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# The Problem of Population Adjustments in Sully County

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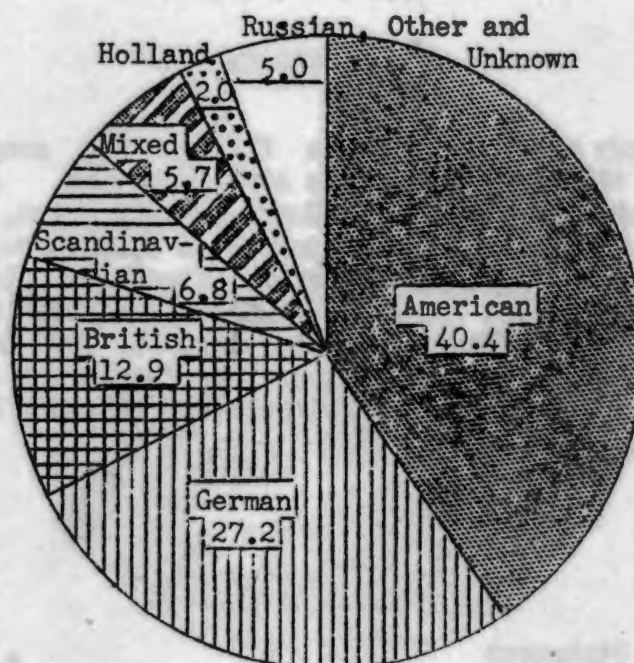
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THE PROBLEM OF POPULATION ADJUSTMENTS  
in  
Sully County

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Nationality of Farm Household Heads  
in Sully County, 1938



In order to understand the social interactions of any population group, one must know their nationality background. Differences in work customs, educational traditions, recreational interests, neighborhood persistence, religious beliefs, agricultural practices, thrift and frugality, progressive tendencies, and other activities and attitudes can be partially explained by variations in nationality background.

## EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years the following significant changes have occurred in the composition and distribution of population in Sully county: the total population has declined; the proportion in the younger age groups has decreased while the proportion in the older age groups has increased; the sex ratio has become more nearly equal; the percentage of foreign born has decreased; the birth rate has been sharply curtailed; and tenancy has increased. Some of these changes have come about as adjustments to changing social and economic conditions. Because a lag always exists between a changing population pattern and long established social institutional patterns, it is now recognized that some of these population changes call for widespread social readjustment.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introductory Statement	1
Farm Population Losses by Townships, 1930-40	2
Percentage of Farm Tenancy, by Townships, 1938	3
Predominant Nationalities in the Farm Population, by Townships, 1938	4
Number of Births Per 1000 of the Population, 1920-1940	5
Age Distribution of the Farm Population, 1930 and 1938	6
Sex Distribution of the Farm Population, 1915 to 1938	7
Adjustments Required by Changing Population Trends	8

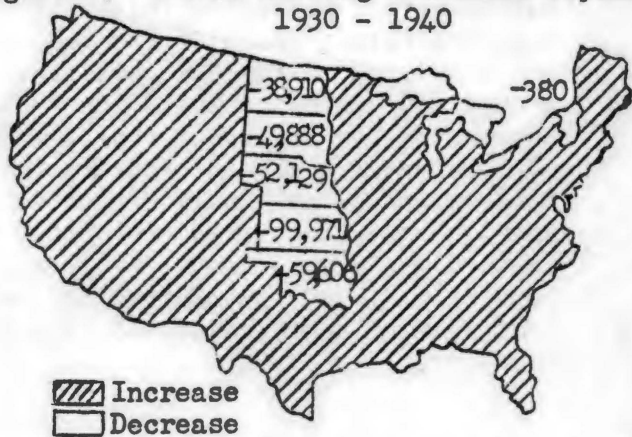
# The Problem of Population Adjustments in Sully County

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## Introductory Statement

Final releases of the 1940 census reveal the fact that only six states experienced population decreases during the decade 1930-1940. The location of these states is shown in Figure 1. Except for Vermont (which suffered a negligible loss of 380 persons) these states form a north-south band across central United States in what is known as the Great Plains area. A region of relatively light rainfall even in normal times, it was hardest hit by the severe drouth of the 1930's. In each of the five states precipitation was below the normal figure in at least seven of the ten years.

