7-15-1942

The Emerging Rural Communities of Clay County

W. F. Kumlien
C. Scandrette

Follow this and additional works at: http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio
Part of the Rural Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
Kumlien, W. F. and Scandrette, C., "The Emerging Rural Communities of Clay County" (1942). Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets. 104.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/agexperimentsta_rural-socio/104
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.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This study was made possible by the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration with the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W.P.A.Project No. 265-1-74-57. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following persons:

church survey field workers who discovered where farm families attend church; high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students; and business men of Clay county trade centers who volunteered information regarding the extent of their trade territories. Full responsibility for statements of interpretation, however, rests with the authors rather than with the persons who supplied the data.
The Emerging Rural Communities of Clay 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 Clay county by locating the principal 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.

Something is wrong with the map below. What important features are lacking? The answer, obviously, is that no villages or highways are shown. The 1,212 farmsteads cannot be thought of as so many isolated settlements, but should be viewed in relation to their neighborhood and their larger, village-centered community settings. The farmer and the village are inter-dependent—the village has sprung from the farmer's needs and, in turn, is dependent on the farmer for its continued existence.

Figure 1. Location of the 1,212 Farmsteads in Clay 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 villages, which appeared on the frontier at an early date, for his supply of many essential goods and services.

The first permanent settlement in Clay county was made about 1857-58 by a company of post settlers who established a trading post at the old town of Vermillion. Settlement progressed slowly the first four or five years but then increased rapidly and by 1870 most of the land in the county had been taken. The town of Vermillion had attained considerable commercial prosperity, being a trading center for a large territory, when the flood of 1881 swept practically the entire city away. A new town was laid out on the high bluff a mile or two back from the old site and this town grew rapidly. Meckling, Burbank and Lodi were other towns established in the county before 1884. To these rapidly growing towns the early settlers came for necessary supplies and services. A surprisingly wide variety of these services and supplies were available. In the fall of 1863 Vermillion had three good hotels, two banks, a courthouse, a newspaper, a university, four churches, a fine schoolhouse, several attorneys and physicians, extensive lumber yards, a brick factory, a band, several Societies and Orders besides mechanics and smaller tradesmen. Stage lines connected the town with the country towns and a commodious ferry operated between the city and several points in Nebraska.

Post offices were located at various points in the county and small general stores and sometimes blacksmith shops at these places served the more immediate needs of their neighborhoods. Schools and churches were among the first requisites to be arranged for among these early settlers and the first school house was built in Clay county in 1862.
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 Danmarks", "Little Germanies", "Little Irelands", 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 Clay county nationality background has played a significant part in the pattern of neighborhood and community organization. It will be noted that the farm household heads of Scandinavian descent were predominant in every township with percentages ranging from 22.8 percent in Fairview township to 88 percent in Garfield township. Other nationalities, particularly British, American, German and French are represented, but ranked above 20 percent in only four townships. The British ranked above 20 percent in three townships (Star, Bethel and Fairview) and in Vermillion township 23.2 percent of the farm operators were of American descent.
Figure 4 shows the various areas from which the village and open country churches of Clay county drew 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. 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 12 open country churches besides 17 town churches* naturally limits the size and increases the number of church 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.

* Only one of the four churches in Irene is located in Clay county.
Figure 5. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Clay County Tuition Students, During the 1939-1940 Term.

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 six high schools within or near Clay county enrolled the Clay county tuition students are plotted in Figure 5 along with the location of rural schools from which the students numbering about 225 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 Clay 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 satisfactions 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, 41 special interest organizations were found among the farm people of Clay county. Eighteen of these groups were 4-H clubs, 10 were Women's Extension clubs, nine were PTA organizations, two were Community clubs and there were two Farmers' Union organizations. (See Fig. 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 Wakonda 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 Wakonda 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 Wakonda (see Figure 8) which rather closely describes the natural community boundaries.
Figure 8. Composite Community Areas of Clay County, 1940.

Legend:

-------- Trade
areas for towns
included in com-
posite community.

"A rural community is regarded as an area
including the village center and the surround-
ing territory, the limits of the territory be-
ing determined by the farthest distances where
the agencies and institutions of the village
serve the majority of the families in a ma-
jority 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 neigh-
borhood ties. More recently the tremendous advances in transportation and com-
munication 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 send-
ing 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 Clay 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. Equitable division was made of
those regions subject to overlapping claims by two or more villages. Dalesburg,
Hub City, Alsen, Greenfield, and Burbank are a part of larger community areas
as they do 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 servies 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, 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.