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THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF SMALL COMMUNITIES
IN THE SOUTHERN ALLEGHENY MOUNTAINS

by

Perry S. Wood

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The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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Department of Geography

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert H. Stoddard

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 1973

TITLE

THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF SMALL COMMUNITIES IN THE

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BY

PERRY S. WOOD

APPROVED

DATE

Robert H. Stoddard

11 April 1973

Dean S. Rugg

11 April 1973

Brian Blouet

11 April 1973

Albin T. Anderson

11 April 1973

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

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CHAPTER I

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased concern among laymen, scholars, and government officials for the problems associated with the urbanization of the population in the United States. One of these problems has been the concentration of the population into large urban areas, which has meant that some communities have experienced rapid growth while others have experienced decline. In particular, it has been the small rural community that has been most susceptible to decline. It has been predicted that for the small communities in the Midwest that are outside the orbit of a metropolitan community "the handwriting is on the wall for a good many of these towns."¹ The eventual decline of a small community has been considered to be a stage in the evolution of population concentration.²

Evidence indicates that rather than the demise of all of the small communities, some of them are growing while others are maintaining their size. The question arises as to which ones will grow and which ones will decline. Previous investigations have revealed

¹Dwight Nesmith, "Cities Crowding--Country Side Losing," United States News and World Report, May 7, 1962, p. 79.

²Jack Gibbs, "The Evolution of Population Concentration," Economic Geography, XXXIX (1963), p. 119.

a direct relationship between the size of a community and its growth pattern. Also, it has been discovered that the spatial arrangement of the communities has a significant bearing on their probability for growth. The present study examines these two relationships and other relationships as plausible explanations for the growth and decline of the small communities in a part of the Appalachian Region.

Overview of Major Findings

Both geographers and rural sociologists have shared an interest in the growth and decline of small communities. After the publication of each decennial census since 1930, there have been studies made describing the changes that have taken place in the size of small communities. Although significant patterns have been discovered, the literature pertaining to the nature of small town change remains inconclusive.

Contrary to the prediction made by a few scholars of the eventual decline of small communities, data show that not all of them have experienced decline. Earlier studies have shown that growth and stability have been as common as decline.³ More recently, Hart and Salisbury, in their study of small towns in the Middle West, found that between 1950 and 1960 growth was more common than decline. Of the total number of 3,697 villages, or small towns studied, 29.8 per cent gained 10 per cent or more while only 24.1 per cent lost 10 per cent or more. The remaining

³Edmund deS Brunner, "Do Villages Grow?" Rural Sociology, I (1936), pp. 506-509; Edmund deS Brunner and T. Lynn Smith, "Village Growth and Decline, 1930-1940," Rural Sociology, IX (1944), pp. 103-115; and Edmund deS Brunner, "The Small Village: 1940-1950," Rural Sociology, XVII (1952), pp. 127-131.

46.1 per cent of the villages experienced no appreciable change.⁴ In a more restricted study, in terms of the area considered, Fuguitt found that for Wisconsin towns, ". . . the number of shifts over a decade to a larger size category exceeded the shifts to a smaller size category."⁵ Thus, the data indicate that not all small communities are declining, but instead, some small communities have experienced growth while others have experienced decline. The problem becomes one of determining the processes at work that have a significant effect on influencing which communities will probably grow and which ones will probably decline.

Although the reasons for the growth of some small communities and the decline of others are very complex, previous research has revealed a significant relationship between the population growth of small communities and their size.⁶ In general, it is believed that once a community reaches a certain threshold of population, it will continue to grow. Thus, small communities below this threshold are more susceptible to decline than are those communities above this level.

In addition to the influence that the size of a community has on its growth pattern, a significant relationship has been discovered

⁴John Frazer Hart and Neil Salisbury, "Population Change in Middle Western Villages: A Statistical Approach," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, LV (1965), p. 141.

⁵Glenn Fuguitt, "The Growth and Decline of Small Towns as a Probability Process," American Sociological Review, XXX (1965), p. 406.

