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The Emerging Rural Communities of Marshall County

W. F. Kumlien

Howard M. Sauer

C. Scandrette

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In the period of early settlement in Marshall County the farmer's contacts were largely limited to his immediate neighborhood. He seldom traveled more than three or four miles—a distance commonly known as a "team haul". In recent years, improved transportation facilities have permitted farm families to go to the village for an increasing proportion of their goods and services. As rural folks have extended their radius of interaction, larger village-centered communities have emerged.
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The Emerging Rural Communities of Marshall County

People can be most effectively reached and influenced through the social groups to which they belong. It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist planning groups and other action agencies in Marshall county by locating the principle rural groupings in the form of neighborhoods and communities of the county. For a better understanding of the present day status and functions of these social groupings, a brief historical sketch is given, with emphasis on the factors leading to the emergence of the rural community.

It is evident that something is wrong with the map below. It is apparent that such important features as villages and highways have been omitted. The 1,120 farmsteads in Marshall county cannot be thought of as so many isolated settlements, but must be considered in relation to their neighborhood and their larger village-centered community settings. The country and village are interdependent; the country looks to the village for such services as merchandising, recreation, education, and the village depends upon the country for raw material, trade and support of its institutions. This reciprocal relation is producing the town-country community of modern rural society.

Figure 1. Location of the 1,120 Farmsteads in Marshall County, 1940.

Source: General highway map of South Dakota, State Highway Planning Survey - 1938
The pioneer farmer was not wholly self-sufficient from an economic standpoint. He was dependent on the village, which appeared on the frontier at an early date, for his supply of many essential goods and services.

The first Marshall county landmark was established in 1864 at Fort Sisseton. At the Fort there was a postoffice, a portable saw mill and a blacksmith shop. In 1880 the Milwaukee railroad was built through Marshall county from Langford to Newark (see Figure 2). Spain grew up half way between Langford and Britton and soon had a postoffice, grocery store and grain elevator. In 1888 the Great Northern railroad built a line across the northwest part of the county and the stations Amherst, Burch, and Kidder sprang up. It was to these towns that the pioneer farmers of Marshall county went for supplies and services. These frontier towns were equipped to supply a surprisingly wide range of services. By 1884 Britton had a total of 41 buildings. The business places included a hardware, drug store, livery barn and feed store, two dry goods and grocery stores, blacksmith shop, hotel, restaurant, and a postoffice. Mail at this time came from the south to the Fort then across to Britton and north to Newark; it also came from Andover to Langford, Spain and then to Britton. Another early mail route was from Webster, Old Eden, Luffman, Sunnyside, Old Veblen, and then north to Geneseo, North Dakota. (See Figure 2).
The early settlers of Marshall county, bound together by such ties as kinship, common religion, common nationality and mutual assistance, tended to homestead in groups on adjoining farms. These neighborhood groupings were especially important in supplying the social satisfaction of the pioneer community. Habits of work exchange and united support of educational and religious institutions tended to draw the families comprising the neighborhood still closer together.

Better facilities for transportation and communication have had far-reaching effects on rural group organization. Farm folks have been able to extend their contacts over a much wider area, reaching out beyond the bounds of their local neighborhood. They have gone more frequently to the village and have discovered they have much in common with village residents. As a result of these forces neighborhoods have declined in importance; some have disappeared, while others have lost certain functions to the village center. Figure 3 shows the neighborhoods which were in existence in Marshall county in 1940. These neighborhoods are probably fewer in number and larger in area than those which existed prior to the advent of the automobile. Although their functions are relatively limited, the neighborhoods of Marshall county have shown a tendency to persist. When representative farmers of the county were asked to name the factors which hold their neighborhoods together, the most frequent replies in order of occurrence were: "district school", "clubs", "visiting" and "kinship" (tied), "work exchange", "country church", and "same nationality". It would appear that the neighborhood still plays a rather significant role in the rural picture, although its importance will probably continue to decline.
Figure 4 shows the various areas from which the village and open country churches of Marshall county draw their members. It is readily seen that the attendance areas of the town churches are considerably larger than those served by the open country churches. The fact that there are eight open country churches in Marshall country and six just outside the county would indicate that people will not travel as far to attend church as they will to obtain certain other services in the village centers. Furthermore, 25 churches in the county naturally limits the size and increases the number of church community areas as compared with service areas which are more completely village-centered. Of the open country churches there are five Lutheran, two Presbyterian and one Reformed.

More and more farm families are attending town churches, a factor which has tended to strengthen town-country relationships. In many sections the participating farm families has become too small to support a country church with a well rounded and adequate program. The village church may eventually take over the religious functions for the entire surrounding area.
Since 1921 it has been compulsory for common school districts which do not operate their own high schools to pay tuition costs for students living within their borders who attend high school in nearby towns or villages. The areas from which 11 high schools within or near Marshall county enrolled the Marshall county tuition students are shown in Figure 5 along with the location of farmsteads from which the students numbering about 250 are drawn.

The high school service areas correspond rather closely to the composite community areas shown in Figure 8. The high school has become a very strong force in determining community boundaries and in establishing closer town-country relationship. The farmer who has sons or daughters in the village high school concerns himself with its organization and activities. He goes into the village more frequently and as he broadens his contacts with the village people he joins with them in an increasingly varied range of activities. His children in high school make still further adjustment to the larger village-centered community life. Through these processes differences and misunderstandings which may have existed between town and country are gradually disappearing.
In the period of early settlement of Marshall county, residence in a specific locality, proximity, and common life; served as the basis for most group organization. The school district, the open-country church, exchange of work, and social activity followed neighborhood lines. Interests were relatively limited and held in common; therefore, group organizations were simple and included almost everyone within the neighborhood.

