

Brief Articles

*Newcomers and Oldtimers: Growth and Change in a Mountain Town*¹

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"Everyone knows" that small towns in America are declining in size and relative importance as dynamic factors on the national scene. Yet, as is so often true, what "everyone knows" may need qualification. Recent Census figures document continuing significant growth in many small towns and rural areas adjacent to metropolitan regions, particularly in certain sections of the country (Fuguitt, 1971). The renaissance of these areas is an interesting sociological phenomenon.

The 1970 United States Census figures reveal that 17 states had nonmetropolitan growth rates in excess of 10 percent during the decade of the 1960's. Of these, seven are Western states (Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Colorado, Alaska, and Nevada) and eight are in the Northeast (Maryland, Delaware, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut). The two remaining states are Florida and Michigan.

In Colorado, as one example, ten counties which had no urban population in 1970 (i.e., no city with 2,500 or more residents), grew faster during the decade of the 1960's than the national average growth rate of 13.3 percent. With one exception, these counties form a contiguous block in the Rocky Mountains to the north and west of the Denver and Colorado Springs SMSAs. That this is a relatively recent phenomenon in Colorado is indicated by the fact that only one of these counties showed some gains over all of the last three decades. Most had been losing population previously.

In addition to the *objective* indication of a resurgence of certain growth in rural areas, there is a stated *subjective* preference on the part of many Americans for small town and rural life.

A recent national Gallup Poll survey (The Denver Post, December 17, 1972: 16) found the small town led in being named as the ideal place to live: 32 percent as against 31 percent of people who chose suburbs and 23 percent who selected to live on a farm. Only 13 percent of those interviewed indicated that, given the option, they would select city life. This represents a decline of nine points since 1966 when 22 percent had cited a preference for city life.

Several caveats need be made. First, as behavioral scientists well know, attitude surveys are not necessarily reliable predictors of human behavior. Yearn-

¹I am indebted to Dr. H. Laurence Ross and Dr. William H. Key for extensive advice and criticism of an earlier draft. The study described in this paper was completed by the Seminar in Law and Society of the University of Denver, Dr. H. Laurence Ross, Professor. Project participants were Penelope C. Austin, Jeffrey B. Ber- man, Stephen G. Everall, Lynn Feiger, Marian J. Gewirts, Kenneth D. Lindbloom, Harry N. MacLean, Michael M. McDonough, Jeremy Mohr, William D. Petit and Edith E. Graber.

ing for rural life and actually moving there are not synonymous. Second, one does not know whether the indicated preference for rural life (55 percent if one combines percentages for small towns and farms vs. 44 percent for urban life, either in a central city or suburb) is based on a rosy-hued romanticism or on a knowledgeable assessment of reality. The age grouping most favoring noncity living were those in their 30's and 40's. One does not know whether any significant proportion of these people had first-hand acquaintance with the realities of rural life; that is, whether they or their parents were in-migrants to the city.

However, in the light of such indicated preferences and the empirical fact of growth for some nonmetropolitan areas near urban centers, it is germane to take a closer look at who moves to small towns and rural areas, why they make the change, and what happens as a result.

Ideally, one needs national samples to satisfactorily answer the questions. These appear to be not yet generated. This report is a case study of an area in Colorado whose history and dynamics may be prototypical of other towns. It is offered as an exploration of phenomena needing careful consideration by rural sociologists.

Framework for analysis

In his book, *The Exurbanite* (1955), A. C. Sectorsky examined the phenomenon of small town growth within commuting range of New York City. During a decade that was enamored of the suburban phenomenon, Sectorsky called to national attention the dispersion of urbanites from the city.

Sectorsky's concept of exurbia was given a very specific content in terms of geographical location, social class, occupation, and character. But if the concept is disengaged from his specificity, there are a number of useful insights which can illuminate nonmetropolitan growth near metropolitan areas. A variant of the exurbanite phenomenon may have migrated to other sections of the country. In any case, I will try to use some of Sectorsky's concepts to frame the examination of resurgence for a small mountain town, Georgetown, Colorado, within commuting distance of Denver.

