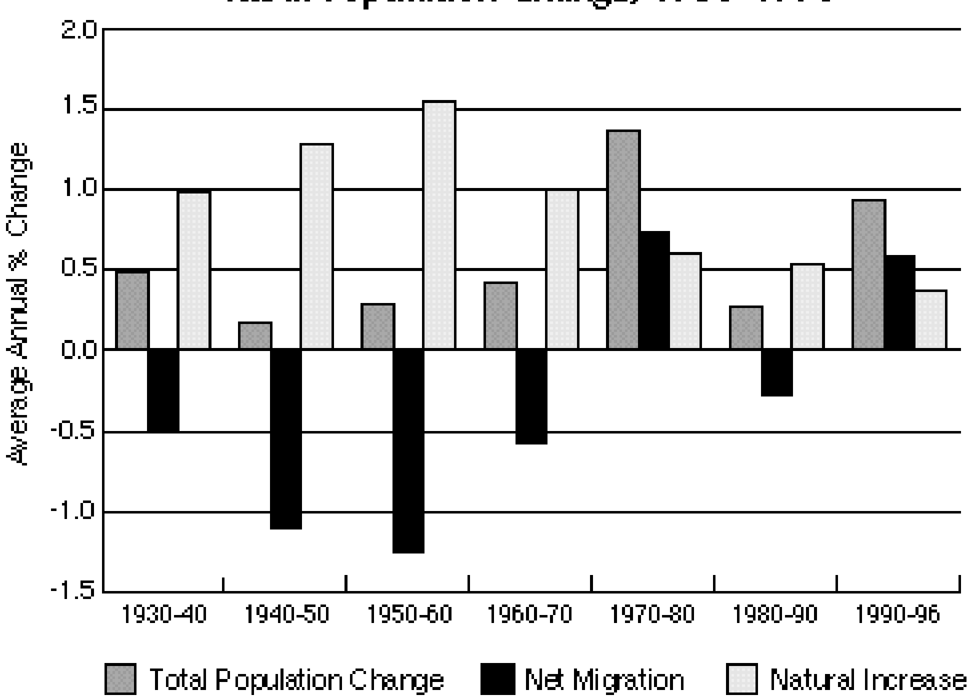
Where the Growth Is
(Population Change in Rural Areas, 1990–96)



Source: Prepared by the authors from Census Bureau data

The benefits of the rural rebound are distributed unevenly. Places blessed with natural beauty—lakes, mountains, oceanfront—have attracted a disproportionate share of the recent rural migrants. The graph below emphasizes how unusual rural in-migration has been during the 20th century.

Rural Population Change, 1930–1996



Source: Authors' calculations from Census Bureau data

Behind the rural revival is a potent blend of economic, social, and technological forces.

cheap, the work force attractive, and access to I-70 easy. The city, county, and state governments all threw in tax incentives. Workers drawn by jobs at the Stover plant were joined by retirees from surrounding farms and small towns, attracted by the relatively superior diversions, services, and health care that Abilene offers.

What Dickinson and other growing rural counties have in common is net in-migration. Through much of this century, most rural areas that managed to increase their population did so on the strength of relatively high rural birthrates. Farm families and small-town residents simply had more children than their big-city cousins, and enough babies were born to offset the constant departure of working-age people for the bright lights and job opportunities of the cities. But over the last two decades, rural women have been bearing fewer children, as the trends that influenced their urban counterparts—rising levels of education and paid employment outside the home, as well as delayed marriage—have reached into the countryside. The fertility levels of the two groups are now virtually indistinguishable.* The areas that are growing now are doing so chiefly because fewer local people are leaving and more outsiders are choosing to move in.

During the early 1990s, rural America gained 1.8 million inhabitants through in-migration. Between 1990 and 1996, it enjoyed a higher rate of in-migration than the nation's metropolitan areas, 3.6 percent versus 1.8 percent. Only once before in recent memory has that occurred: during the population turnaround of the 1970s. This voluntary movement of people is the great unifying factor behind the revival of rural America during the past quarter-century.