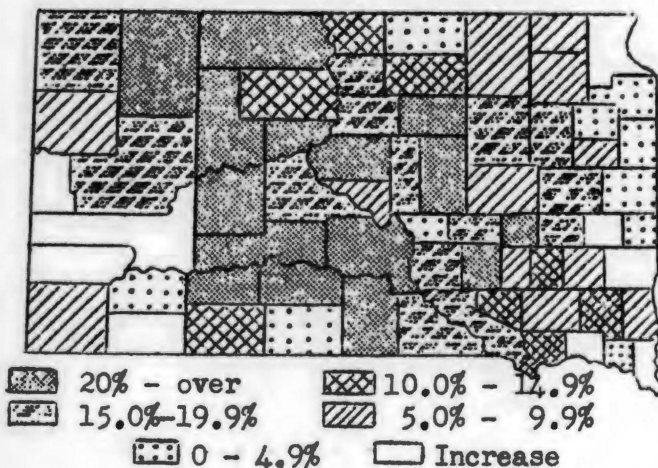
Figure 1. States Showing Decreased Population, 1930 - 1940



South Dakota received only 82 percent normal rainfall during this period—a figure lower than that for any of the other Great Plains states. Precipitation was below normal in each of the ten years, with the drouth taking rank as the most severe and prolonged since 1890, the year in which the weather records were first kept. In 1934 when precipitation reached an all-time low of 13.2 inches for the state, crop failure amounted to nearly 100 percent in over two-thirds of the counties.

These conditions not only caused many families to leave the state but also resulted in heavy relief loads. Between July, 1933, and June, 1935, South Dakota led all other states in the percentage of its population on Federal relief.\*

Figure 2. Gains or Losses in South Dakota's Population by Counties, 1930-40.



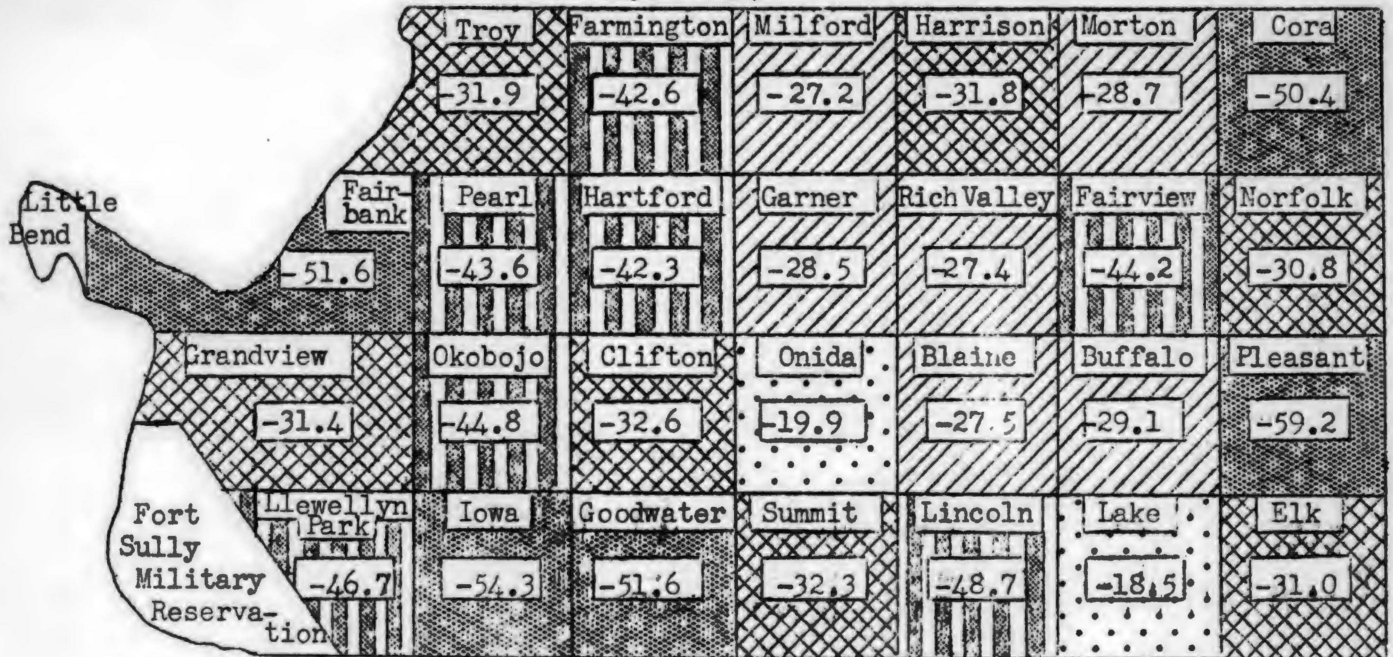
Population losses varied considerably among counties of the state, as shown in Figure 2. Sixty of the 69 counties lost in population, with losses ranging from less than 2 percent to over 30 percent. In Sully county the population decline amounted to 30.7 percent. It will be noted that the central and western counties (the Black Hills area excluded) where the drought was