⁶S. C. Ratcliffe, "Size as a Factor in Population Changes of Incorporated Hamlets and Villages, 1930-1940," Rural Sociology, VII (1942), p. 332; Hart and Salisbury, op. cit., p. 157; and Ray Northam, "Population Size, Relative Location, and Declining Urban Centers: Conterminous United States, 1940-1960," Land Economics, XLV (1969), p. 315.

between the population growth of a small community and its distance from a large community.⁷ Small communities in spatial proximity to a large community are more inclined to grow than are those communities that are remotely located. In essence, the small communities that are situated close to a large community take on the characteristics of suburbs serving as bedroom communities.

Although the small communities in spatial proximity to a large community tend to experience population growth, the large community has a debilitating effect on the commercial structure of the small communities within its sphere of influence.⁸ These small communities that are located close to a large community tend to have fewer retail establishments than do other communities of the same size category that are found at a more distant location. This pattern can largely be attributed to the tendency of persons to shop in a larger community, where they have access to a much larger selection of consumer goods.

The loss of retail establishments in small towns is not only characteristic of communities in the immediate influence of large communities, where the debilitating influence is most pronounced, but includes all small communities. In general, small communities have experienced a decline in the number of retail establishments, which are concentrating in the larger communities.⁹ This change can largely be attributed

⁷Hart and Salisbury, op. cit., p. 157.

⁸Gerald Hodge, "The Prediction of Trade Center Viability in the Great Plains," Papers and Proceedings of the Regional Science Association, XV (1965), p. 98.

⁹Ibid., p. 91.

to the decline of rural population density and to the decrease in effective distance between any two points brought about by the common use of the automobile as a means of transportation and by the improvements in highway facilities. Because of these improvements in transportation, it is easier to travel twenty miles to a larger community today than it was in the past. This ability of people to travel greater distances has contributed to the demise of retail establishments in the small communities.

As indicated previously, it has been discovered that some small communities have been growing while others have been declining. Northam discovered that there is areal variation in the distribution of declining communities.¹⁰ Upon cartographically describing the distribution of declining communities as a per cent of the total number of communities in a one thousand square mile area, he found that a large percentage of the communities were declining in Appalachia, in the Cut-Over Region of the Great Lakes, in the Midwest, and in scattered areas elsewhere. A small percentage of the communities were found to be declining in the Industrial Belt, in the Gulf Coastal Region, and in the Southwestern part of the United States.

At the state level, Mattingly found that in the northern part of Illinois, an area characterized by industrialization and prosperous farms, even the small communities had a tendency to grow.¹¹ The findings

¹⁰Ray Northam, "Declining Urban Centers in the United States: 1940-1960," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, XV (1963), p. 20.

¹¹Paul Mattingly, "Population Trends in the Hamlets and Villages of Illinois: 1940-1960," Professional Geographer, XV (1963), p. 20.

of Mattingly are consistent with those of Northam in that both authors characterized the northern part of the state as an area having a small percentage of declining communities.¹² In the southern part of the state, an area characterized by coal mining and poorer farms, Mattingly found that three-fourths of the large communities, those communities with population in excess of 2,500 inhabitants, lost population. The findings of Mattingly support the conclusions reached by Northam in that there is areal variation in the distribution of declining centers at the state level as well as at the national level.

Need for Additional Research and Purpose of Present Study

Because of the areal variation in the distribution of growing and declining small towns, there is a need to focus additional research efforts on communities in areas that are smaller than the entire area of the United States in order to better understand the forces at work contributing to the growth of some communities and the decline of others. Fuguitt has also recognized this need when he made the following statement: "It is important to move next to the analysis at the subregional and state level in all regions."¹³ It is believed that studies at a larger scale that are concerned with a smaller area will expose additional factors, other than the size of a community and its spatial proximity to a large community, that have a significant influence on the growth and decline of small communities. In addition, studies at

¹²Northam, op. cit.

¹³Glenn Fuguitt, "The Places Left Behind: Population Trends and Policy for Rural America," Rural Sociology, XXXVI (1971), p. 463.

a different scale will reveal whether the relationship between community growth and its size or the relationship between community growth and its spatial proximity to a large community is altered with different regional settings. The present study is concerned with a small area encompassing 6,287 square miles. The ten county area is a part of the Appalachian Region and is characterized by Northam as having a large percentage of declining communities; however, there are some communities in the area that are growing. It is considered important to discover what these differential patterns can be attributed to.