Driving the revival is a potent blend of economic, social, and technological forces. Improvements in communications technology and transportation have sharply reduced the "friction of distance" that once hobbled rural areas in the competition with the great metropolitan centers for people and commerce. In practical terms, rural areas are now much less isolated than they were only a few decades ago. Satellite technology, fax machines, and the Internet are among the most familiar aids, rendering distance virtually irrelevant in the transmission of information. Other sources of change are less obvious. Decades of steady state and federal investment in roads and airports—building and widening of highways, runway paving, subsidies for equipment pur-

*This fertility decline, coupled with the aging of the rural population (which reduced the number of couples of childbearing age while increasing the number of older adults), left an estimated 600 nonmetropolitan counties with more deaths than births between 1990 and '96, the highest number in history.

chases—have also made an enormous difference. At the same time, congestion has increasingly vexed the nation's large metropolitan areas, reducing the value of one of the cities' great competitive advantages: proximity. Catalog retailer Lands' End is able to operate a huge national distribution headquarters in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, a small town west of Madison, in part because the state government upgraded U.S. Route 18-151 to a four-lane divided highway during the 1980s. In Michigan's Upper Peninsula and other once-remote places, Federal Express trucks now regularly deliver packages down long dirt roads. With the assurance that crucial parts and supplies can be secured overnight, small-factory owners can now set up shop virtually anywhere.

Such advances have freed businesses to light out for the hinterlands and all their perceived advantages: lower labor and land costs, the absence of unions, what many executives see as the superior work ethic of the rural labor force, and economic incentive programs offered by state and local governments.

Missouri's Mercer and Sullivan counties tell one tale of deconcentration. They adjoin one another near the Iowa border in the southern Corn Belt, where, thanks to poor soil and sloping terrain that promotes soil erosion, farm productivity lags behind that in the best midwestern farming areas. The land has never generated enough wealth to sustain a strong local economy. The result has been an extraordinarily prolonged population decline. Mercer County's population peaked at 14,700 in 1900 and then commenced a long and steady fall to only 3,700 in 1990—a devastating decline of three-fourths. Sullivan County lost 58 percent of its population, reaching 6,300 in 1990.

Then, in the early 1990s, an entrepreneurial area firm called Premium Standard Farms, armed with investment capital and encouraged by a strong market for pork, opened a large new hog-raising and pork-processing business. Premium has its headquarters building in Mercer County and a packing plant in Sullivan County. Vast numbers of hogs are produced in highly efficient confinement-feeding operations, slaughtered, packed, and shipped—all of which generates a large number of jobs. And the workers have come. Census Bureau estimates for Mercer County in July 1996 indicated that its population had spurted by 7.5 percent, while Sullivan had recovered by 5.1 percent. The result: a local housing shortage that has fueled residential construction and forced some workers to commute from other counties.

This kind of story is being repeated in various forms all over rural America, as business and industry expand and move into new areas, especially in the South and, more recently, the Midwest. Between 1985 and 1993, rural areas increased their share of the nation's manufacturing jobs from 20 percent to 23 percent. Indeed, since 1960, manufacturing has supplied more rural jobs than farming. It now accounts for about one-sixth of rural employment.

The roster of rural industries is varied, including poultry processors, clothing manufacturers, auto parts makers, and manufacturers of computer equipment. Some of these enterprises are relatively small and self-contained, but others are big enough to generate considerable ripple effects. In the archipelago of auto assembly plants that Toyota and other carmakers have built along I-75, for example, the factories don't stockpile parts but use just-in-time manufacturing techniques that effectively require many suppliers to have their own plants less than 100 miles away. Workers at these plants then carry their paychecks home to communities perhaps as much as 60 miles distant, where the money may find its way to local retailers and other businesses.

One very special sort of "industry" has provided a surprising lift in many rural areas and small towns. More than 50 nonmetropolitan counties that have rebounded from population losses in the 1980s have been helped by the boom in prison construction spawned by the nationwide crackdown on crime. In Tennessee's Lake County, a declining Delta cotton-farming area, a new state prison that opened in 1992 brought more than 1,000 inmates (whom the federal census counts as residents) and 350 jobs. Secure, well-paid prison jobs are highly prized by people in places such as Lake County, but it is questionable whether prisons will give rural communities a foundation for longer-term growth.