most pronounced, suffered the heaviest losses. These same counties had the highest per capita expenditures for relief.

\* Kumlien, W. F., A Graphic Summary of the Relief Situation in South Dakota, 1930-1935, Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin Number 310, South Dakota, State College, Brookings, South Dakota.



Figure 3. Farm Population Losses in Sully County by Townships, 1930 - 1940



Legend:

	10.0 - 19.9%		30.0 - 39.9%		50.0% or more
	20.0 - 29.9%		40.0 - 49.9%		

Source: Final Releases of 1940 U. S. Census.

During the period 1930 - 1940 only two counties in the state, Corson and Armstrong, lost a larger percent of their population than Sully county. The loss in Sully county, of 30.7 percent, was due in part to a declining birth rate and migration. As shown by Figure 3 the farm population losses were especially heavy, ranging from a loss of 18.5 in Lake township to 59.2 percent in Pleasant. In thirteen townships losses exceed 40 percent of their 1930 number.

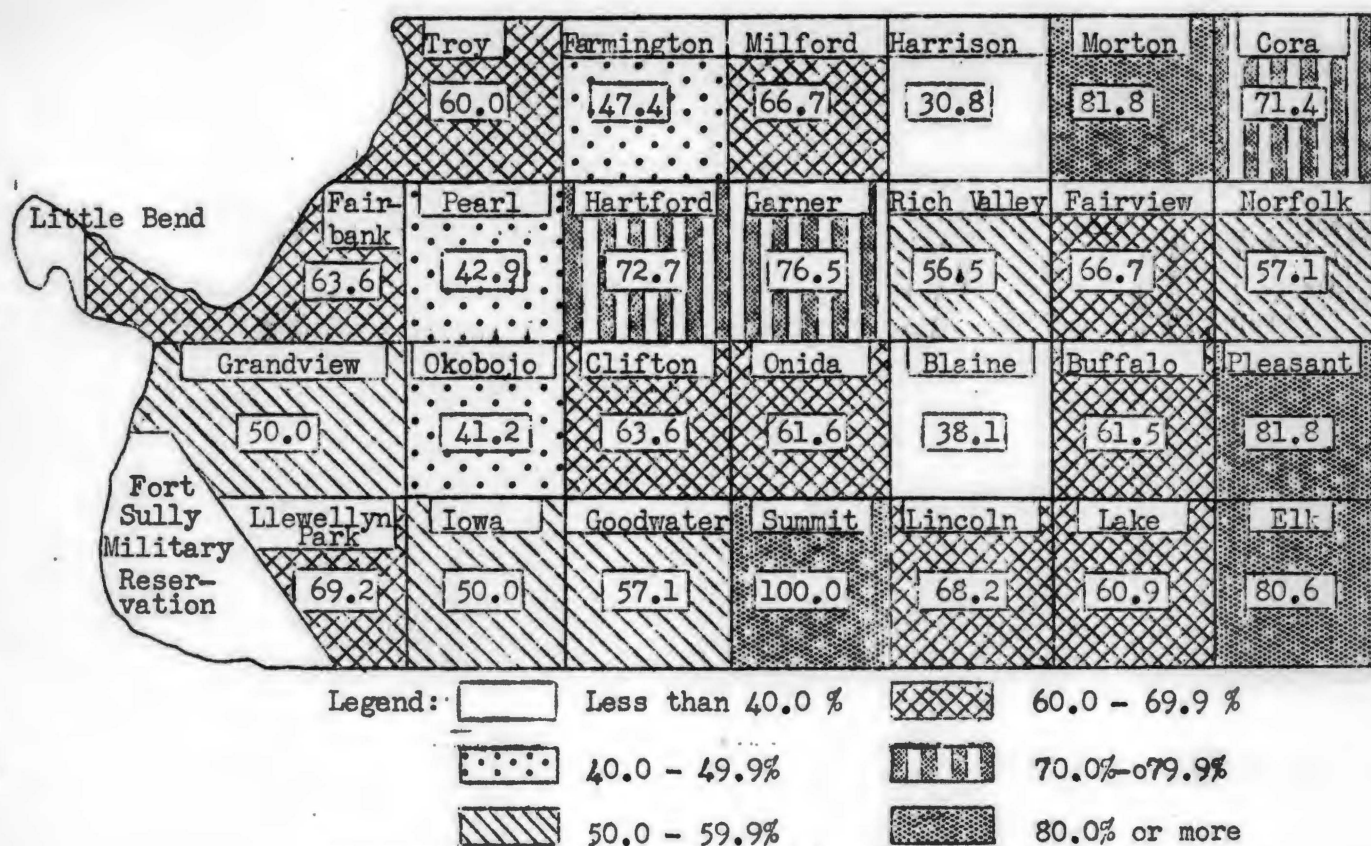
Table I shows the growth and decline of the population in Sully county from 1890 - 1940. The effect of drouth and depression is revealed in the 28.9 percent loss of population that occurred between 1890 - 1900. From 1900 to 1930 there was a steady and continuous growth in population. However, the influence of drouth and depression is revealed again during the decade 1930 - 1940 when the county lost 30.7 percent of its population, reducing it to fewer persons than it had in 1920.