Studies at a scale encompassing the entire United States have revealed that the size of a small community has a significant influence on the potential for growth of a community. Large communities are more likely to grow than are small communities. However, there is need to examine the significance of the relationship between size and growth in various regional settings to see if there is areal variation in the significance of the relationship. Communities in a declining area may decline regardless of their size. The present study examines the relationship between size and growth in an area that has been characterized by population decline for the past thirty years.

There is also a need to assess in greater detail the importance of the suburbanization influence that large communities have on the small communities that are found in spatial proximity. One would hypothesize that the significance of the influence would be a function of the size of the large community and would be a function of the rate of growth of the large community. But what is the significance of the influence when the large community is characterized by decline? The present study examines the significance of the relationship between

small town growth and decline and spatial proximity to larger communities that are characterized by population stability and decline rather than growth.

The functions that a community performs will have significance on whether or not a small community will grow or decline. There is a need to differentiate between types of communities based on their dominant function to determine whether a significant relationship exists between the type of community and its population change. The present study examines the relationship between growth and function by comparing the population trends for communities that are primarily central places with the population trends of those places that are tied to local mineral sources.

There is a need to refine the measurements used to classify communities as either growing, stable or declining. Important differences can occur in the number of communities classified in either of these three categories depending on the measurement used to define the categories. The present study introduces a technique that classifies communities according to long term trends rather than the change experienced over one decade.

Boundaries of the Study Area

In 1965 the United States Government, through the use of poverty as the main criterion, delimited the Appalachian Region.¹⁴ The region is not only characterized by poverty but also by population decline,

¹⁴"Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1965," Status at Large, 1965, Vol. 79, (1966), pp. 5-23.

largely a result of an out-migration of population. The population decline of the region was clearly evident in the decade between 1950 and 1960,¹⁵ and the trend continued from 1960 to 1970.¹⁶ Special funds were made available to communities in order to assist them in making needed capital improvements that would enhance their viability. These funds are to be given to the communities that show the greatest potential for growth, but unfortunately, it has been difficult to determine which communities are going to grow and which ones are going to decline. Although population decline of the communities within the region has been the general rule, the data indicate that there are communities within the region that have experienced population growth and others that have remained basically unchanged.

The study area has been restricted to only a part of the Appalachian Region. The area of study was selected because of its diversity, in terms of land use, rather than because of its possessing any desired homogeneous characteristics other than its being included in the Appalachian Region. Within the study area, sharp contrasts exist in the density of land used for agricultural purposes. This diversity permits the comparison of the population trends for communities that

¹⁵United States Department of Agriculture, "Population Change, 1950-1960," The Economic and Social Conditions of Rural America in the 1970's, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), Maps opposite page 28.

¹⁶United States Department of Agriculture, "Population Change, 1960-1970," The Economic and Social Conditions of Rural America in the 1970's, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), Maps opposite page 28.

have differences in the intensity of agricultural land use in their immediate area even though all of the communities are found in close proximity to each other. The boundaries of the study area correspond, but do not coincide, with the boundaries of the southern portion of the Allegheny Mountain Section of the Appalachian Plateau Physiographic Province as delimited by Fenneman.¹⁷ The decision to include or exclude any individual county has been subjectively determined; however, the area does possess a certain quality of internal coherence and is locally referred to as the Tri-State Area.

The western boundary of the study area is fairly close to the boundary of the physiographic section, but on the eastern side the boundary of the study area extends into the Ridge and Valley Province. This eastern boundary corresponds with the eastern boundary of the Appalachian Region and does not include any part of the prosperous Great Valley. The southern boundary of the study area is approximately fifty miles north of the physiographic boundary. The area between these two boundaries was excluded primarily because of the sparsity of settlement in the area. The northern boundary of the study area was determined as a matter of convenience. Both the physiographic section and the Appalachian Region extend farther northward through Pennsylvania, but it is believed that the northern boundary of the study area is sufficient to encompass the area that is focused on Cumberland, which is the largest community in the study area. The counties included in the study area are Allegany and Garrett in Maryland; Bedford and

¹⁷United States Geological Survey, Map-Physical Divisions of the United States, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946).