Who moves out?

On this point, Sectorsky gave his concept the greatest specificity. For him, the exurbanite is a displaced New Yorker. Spiritually he remains an urbanite, even though classified as "rural" in census data. The exurbanite was of upper-middle or lower-upper class status and engaged in some aspect of the communications industry. Sectorsky spent a major part of his book spelling out the commuting problems of this set, their work and its pressures, their financial anxieties, their frenetic play, their family lives. Much of the description Sectorsky gave is clearly idiosyncratic to the particular group studied. Sectorsky was less than sanguine about extending his concept of the exurbanite to other metropolitan areas. For him the specific content (e.g., the employment in the communications media) was a necessary condition of the concept. Further, he doubted that exurbanites elsewhere would be "concentrated in sufficient numbers to lend the rich flavor to a residential neighborhood requisite to make of it a true exurb" (Sectorsky, 1955:107). However, a further examination of his delineation of the exurbanite yields useful insights.

Why do they move?

Exurbanites were seen by Spector (1955:253) as pursuing what he called the "limited dream." The "unlimited dream" consists of a "never-never" land where one lives an idyllic South Sea Island existence and all aspects of one's life are as one chooses. That is, of course, attainable only in the imagination. Yet when the urbanite looks at the disadvantages he perceives in urban living, he concludes that something better—a more responsive way of life—must be available somewhere. Many moved, he claimed, to escape stereotypes of city life; crime, pollution, crowding, the "rat race" of urban competition, and tensions. This is a "push" away from the city. The "pull" is to achieve some quiet and rural peace at the end of the day, to smell growth and fresh air, to hear country sounds, and to sense nature and the seasons.

What changes do they bring with them?

Spector suggested that the population growth in "Exurbia" exceeds simply that of the commuters themselves for they bring with them purveyors of new goods and services. Real estate values rise sharply as a result. Those "natives" who were fortunate enough to hold more land than they need for their own use parcel out and sell their property for the development of houses, condominiums, and subdivisions with substantial benefit to themselves.

Exurbanites, Spector said, do not tend to build pretentious homes but develop a taste for "regional stigmata," for those objects and properties which are old, have a rural flavor, and relate to the history of the region. Restoration is the watchword and local antiques are desired objects.

As a result of the influx, a new stratification alters the social structure of the area. The commuter often has a better-paying job than either the native of the region (unless the native is land-rich) or the purveyor of goods and services who moves out with him. Even if he does not engage in conspicuous consumption in his housebuying or housebuilding, the margin of discretionary income soon makes itself felt in one way or another. Further, the exurbanite remains essentially urban in tastes and cultural interests, which may further set him apart from his neighbors and create tensions which did not exist before he came.

Another change results because of his coming. The charm of the rural area lies in its nonurban qualities. But the more people there are that discover these charms and the greater the influx, the more the area begins to acquire urban characteristics. Thus, exurbanites soon realize that in order to protect their seclusion, they must keep other people out. They grumble that there are "too many goddam newcomers in this town" (Spector, 1955:21). One defense the exurbanite may use is to buy as much property as he can afford to preserve his rural peace from further urban invasion. Thus, there is the paradox that the exurbanite who moved out to achieve rural peace and escape the fast pace of change discovers that he brings change with him as he moves. The rural idyll is altered precisely because he comes.

Data

Georgetown, Colorado lies in a narrow rugged mountain valley in the Front Range of the Rockies, 47 miles west of Denver. A recently completed portion of Interstate 70 brings this town of 542 persons within an hour's commuting distance of Denver, Colorado's largest urban area and capital city.