With the coming of better facilities for travel and communication the country dwellers were able to seek satisfaction in groups of their own choice. The farmer has been exposed to new types of interest groups and associations which often go far beyond neighborhood bounds in recruiting their participants. In 1940, 48 special interest groups were found among the farmers of Marshall county. Twelve of these groups were Womens' Extension clubs, 11 were 4-H clubs and 9 were Community clubs. There were also 8 Girls' 4-H clubs, 5 Farmers' Union Organizations and 3 Farmers' Co-operative organizations in the county. (see Figure 6). These categories do not include informal social gatherings or farm membership in town centered organizations such as Service clubs and lodges. It is evident that group activities, like other aspects of rural life, are being reorganized on a wider community level.
The farm family, as previously noted has always been somewhat dependent upon village centers for the satisfaction of its economic needs. Since the coming of the automobile, many functions which were formerly neighborhood-centered have been shifted to the village. Improved transportation and communication facilities in recent years have greatly increased the number of trips made to the village, as well as the variety and quantity of goods and services supplied by the village centers. The cross-roads general store has all but passed from the picture; the village has become the economic core of the surrounding farm area. It serves as a market for agricultural produce and, in turn, supplies the farmer with his groceries, clothing, goods used in the farming enterprise—oil, twine, fencing, machinery, etc., and many other necessities. Increasing interdependence of town and country in their trade relationships is evident.

Figure 7 shows the trade areas of Britton for five commodities selected because of their importance to the farmer. These commodities are bulk fuels, grain, groceries, machinery and produce. Since the boundaries are based upon information supplied by Britton tradesmen, they represent only personal estimates, and it has been found that there has been considerable overlapping with trade area secured in similar fashion for other towns of the county. Despite these limitations, Figure 7 does show the approximate areas served by dealers in the selected commodities. (Britton has an especially large farm machinery trade area because very little farm machinery is handled in the county except at Britton, Veblen and Langford). By combining the trade, church and high school service areas it is possible to arrive at a composite community area for Britton (see Figure 8) which rather closely describes the natural community boundaries.
"A rural community is regarded as an area including the village center and the surrounding territory, the limits of the territory being determined by the farthest distances where the agencies and institutions of the village serve the majority of the families in a majority of their activities." DWIGHT SANDERSON

Until about 25 years ago, the rural community was relatively unimportant and hardly existent in recognizable form. The social life of farm people was centered largely in the neighborhood. The one-room country school and the open country church, two important rural institutions, strengthened the neighborhood ties. More recently the tremendous advances in transportation and communication have brought widespread changes in the structure of rural group life. Depopulation through outward migration has weakened many neighborhoods. Others have lost their principle functions with the decline of the district school. A larger number of farmers are going to the village for church services and sending their children to the village school.

The same forces which have led to the decline of neighborhoods have been responsible for the reorganization of rural life on a larger community basis. Many of the functions dropped by the neighborhoods have been assumed by village centers. Figure 8 shows the composite community areas of Marshall county. These areas were located by first plotting on a map the trade, high school, and church areas for each village offering those services, then selecting a boundary in each case which was most representative of all the plotted areas. Equitable division was made of those regions subject to overlapping claims by two or more villages. Hillhead and Spain are a part of a larger community area as they do not offer enough services to constitute a separate community area. It is evident that the size of the community varies directly with the population of the village center and the number of services it supplies.
Various historical changes in social organization have been shown in this pamphlet in order to trace the gradual emergence of the present rural community. The rural neighborhood, of which the community is essentially an enlarged reproduction, functioned best during the horse and buggy days. It consisted of ten to twenty families which frequently clustered about some single economic or social service, such as a general store, a blacksmith shop, post office, a rural school or a church. In some instances the neighborhood was merely a social grouping held together by some such common bond as kinship, neighborliness or exchange of work.

With the coming of the automobile and good roads, most of the economic services were readily taken over by the village or town. The only institutions left in many open-country areas were the rural schools and churches. Even the open-country churches have been giving way during the last few years. At the present time they make up less than one-fourth of all churches in the state, and of those which remain only 7 percent have resident ministers. Most country churches are now yoked with a town church, with the same minister serving two or more congregations.

During the past decade the rural district school system has declined in much the same manner. Recent studies reveal that rural school enrollments for the state have declined more than 25 percent since the peak year of 1930. Over half of the open-country schools enroll ten or fewer pupils, and in some counties as many as 25 to 30 percent enroll five or fewer. When the enrollment drops to five or below, it has been customary to close the school and send the remaining pupils to a neighboring school, paying tuition and transportation costs. In some cases the remaining pupils have been sent to nearby village or town schools.

It now appears that the villages and towns are becoming the service centers for the rural community. The village center and its surrounding service area constitute the new rural community, which makes up the prevailing type of social organization in South Dakota. Thus in a typical county there will be as many rural communities as there are villages and towns.

IMPLICATIONS

There are definite implications growing out of this situation both for the farmer and the townsmen. For the farmer it means that he is just as truly a member of the rural community as is the village-resident. The fact that he can obtain the various economic and social services in the center at a reasonable cost makes it possible for him to be a specialist in agricultural production. Likewise for the townsman it means that he can specialize in his particular field of service as long as he serves his open country and town neighbors efficiently. Thus there are distinct mutual advantages in maintaining harmonious town-country relationships.

Public servants, such as extension agents, FSA and AAA workers, teachers, ministers, etc., should recognize that the new rural community is a natural community which has evolved through gradual economic and social adjustments. All planning activities should take into account the natural community areas and should utilize them as the logical units of rural organization.