Important as economic and technological forces have been in fostering the rural revival of the past quarter-century, it would be a mistake to see them as the sole driving force. National prosperity, job growth, and the declining "friction of distance" have combined to give many more Americans the freedom to choose where to live, and it should come as no surprise that many prefer the countryside. Through the decades of exodus from the hinterlands to the cities—much of it more a matter of economic necessity than choice—many Americans retained a strong attachment to the rural ideal. It was this desire for a retreat from big-city strains and hazards, the desire to enjoy nature and live in a community where one can be known and make a difference, that made the suburbs grow, and now that technological and economic change allow, it may continue to benefit rural areas. In a 1995 Roper survey, for example, 41 percent (up from 35 percent in 1989) of those polled said that they would like to live in a small town or rural area within 10 years.

Among the most important contributors to rural growth are the most footloose people of all—retirees, who are free to go almost anywhere their pension and Social Security checks can reach them. They are drawn to areas in the Sunbelt, coastal regions, parts of the West, and the Upper Great Lakes, places that offer beautiful scenery or recreational attractions, from lakes to ski slopes and golf courses. Of the 190 rural counties classified as "retirement destination" counties (i.e. those with a history of large influxes of retirees), all gained population between 1990 and 1996, and 99 percent experienced net in-migration.

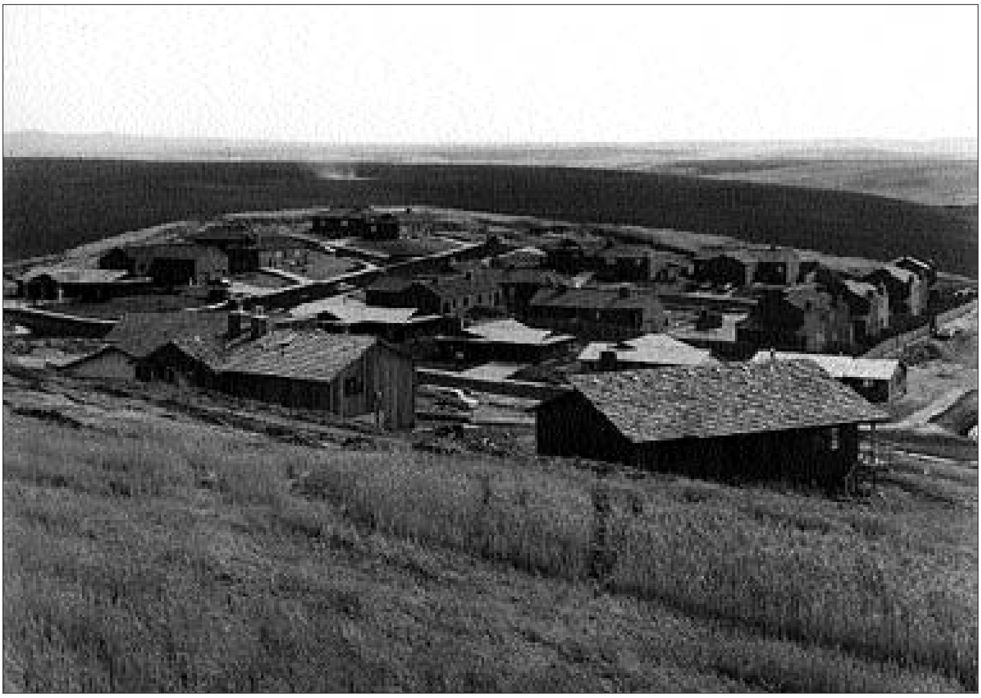
Most other rural migrants are still tied to jobs. They include older people who have cut back their work week and the growing number of working-age people who have been freed by new communications technologies and changes in the organization of work to move far from major cities, or who perhaps need to show up at the office only a few days a week. Those are not primarily the "lone eagles" in pressed flannel shirts we see in magazine ads making multimillion-dollar deals by cell phone as they gaze at distant mountain peaks, but computer consultants, editors, and other middle-class workers. Still other rural migrants are returning to areas where they were born, now that jobs are available, wanting to raise their children in the kind of atmosphere they enjoyed as youngsters.

