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The Emerging Rural Communities of Turner County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette

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During pioneer days most of the farmers' activities were confined within a radius of three or four miles—a distance commonly known as a "team haul." In more recent years, improved transportation facilities have permitted farm families to go to village centers for an increasing proportion of their goods and services. The result has been the emergence of village-centered communities whose areas are several times as extensive as those of the old-time neighborhoods.

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota
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The Emerging Rural Communities of Turner 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 Turner 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 function of these social groupings, a brief historical sketch is given, with emphasis on the factors leading to the emergence of the rural community which encompasses both town and country.

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 1,734 farmsteads 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 dwellers are interdependent; the country looks to the village for such services as merchandising, recreation, education, etc., and the village depends upon the country for raw materials, trade and support of its institutions.

Figure 1. Location of Farmsteads in Turner County, 1938

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 villages, which appeared on the frontier at an early date, for his supply of many essential goods and services.

The first settlement of Turner County was made in 1869 at Swan Lake. When the county was organized in 1871 this place, designated as Swan Lake City, became the county seat. As early as 1884 the towns of Parker, Marion Junction, Hurley and Centerville had also been established. In these towns a surprising number of business enterprises were in operation. An early historian writes of Parker "All lines of mercantile pursuits are thoroughly represented." It was to these rapidly growing towns that the early settlers went for various services and necessary supplies.

Postoffices were located at Danerville, Turner, Idlewilde, Spring Valley, Childstown, Home, Shank, Lost Lake, Adelia and Freya. Country stores and blacksmith shops often located near these points, served the more immediate needs of their neighborhoods. As railroads extended their lines through the county some of these places found themselves "inland" towns and gradually faded from the map. Swan Lake City was one of these and was virtually abandoned when the county seat was established at Parker in 1885.

Churches and schools were built at an early date. It will be noted that six open country churches are shown on the 1884 map. In addition to these, eleven church edifices had been built in the towns of the county.
During the settlement period persons of the same nationality tended to homestead in groups on adjacent farms. In some instances whole blocks of townships were settled by persons of the same nationality. These areas were virtually "Little Denmarks", "Little Germans", "Little Irish", etc. as the case might be, the cultural pattern of their homeland being transplanted almost bodily.

Since settlement days both the cultural and geographic isolation of the original nationality group has been partially destroyed through migration, intermarriage and Americanization. Nevertheless persons of the same ancestral background still tend to neighbor together to a much greater extent than they neighbor with persons of other nationalities.

In Turner county nationality background has played a significant part in the pattern of neighborhood and community organization. It will be noted that a large majority of the farm household heads in eleven townships comprising the north and central parts of the county were of German extraction, with percentages ranging from 26.7 in Parker township to 94 percent in Dolton township. In the seven remaining townships in the southern part of the county those of Scandinavian nationality were predominant with majorities ranging from 40 percent in Hurley to 81.9 percent in Daneville township.
Figure 4 shows the various areas from which the village and open country churches of Turner county draw their members. It is readily seen that the attendance areas of the town churches are considerably larger than those of the open country churches. Yet it seems that people will not travel as far to attend church as they will to obtain certain other services in the village centers. The fact that there are twenty-four open country churches besides 40 town churches naturally limits the size and increases the number of community areas as compared with service areas which are more completely village centered.

However, more and more farm families are attending town churches, a factor which has tended to strengthen town-country relationships. In many sections, the number of participating farm families has become too small to support adequately the open country church. The village churches may eventually take over the religious function for the entire surrounding area.

* Areas including several country churches indicate that the membership of all churches shown is scattered throughout a given 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 13 high schools within or near Turner county enrolled the Turner county tuition students are plotted in Figure 5 along with the location of rural schools from which the students, numbering about 350, 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 relationships. 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 adjustments 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 Turner 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, 52 special interest organizations were found among the farmers in Turner county. Twenty-six of these were Boys' 4-H clubs, seven were Girls' 4-H clubs, 16 were Women's Extension clubs and there were two Men's farm organizations (one Crop Improvement Association and one Livestock Improvement Association). 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 crossroads general store has all but passed from the picture; the village has become the economic core of the surrounding farm area. The village 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 Parker 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 Parker tradesmen, they represent only personal estimates, and it has been found that there has been considerable overlapping with trade areas 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. By combining the trade, church and high school service areas it is possible to arrive at a composite community area for Parker (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 neighborhood have been assumed by village centers. Figure 8 shows the composite community areas of Turner county. These areas were located by first plotting on a map the trade, high school, and church service areas for each village, then selecting a boundary in each case which was most representative of all the plotted areas. Equivalent division was made of those regions subject to overlapping claims by two or more villages. Hooker is a part of a larger community area as it does not offer enough services to constitute a separate community area. It seems that the size of the community varies directly with the population of the village center and the number of services it supplies.
SUMMARY

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, neighborhood 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 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 townsmen 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.