Table I. Total Population and the Increase or Decrease by Decades, Sully County, 1890 - 1940.

Year	Total Population	Increase	Percent Increase
1940	2,668	-1,184	-30.7
1930	3,852	1,021	36.1
1920	2,831	369	15.0
1910	2,462	747	43.6
1900	1,715	- 697	-28.9
1890	2,412		

Source: Final Releases of 1940 U. S. Census.

Figure 4. Tenancy Rate in Sully County by Townships, 1938.



Source: Farm Security Records Supplemented by other sources.

A survey of Sully county made in 1938 showed 441 farm operators, of which 269 or 61 percent were renters. Figure 4 shows the variation in proportion of tenancy among the townships of Sully county in 1938. The percentage which renters were of all farm operators ranged from 30.8 percent in Harrison township to 100 percent in Summit township. In 11 townships 65 percent or more of the operators were listed as tenants.

Table II shows two significant developments—a continuous increase in the tenancy rate from 8.7 percent in 1890 to 58.4 percent in 1940, and the recent trend toward increased size of farms. The latter trend appears to be desirable, as it indicates an essential adjustment to a farm unit adequate for the support of a family. The increase in tenancy is not so desirable. Because of the insecurity of the renter's tenure, social organizations tend to be relatively weak and unstable in areas where the tenancy rate is high. There is less interest in conserving land resources and making needed improvements. Furthermore, absentee landlords become chiefly interested in the return from the farm and they often oppose community betterment insofar as it raises taxes.

Table II. Trends in Tenancy Rate, Number of Farms and Average Size of Farms in Sully county, 1890-1940.

Year	Tenancy Rate	Number of Farms	Average Size (in Acres)
1940	58.4	488	1,193.0
1930	41.6	673	773.5
1920	28.1	456	1,061.6
1910	19.7	478	676.4
1900	13.1	375	978.6
1890	8.7	589	254.4

Source: U. S. Census Report.

\* All Nationalities comprising 20 percent or more of the farm operators.  
Source: Farm Security Records, supplemented by other sources.

As previously noted, nationality background is an important factor in determining the habits, attitudes and customs of a group. Variations in work customs, in education traditions, in recreational interests, in neighborhood persistence, in religious beliefs and affiliations, in agricultural practices, in thrift and frugality, in progressiveness and in many other customs and practices can be partially attributed to the difference in the cultural background of various nationalities. One of the significant relationships borne out by this study is that which exists between nationality and denominational preference. The Scandinavians are predominantly Lutheran--that of their native land; the British are mainly Methodist and Catholic; and the Germans are about evenly divided between the Lutheran, Methodist and Mennonite churches. Forty-four and nine-tenths percent of the Americans prefer the Methodist church, while the remainder of the Americans and the mixed groups are rather evenly divided among the major denominations. Since many Americans and many of those in the mixed groups no longer trace their nationality back to the country of origin, one may believe that with the passing of time and merging of culture patterns, distinct nationality characteristics--church preference and others tend to disappear.