Georgetown was born with the discovery of gold in 1859 and of silver in 1864. The town was chartered by the Colorado Territorial Legislature in 1868 and grew lustily; by 1877, it had become Colorado's third largest city with a population of nearly 5,000. With the discovery of larger gold mines elsewhere and the devaluation of silver, the town began a steady decline. By 1900 the population had dropped to 1,148 and during the Depression years of the 1930's, it reached a low of less than 200. Thus, Georgetown experienced a period of hibernation for some decades in this century. Because of the slowed pace of life and because it never suffered a major fire, the town escaped the continual accretion of change that is characteristic of active, developing towns.

The decade of the 1960's saw a slow resurgence of growth with a 76.5 percent increase (from 307 to 542 persons). The national growth rate during the decade was 13.3 percent. Colorado grew at a rate of 25.8 percent. Clear Creek County, of which Georgetown is the county seat and second largest incorporated area, grew at a rate of 72.5 percent (from 2,793 to 4,819 persons). During the previous decade (1950-60) its population had declined by 15.1 percent.

Like Vidich and Bensman's *Small Town in Mass Society* (1958), the shape of Georgetown's fortunes are determined in large measure elsewhere.² Thus, major factors influencing the renaissance of this mountain town have been:

- 1) The decision by the Federal Highway Department to route Interstate 70 on the west edge of Georgetown's narrow mountain valley. When completed, this will be the major east-west highway through Colorado. Work has also been completed recently on the Eisenhower Tunnel, just beyond Georgetown, which carries combined US 6 and Interstate 70 under Loveland Pass.

- 2) The decision to hold the 1976 Winter Olympics in Colorado. This decision, secured early in 1970, provided a considerable impetus to focus on growth and development since there was a strong likelihood that some Alpine events might well be held in ski areas approximately ten minutes from the town. A subsequent decision by Colorado voters in 1972 to halt state funding of the Olympics had little effect on the town for the focus on growth and development was by then securely established.

- 3) The decision by the Colorado State Legislature to fund the rebuilding of the dam and lake below the community.

- 4) The decision by the State Historical Society to develop the Georgetown Loop (an area just above the town which featured a narrow-gauge railroad) into a historic area.

- 5) The decision by outside developers to purchase about one-third of the town's land area. The major builder is Georgetown Associates, a subsidiary of Western Pacific Resources, which is developing about 100 acres north of "Old Georgetown," designated as "Georgetown Meadows."

² If the future of a small town is decided elsewhere, one could well question whether a city exercises more effective control over its own destiny. Ultimately, many of the crucial decisions affecting metropolitan areas are *also* made elsewhere, particularly in Washington. It is still true, however, that highways are planned to *connect* (and thus focus on) urban areas while the decision to route the Interstate past the small mining town studied must be considered more an accident of geography. Without ready access, Georgetown would doubtless have continued its hibernation and/or decline.

Given these parameters, Georgetown's response has been an active one. It moved to preserve the historic character of the town and to guide growth in the face of an influx of newcomers. In May, 1970, the Board of Selectmen (town council) adopted a Historic Preservation Ordinance providing for the creation of a Historical Preservation Commission. Its duties are to "preserve, protect and continue historical areas and historic land mark structures; to provide for the construction of new improvements in conformity with the historical significance of the town" (Georgetown, Colo., Ordinance 205, May 19, 1970: Sec. III, A).

The study on which my report is based set out to ascertain the socioeconomic characteristics of newcomers and oldtimers in this mountain town, the reasons why newcomers had moved out, and the specific sources of support for the Historic Preservation Ordinance among newcomers and oldtimers as a way of getting at change.

A total of 76 persons were randomly selected to be interviewed from the official list of registered voters. In addition, 18 community leaders were identified, using the reputational and positional approaches. "Community leaders" included the mayor, a former mayor, the town clerk, and members of the three most active and powerful commissions or councils—the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Commission, and the Historic Preservation Commission. Nine of these leaders also fell into the random sample. Thus, a total of 85 interviews were conducted in 1972 among an adult population of approximately 356 persons. Those having resided in Georgetown less than ten years ($N = 61$) were designated "newcomers" while those who had lived there longer ($N = 24$) were termed "oldtimers." The dividing line at ten years of residence was drawn in order to assure a sufficiently long acquaintance with the town to facilitate informed participation in the local political scene and to incorporate most of the population increase of the recent decade.