These sorts of people account for the rapid growth of 285 nonmetropolitan counties we classify as "recreational" destinations. Included among these are forested lake counties of the North Woods, winter sports areas of the West, and the foothills of the Appalachians and Ozarks, where mountain vistas and golf courses abound. Ninety-three percent of them grew between 1990 and 1996, with a large majority (88 percent) enjoying net in-migration.

Chaffee County, Colorado, set in the Arkansas River valley and flanked by the high peaks of the Rockies, is a good example. The county suffered during the 1980s when a large molybdenum mine shut down—the metal is used in the fabrication of high-tech alloys for military aircraft and other products—taking a lot of good jobs with it. From 1990 to 1996, however, the population rose by 15.7 percent, thanks largely to the arrival of newcomers fleeing growing congestion and dense settlement in Denver and elsewhere in the Front Range of the Rockies. The county also attracted workers employed in the nearby resort towns of Vail and Breckenridge but forced out by rising real estate prices. Some of the more affluent Chaffee newcomers have launched new businesses or bought out older proprietors. A number of small-scale manufacturing plants have come on line: a toolmaker, a manufacturer of archery equipment, and an assembler of first-aid kits.

Recreation brings many to counties such as Chaffee, supplying a big share of jobs and income: motels, restaurants, and recreation provide jobs and attract visitors, whose dollars in turn create more jobs in construction, retail, and services. In Grand County, Utah, in the shadow of Arches National Park, the county government was more successful than local leaders had dreamed—and perhaps more than they had wished—when it decided to promote the area as a tourist destination for mountain bikers. Between 1990 and 1996, the population jumped by 18.2 percent, and restaurants, motels, and other businesses sprouted to serve the vacationers. Quite a comeback from the 20 percent drop in population Grand County experienced in the 1980s, when the uranium mines shut down.

The boundary between the nation's metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas can be blurry at times. Some counties, though officially metropolitan, are hardly "close in." Clarke County, Virginia, for



The small-town ideal remains, but reality for most newcomers to rural America consists of familiar suburban-style subdivisions and commercial strips.

example, is more than 65 miles from downtown Washington, D.C. There is no question that the rural revival owes some of its vigor to spillover effects from the rise of "edge cities" on the periphery of metropolitan areas. These quasi-urban agglomerations of office parks and shopping centers have made it easier for people to move farther from downtown districts, to places such as Clarke County and beyond, without severing their links to the metropolitan economy.

Indeed, more than 85 percent of the rural counties adjacent to urban areas gained population in the early 1990s, and 77 percent enjoyed net in-migration. Another tier of counties farther out also benefited from the arrival of metro-area workers willing to drive long distances to their jobs. Eventually many of these counties will also be absorbed, at least in official data, into metropolitan areas. But many commuters coming to rural America are traveling to other rural counties or to towns and cities that are too small to be classified as metropolitan but are nevertheless experiencing the effects of deconcentration.

Wolfe County, Kentucky, illustrates some of these complexities. Mountainous and thickly wooded, it lies three counties distant from Lexington, the nearest metro center. The county's population fell by 2.9 percent in the 1980s as coal-mining jobs in the area were lost to mechanization, but the county benefits from the four-lane Combs Mountain Parkway, which permits residents to work an hour away in Lexington and in a new Toyota plant located yet another county distant. It has also attracted a fair number of retirees—some returning home after having made lives elsewhere, some leaving the rawer Appalachian hill country to the east. In the 1990s, Wolfe County began growing again, with population up 13.2 percent between 1990 and '96.

Will success ruin rural America? It is already exacting tolls of various kinds in many rural communities. After decades of population shrinkage, revenue sources are limited and are not likely to grow as rapidly as the demand for roads, schools, and other services and infrastructure. And newcomers often demand not just a greater quantity of services but better quality as well. People coming from cities and suburbs with professional fire and ambulance corps, municipal sewage systems, and regular garbage pickup may not see much charm in volunteer fire departments and backyard septic systems. Newcomers may also retard change. Retirees lured to an area by low living costs and scenic beauty may not be sympathetic to pleas to increase spending on public schools.