Figure 6. Number of Births and Deaths Per 1000 of the Population of Sully County, 1920 - 1940.

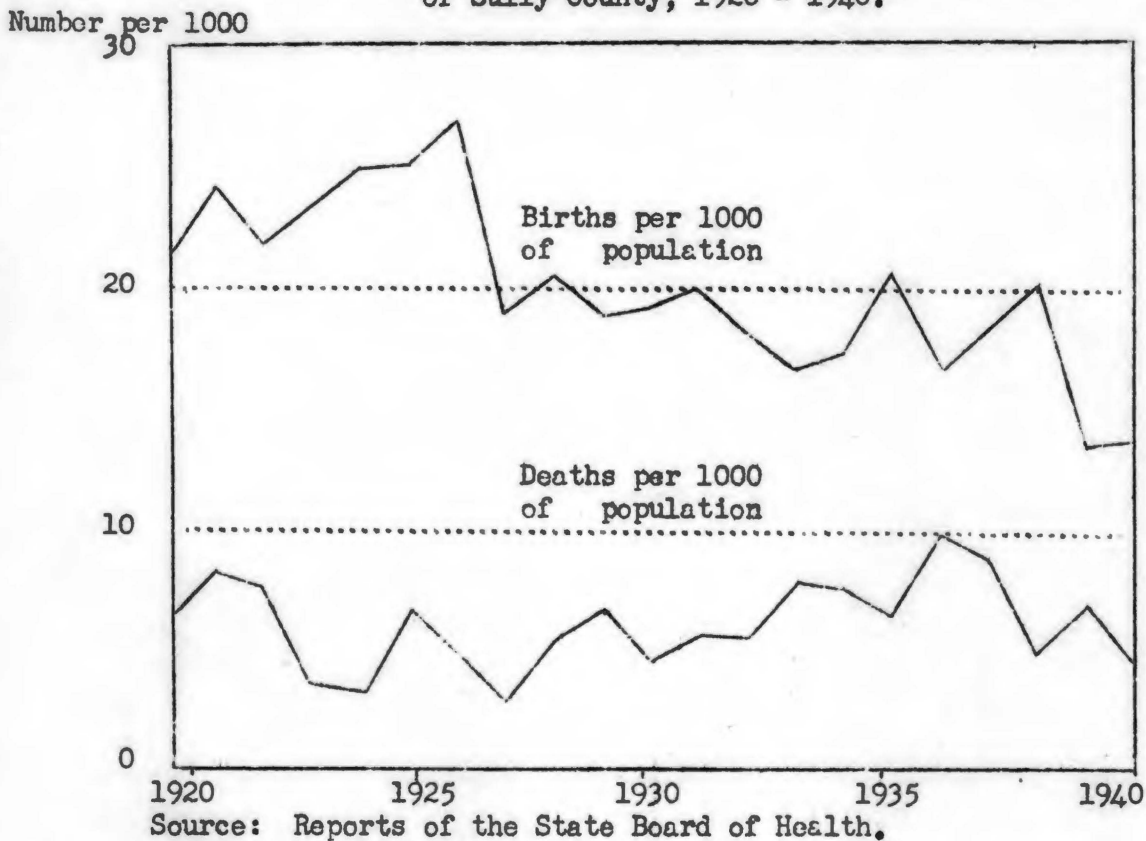
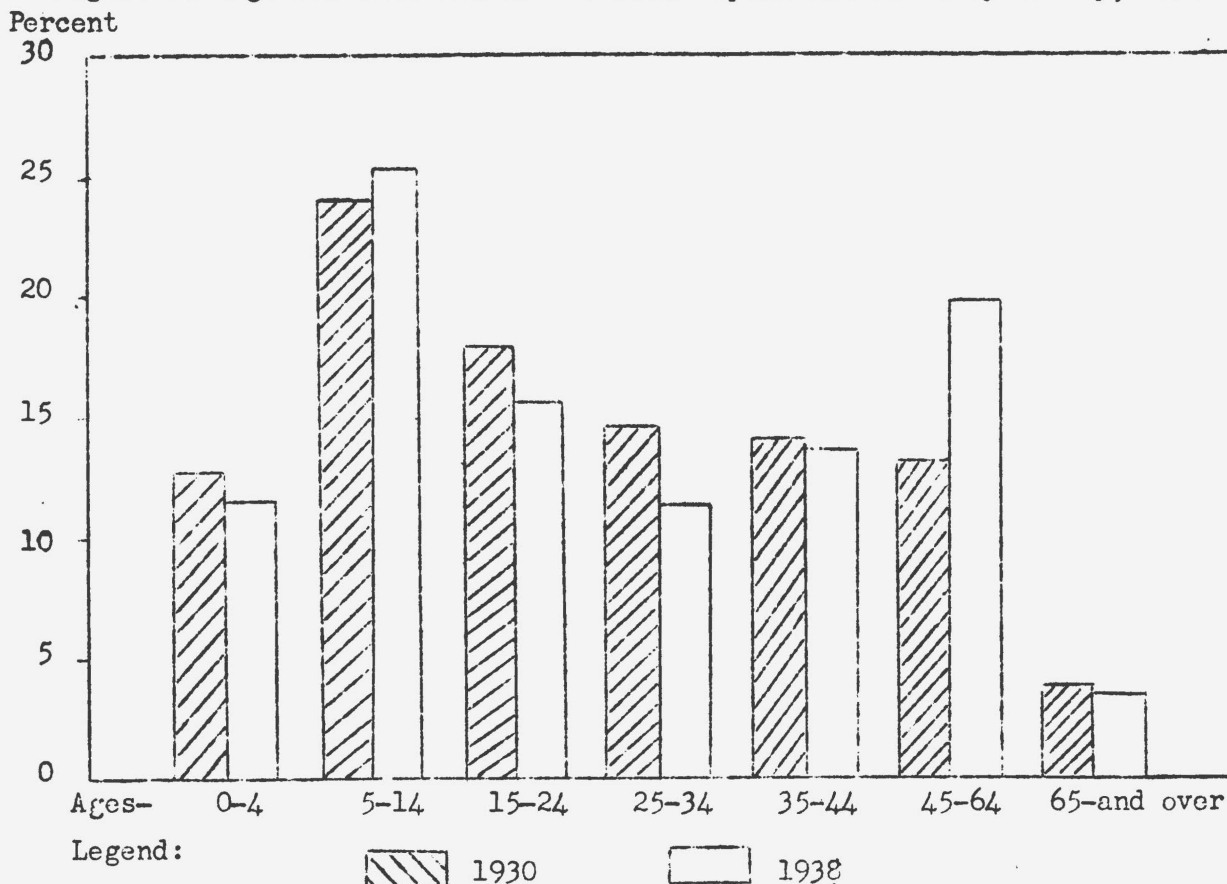