Who moves out?

Newcomers were characterized by a higher level of education. Nearly three-fourths (72.1 percent) had some college or were college graduates as contrasted with 50.0 percent of the oldtimers. In Colorado, 29.5 percent of the population has had some college or are college graduates. The national figure is 21.2 percent. Colorado ranks highest among the 50 states in percentage of the population who have *completed* four years or more of college with a proportion of 14.9 percent. Nationally, 11.0 percent of the population have completed four or more years of college.

"Collar color" did not vary greatly between the two groupings. Of the newcomers, 67.2 percent were in white-collar occupations while 63.6 percent of oldtimers had such employment. Clear Creek County listed only 39.4 percent of employed persons as white-collar in 1970. In Colorado, 53.9 percent of workers were so classified.

However, among newcomers, both white- and blue-collar workers were apt to be employed outside of Georgetown and commute to their jobs. Only 36.6 percent of white-collar newcomers were employed in Georgetown (as contrasted with 50.0 percent of white-collar oldtimers). Among blue-collar newcomers, only 25 percent were employed in the town as contrasted with 85.7 percent of blue-collar oldtimers. Among all newcomers, over a quarter (26.2

percent) were employed in Denver; only two oldtimers were so employed. Occupations in this set were a building contractor, an airline pilot, a library assistant, a professor, a toolmaker, an executive secretary, and a fireman. Several of these persons have jobs which require less than daily commuting. The airline pilot and fireman, for instance, work a certain block of time and then have a sizable block off the job. Such jobs lend themselves to a residence quite removed from the place of work. This may be indicative of a facilitating pattern in long distance commuting.

Newcomers were also distinguished from oldtimers by age. Only 11.5 percent of newcomers interviewed were over 50 years of age in contrast to 54.2 percent of oldtimers. Of those who had lived in Georgetown less than one decade, 77.0 percent were under 40 as contrasted with 25.0 percent of the oldtimers; 45.9 percent of the newcomers were under 30. Since the random sample was based on the list of registered voters, this means that there was a very sizable grouping of young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 residing in Georgetown. Transients were excluded from the percentages given, since the sample was drawn from those who had made a sufficient commitment to their location to register as voters.

The newcomer to Georgetown is thus seen as a younger, more highly educated person who is apt to commute to a job outside of town. This agrees with Kirschenbaum's finding (1971:322) that increasing age is negatively associated with mobility while education is positively associated. But it represents a major deviation from Spector's since his exurbanites were largely middle-aged executives with families. The large bulge in the Georgetown age pyramid at the young adult level indicates that such persons may be finding ways to accommodate making a living with preferred residence location.

Why do they move?

Like much of the movement to the suburbs (Dobrin, 1963:64), movement to Georgetown was characterized in the minds of the movers by flight and search. The "push" of negative experiences in the city was palpable; for example, the desire to escape from pollution, especially from the cover of smog which often hangs over Denver and which is readily visible as one descends from the mountains. Other negative experiences evoked in discussions were the intense pace of urban competition, anonymity and impersonality, and the desire to get one's children into the country.

Respondents were asked directly what they liked about living in Georgetown. The social environment of the small town was cited most often, by 65.5 percent of the newcomers and 79.2 percent of the oldtimers. They elaborated with such comments as: "you can walk down the street and recognize people"; "the joy of a small community"; "there are friendly people"; "there is quiet and peace, it's safe, there is a sense of community activity"; "no crime, pollution, pressure." A less flattering interpretation was offered by one respondent: "We here are cop-outs from big city life. We're misfits there. The big city is too much for us. We want a different quality of life, a lesser intensity of competition." Whatever deeper motives might be stirred, the attraction of a smaller, less intense, more personal universe of residence seemed to have high appeal and subscription for both newcomers and oldtimers.

The physical environment was cited by 60.7 percent of the newcomers and

