

CENSUS DISCLOSES POPULATION TO BE MOVING CITYWARD

Small Towns Show Greatest Increase. Good Roads Make It Possible for Farmers to Live in City, Industry Spreading Out to Small Cities and Large Towns.

By CALEB JOHNSON

Except in a very few widely scattered and especially favored regions, the farming districts of the United States are losing population.

This is true not only of the strictly agricultural territory, but of little villages which once were the farmers' trading centers.

All over the United States the census returns so far completed tell the same story. The little villages of 500 to 800 are disappearing. Some of them are already down to the bones of a filling station and lot of dry goods. Almost all of them show a decline in population since 1920.

Where have the people gone, who used to live on the farms and in these little country hamlets? To the big cities? All of the big cities show population gains. The biggest cities naturally show the biggest gains. But that does not mean that the farmers of the United States are flocking to Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and New York.

They are moving to town, but to the nearby, growing country towns. For while the very small villages are mostly getting smaller, the trend of census returns to date indicates clearly that the medium-sized country towns, the larger rural communities and the small cities are all growing. The towns that had a thousand or so in 1920 are now mostly in the 1500-2500 class. Towns of 5,000 ten years ago now have from 7,000 to 10,000 inhabitants as a general thing. One of the most interesting series of groups of facts disclosed by census returns as published so far is the large number of little cities which have jumped into the 10,000 class. And the same holds good all along the line.

We are all moving into town. But that doesn't mean that we are all becoming city folks.

We are moving into town for several reasons. Some of us, a good many of us, are still farmers, although living in good-sized communities. In that respect we are getting to be like the farmers of Europe. Over there the farmer seldom lives on his farm, unless it is a very big farm, in which case he usually lives in a castle or manor house and his tenants, who rent their little farms from him, live in a village which he owns. Farm houses scattered over the countryside a mile or three or ten miles apart, are almost unknown in Europe.

The European farmer has always lived in towns, however. They had to live in communities in the old days, for protection against wild beasts and robbers. They have kept up the habit of community life, going out each day to their farms, perhaps several miles away from their homes. On this side of the Atlantic, however, men started farming before there were towns, and we established the habit of living on the farm. The coming of our big cities, however, is changing that. We are now a community people, and in some degree, farmers could live in any other way and keep on being farmers.

We have talked a lot about the joys of rural life, and there is much to be said for the farm house as a place for a big family to grow up in. But were not raising such big families, and you never heard the rural folks of the farm say very much about how happy they were. It is only in winter, when the snow is on the ground, and the teams all too busy to take them to work when the road happens to be possible.

The main fact is, that we have been in town on the farms because we had to. We had to attend the school, and to get things, good things, came from town. Then, the older generation, fixed in its habits, resisted the idea of moving to town, although they all enjoyed getting to town, especially in winter.

For and often than before. But with the rise of the movies and the other entertainments, with the opening of fine facilities with municipalities, rural folks have been moving into town. They are now getting to be more town people than they were a few years ago.

Girls to earn a living, they liked better which, for boys, to pay them better than the movement from farm to town to get in stronger.

In other words, it is now definite that the farmers of the United States are now getting to be more town people than they were a few years ago.

Probably three quarters of the population. The census figures don't show with great precision just what proportion of the total population lives in communities having a decidedly rural outlook. The Government arbitrarily classes all communities of more than 2,500 as "urban." But what you know of towns smaller than that, with a few many metropolitan areas, cities, and of towns of twenty or thirty thousand which are still rural in their outlook.

The tendency, however, is toward the same kind of living in the small cities as in the big ones, in the big towns and villages as in the small ones. We not merely dress alike all over the United States, listen to the same things over the radio, see the same movies, read the same magazines and books, eat the same food from the same kind of cans, drive the same kind of cars, but because we are in closer contact with one another we tend to think alike. There is, for example, no longer the difference in point of view between the city dweller and the inhabitant of the small town which used to make it almost impossible for them to understand each other.

Very well, then, we are becoming a nation of community dwellers. We have become such in fact, without noticing the change very much. What are we going to do about it, and, more important, what is it all doing to us?

First off, an increasing proportion of us are becoming fabricators of finished commodities instead of growers of the raw materials of commodities. And that certainly means that those who do remain on the farms are bound to get along better than was the case when there was too many growers in proportion to the number of consumers of farm products.

Second, we, as community dwellers, are developing new tastes and wants and making the market for all sorts of manufactured commodities greater than it was. We began to realize just after the war that America had become an industrial nation. Now, ten years later, we find that industry is spreading out to the small cities and big towns, that better transportation facilities and the extension of electric power lines are bringing industries into the little communities. And that means that the problems of the wage-earner are becoming more important to larger numbers of people than the problems of the farmer are.

The affairs of the community as such command more and more attention as communities grow larger. Living in crowds has a definite effect upon manners and customs. The pressure of the mass upon the individual has a moulding effect on character. Personal rights have to be subordinated, in many respects, to the rights of the social group.

It would be interesting, if one could do it, to come back to American centennial years. From now, and see what changes have occurred in the American people themselves as a result of the closer-knit community life which we, as a people, have definitely and finally entered.

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