Figure 6 shows the trend in birth and death rates in Sully county 1920-1940. It is evident that the two rates are approaching some degree of equality. This situation is due to the rapidly declining birth rate, and to the fact that the death rate has increased slightly—the average death rate for the period 1920-1924 was 5.9, while the average rate for 1936-1940 was 6.8 deaths per 1000 of the population. The birth rate has fallen from 21.2 births per 1000 of the population in 1920 to 13.5 births per 1000 of the population in 1940. Because the number of births in any given year probably does not represent fairly the prevailing level of the birth rate, a five year average for the beginning and the end of the period has been used for comparative purposes. For the interval 1920-1924 the average was 23.1 births per 1000 of the population, while during 1936-1940 the average had dropped to 16.3 births. Since the population is gradually ageing and medical science has not extended the span of life, a slightly rising death rate is in prospect.

The desire for a higher standard of living, coupled with a widespread knowledge of contraceptive measures are important factors which are partially responsible for the declining birth rate. The decline has brought about a marked decline in the age distribution of the population. One of the major problems created by the drop in the birth rate is that of declining elementary school enrollments. Between 1926 and 1940 elementary enrollment in Sully county declined 45.6 percent—from 857 to 466 pupils. By 1940 eighteen schools had been closed; one-sixth of all schools open had five or fewer pupils and consequently were operating at very high costs per pupil. While loss of population through migration was partially responsible for the decline in enrollment, it is believed that the declining birth rate has been the chief factor. (A more complete discussion of this problem may be found in Rural Sociology Pamphlet No. 23, The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Sully County.)