While many long-time residents welcome the energy and enthusiasm new arrivals bring, others fear they will undermine the very "rural way of life" they seek. Some rural communities are already beginning to experience traffic congestion and even sprawl. The newcomers, moreover, have few ties to the traditional rural economy or way of life; they are in rural America but not of it. It is almost inevitable that they will change it.

The rural revival raises other questions of policy. Many remote rural counties that lost population during the 1980s also found it difficult to attract and retain doctors. The influx of newcomers, however, combined with the continuing aging of the established population, almost certainly increases the need for medical care. Yet federal programs designed to encourage physicians to locate in such underserved areas were cut back in the early 1980s.

A larger and longer-term question is whether the revival of rural fortunes will someday pose a threat to the health of cities. No one can see that far into the future, but it is at least possible to point out that it has not done so yet. The 1990s seem to have been as good for metropolitan America as they have been for the hinterlands. The cities remain the great economic engines that drive the American system, the command-and-control centers that direct the development of the economy, government, media, and the arts. They remain the source of the best economic opportunities and highest-paying jobs, magnets for immigrants and for people with strong appetites for cultural, social, and educational opportunities. They are the gateways to the increasingly important global economic system.

Some trends suggest that the rural revival may continue for a long time. The aging of the affluent baby boom generation suggests that there will be a plentiful supply of retirees well into the future. And the revolution in communications, the improvement of transportation, and the evolution of the organization of work are all unlikely to be reversed. Yet the slowdown of the rural revival during the 1980s underscores the fact that such large changes seldom proceed at an even pace. A sour economy, for example, can undo a great deal.

America may, in any event, have entered a period of relative equilibrium, in which short-term demographic shifts are acutely sensitive to immediate changes in the economic, political, and social climate. Because rural America no longer enjoys the high fertility rates that traditionally fueled its population growth, its demographic prospects in coming decades will depend more than ever on the course of migration. The fate of rural areas will be linked more directly than before to national and global economic, political, and social forces—the forces that directly and indirectly influence the millions of individual decisions that people and businesses make about where to locate.

The problems and challenges that await a growing rural America are bound to be daunting. But whatever they are they will almost certainly be preferable to the challenges posed by isolation, exodus, and decline.

Further Reading

The transformation of rural America lends urgency to a number of new and old issues, from the persistence of rural poverty to the future of agriculture to the problems of growth and sprawl. These and other subjects are surveyed in three useful anthologies: **The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places** (Univ. Press of Kansas, 1995), edited by Emery N. Castle; **Rural and Small Town America** (Russell Sage, 1989), edited by Glenn Fuguitt, David L. Brown, and Calvin L. Beale; and **Rural Planning and Development in the United States** (Guilford, 1989), edited by Mark B. Lapping, Thomas L. Daniels, and John W. Keller. The two-volume **Encyclopedia of Rural America** (ABC CLIO, 1998) also offers a surprisingly accessible overview. **Migration into Rural Areas: Theories and Issues** (Wiley, forthcoming), edited by P. J. Boyle and Keith Halfacree, brings to light some signs of rural revival overseas.

The countryside is astutely observed in a number of more literary works, including **Bad Land: An American Romance** (Vintage, 1997), by Jonathan Raban, **Great Plains** (Penguin, 1990), by Ian Frazier, and **Praeryerth (A Deep Map)** (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), by William Least Heat-Moon. Eulogies for the vanishing rural way of life—now almost a genre of their own—include Wendell Berry's **Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture** (Sierra Club, 1996) and Victor Davis Hanson's **Fields without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea** (Free Press, 1997), each dealing eloquently but in different ways with the disappearance of the family farm, and W. D. Wetherell's **North of Now** (Lyons, 1998). Two significant books on the rethinking of the meaning of wilderness and the natural world are Daniel B. Botkin's **Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century** (Oxford, 1992) and **Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature** (Norton, 1996), edited by William Cronon.