Somerset in Pennsylvania; and Grant, Hampshire, Hardy, Mineral, Preston and Tucker in West Virginia (Figure 1).

The present study has certain limitations that should be called to the reader's attention. First, the relationships that are found to exist between the community's size, distance from a larger town, and function and the community's pattern of growth can only be applied to the communities in the study area. It is believed, however, that where similar conditions exist the significance of these relationships will be the same, though further investigation to substantiate these relationships will be necessary to determine their broader implications. Secondly, the study includes only incorporated communities and unincorporated communities that have reached 1,000 or more inhabitants. Data are not available for communities that do not satisfy either of these two criteria. Thus, generalizations made from the data apply only to the communities for which data are available. One can assume that similar patterns would exist for the other communities in the study area that have not been included in the study.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the study there are terms used that may need clarification. Definition of some of these terms frequently used is presented here.

Community. The word community is used to include all nucleated settlements that have been incorporated or have reached a population size of 1,000 or more inhabitants. The words towns and villages are used interchangeably with community.

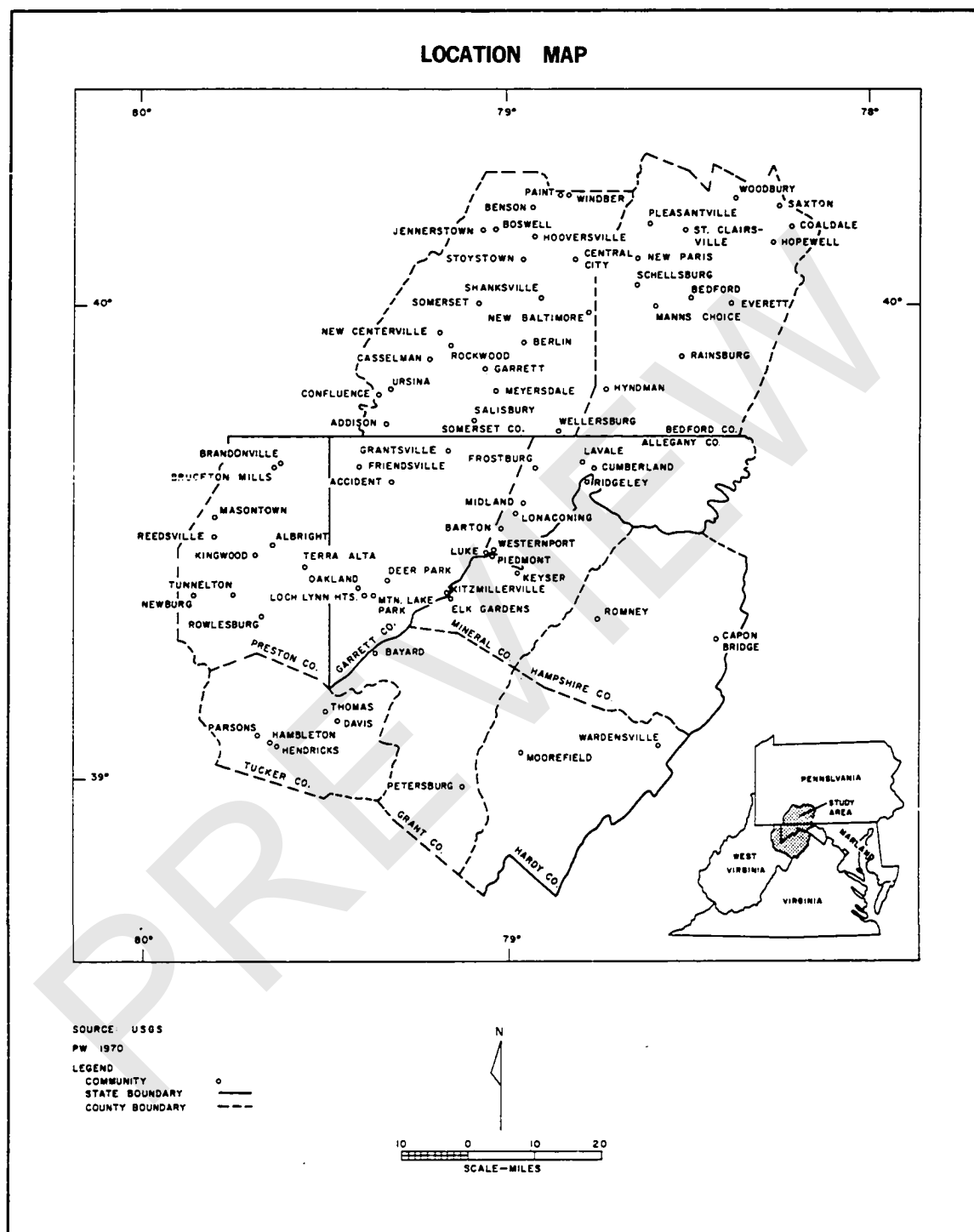


Figure 1

Large Community. The term large community is used to refer to a community with a population in excess of 25,000 inhabitants. The term small city is used interchangeably with large community.

Central Place. A central place is any nucleated settlement in the study area that provides services to the population in the surrounding area regardless of the size or legal status of the community and regardless of the number and type of services found in the community.

Trade Area. The trade area of a central place is the territory served by the community. The size of the trade area varies, depending on the type of service.

Central Place Function. A central place function is any retail or service activity that is found in a central place.

Specialized Function. A specialized function is an economic activity that is linked to an area larger than the immediate surroundings of the community. Examples of specialized functions are mining, government and manufacturing.

Tributary Area. For the purpose of this study the term refers to the area around a community encompassed by a circle with a four mile radius, which may not necessarily conform to the trade area of the central place.

Community Size. The size of a community refers to the number of inhabitants rather than the area occupied by the community.

CHAPTER II

SETTLEMENT IN THE STUDY AREA