Figure 7. Age Distribution of the Farm Population in Sully County, 1930-1938.



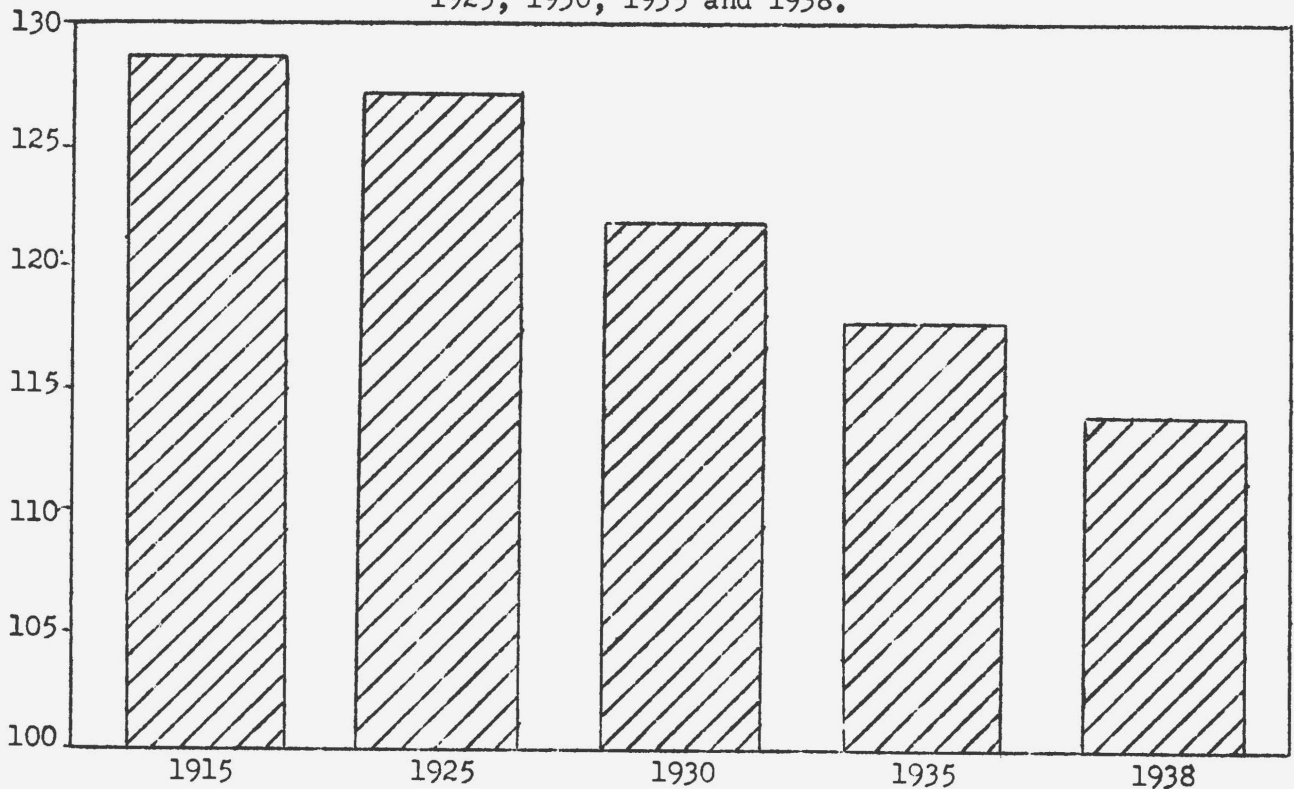
Source: U. S. Census and Farm Security records.

The above chart indicates that the age distribution of the farm population changed considerably between 1930 and 1938. With the exception of the 5-14 age group, the proportion of the population declined in all age groups under 44 years while the proportion of the population 45-64 years of age increased from 13.0 percent of the population in 1930 to 19.7 percent in 1938. The decline in the proportion of the population in the younger age groups was due to the drop in birth rate; outward migration, especially of young persons; and an increasing number of aged due to the maturing of the population. Similar factors as, the extension of the expectancy of life for the younger age group, an ageing population and a declining number of persons in the younger age groups, were responsible for the increased proportion in the older group.

These changes in the age distribution of the population will have a number of significant social consequences. The most significant result of a decreasing number of young persons is dwindling elementary school enrollments necessitating reorganization of the existing school structure. Since the proportion of the aged will probably continue to increase, it may be necessary to extend old age assistance to a larger percent of the population. Other effects of an increasing proportion of aged persons in the population will probably be a lessening of population mobility; an increase in church membership; and a greater conservatism in taste and public opinion.

It should be borne in mind that Figure 7 shows the age distribution only for the farm population of the county. The age distribution is more marked in towns and villages. According to the 1930 census the proportion of persons over 65 years of age was almost three times as large in the town population as in the farm population of the state. On the other hand, the towns with a lower birth rate have a smaller proportion of the population in the younger age groups. The preponderance of old people in towns is partially due to the fact that the town is a convenient and rather inexpensive place in which to retire.

Figure 8. Males Per 100 Females in the Farm Population of Sully County, 1915, 1925, 1930, 1935 and 1938.



Source: U.S. and State Census Reports, and Farm Security Records.

A high ratio of males to females is always characteristic of predominantly rural areas. The farm population contains a larger proportion of males than females because farm work is essentially a man's occupation. Single men are more likely to be farm operators than are single women. The hiring of male farm laborers also tend to increase the proportion of males in farming areas. With approximately 81.4 percent (1930) of its gainfully employed male population engaged in agricultural pursuits, it is not surprising to find more males in the Sully county population than females. A high ratio of males to females was true in Sully county in pioneer days when many of the settlers were young unattached males. With the passing of the settlement period, the sex ratio has tended to become more equal. In the farm population the sex ratio decreased from 128.8 in 1915 to 113.9 in 1938. (See Figure 8) For the county as a whole, both town and country, the number of males per 100 females decreased from 142.7 in 1890 to 112.4 in 1935. A reduction in the number of foreign-born has automatically tended to equalize the sex ratio, since it is the foreign-born segment of the population which has by far the larger ratio of males to females. The declining proportion of persons engaged in agriculture and the growth of towns has also tended to reduce the sex ratio.

In Onida, the females outnumber the males. In 1925 there were 95.7 males per 100 females and in 1935 the sex ratio had dropped to 92.1. The towns attract a larger number of women and girls because of the opportunities for employment in clerical and domestic positions.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. The loss of farm population in Sully county during the past decade has been accompanied by an increase in the size of farm units. This trend seems to be a healthy one, pointing to a better man-land adjustment.
2. The increasing tenancy rate constitutes both an economic and social problem. Economically, tenancy, because of the usual short term lease, makes for a lack of responsibility on the part of the tenant which is reflected in mining of the soil and abuse of farm buildings. From a social standpoint, all organizations tend to be weaker and more unstable in tenant dominated areas than in localities where owners predominate. There is nothing inherently evil in tenancy itself but rather in the usual way in which it is administered. The policy of short term leases is undoubtedly the worst feature of tenancy as it now exists. It is felt that long term leases of the sliding-scale type would do much to alleviate the present social problem caused by tenancy.
3. Although the proportion of the foreign-born in Sully county is declining, nationality culture patterns continue to influence the lives of those of foreign descent. This is particularly true with respect to the family, neighborhood groups and church preference. The existence, distribution, and characteristics of various nationality groups within the county should not be overlooked in any program of land use planning. It is particularly important to have adequate representation from each nationality group on the planning committee.
4. The falling birth rate has resulted in a declining number of persons in the lower age groups, with consequent reduction in elementary enrollments. Because of the excessive per pupil costs for operating schools for only a few pupils, declining enrollment has recently been recognized as a real problem. Several suggestions for the solution of this problem are offered in the Rural Sociology Pamphlet Number 23, The Declining Enrollment Problem in the Schools of Sully County.

Ageing of the population, a low death rate, and a decrease in the number of persons in the younger age groups through the operation of a lower birth rate and outward migration of younger people have resulted in a considerable increase in the proportion of persons in the older age brackets. As a high percentage of these persons are without financial resources, it appears likely that the number of persons needing old age assistance will increase. Attention should also be given to the building of more, smaller, and cheaper apartments to accommodate old people; to the prevention of diseases that afflict the aged, and to providing leisure time activities and facilities for oldsters.

5. The number of males per 100 females seems to be approaching equality in the farm population of Sully county. This is probably a healthy condition since the trend toward equality in the sex ratio will tend to increase the number of normal families; retard excessive mobility; and introduce more refinements into everyday life.