The preceding chapter indicates that there are growing as well as declining small communities. The areal variation in the spatial distribution of these communities suggests the need for additional research at a scale concerned with areas smaller than the United States. It is believed that through such research, local factors will be discovered that have a significant influence on the patterns of community change. In addition, it will be discovered whether the previously determined relationships at the national level are altered by local conditions. The present chapter is concerned with describing certain characteristics of the study area that have had significant influence on the temporal changes in the settlement pattern.

General Function of Towns

In their essay entitled "The Nature of Cities" Harris and Ullman state that the support of a community is based upon three broad categories of economic activities referred to by the authors as central place functions, transportation functions, and specialized functions.¹ The central place functions are those retail and service activities which to a large extent derive their support by providing services to

¹Chauncy Harris and Edward Ullman, "The Nature of Cities," Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science, CCXLII (1945), pp. 277-86.

the population in the area surrounding the community. The transportation functions are basically the activities that accrue benefits because of their situation with respect to transportation thoroughfares or break-of-bulk points. The specialized functions are those activities that are linked to a territory larger than the immediate hinterland of the community. Examples of specialized functions are mining, manufacturing and government employment. Commonly the economic base of a community is dependent upon a combination of all three types of functions.

Relationship Between Transportation and Towns

The communities in the study area are linked together by a network of highways, and they are, in turn, linked to other parts of the country by major thoroughfares. Communities derive certain benefits because of their accessibility to other areas and because of their accessibility to places within the same area. The physical environment, however, places certain limitations on the movement of people through the study area.

The rough topography of the study area tends to restrict circulation. The upland area has alternating parallel ridges and valleys that are oriented in a northeast-southwest direction. Although the ridges are referred to as mountains, which are a part of the Allegheny Mountains, the local relief is generally less than 1,000 feet, but the slopes are commonly steep. The Allegheny Front, which is the eastern boundary of the Allegheny Mountains, is the most pronounced feature on the landscape with a local relief of 2,000 feet near Cumberland. The valleys between the ridges vary in width from five miles