Rewriting the Rural Narrative
Speak softly and carry statistics

Benjamin Winchester
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Minnesota Extension
People keep leaving rural America. According to U.S. Census figures from 2010, just 16% of the country's population lives in rural areas, down from 20% in 2000, and down dramatically from 72% about a hundred years ago. Behind these stories, both of the people who left their rural homes and the small percentage of Americans who still live in rural nation. There are stories, too, of people who've left for myriad reasons. We want to know those stories, too.

Sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas spent two years in a small town in Iowa trying to find out why so many young people are leaving rural America. What they found was that many small towns are playing a role in their own demise, by pushing the best and brightest to leave and under-investing in those who stay.

From Breadbasket to Basket Case

In the 1980s, rural Americans faced fewer teen births and lower divorce rates than their urban counterparts. Now, their positions have flipped entirely.

Rural Minnesota is in trouble. Young people are fleeing the farms and forests of the Gopher State, and the residents left there are aging. And they're dying. While population in Twin Cities area, especially the suburbs, but... We became kind of the poster child for the war on poverty, and any time somebody wanted to do a story about poor people, we were the first stop.
When death comes to a small town, the school is usually the last thing to go. A place can lose its bank, its tavern, its grocery store, its shoe shop. But when the school closes, you might as well put a fork in it.
Deficit Approach
Fixing things that can’t or shouldn’t be fixed
No More Anecdata!

anecdata (noun). information which is presented as if it is based on serious research but is in fact based on what someone thinks is true
1900-1950

- Mechanization of agriculture
- Roads and transportation
- Educational achievement and population loss
- Church closings (Delafield)
1950+

- Main street restructuring
- School consolidations
  - MN 432 districts in 1990 to 337 in 2010
- Hospitals closings
The rural idyll

“Agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy.”
The Media Idyll Persists

Who are you going to find in a small town when you travel to small towns in morning and afternoon?

http://www.dailyyonder.com/speak-your-piece-just-say-no-to-poverty-porn/2016/12/02/16407/

Photo by Denise Peterson

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Rural is Changing, not Dying

- Small towns are microcosms of globalization
- Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life
- Research base does NOT support notion that if XXXX closes, the town dies
  - In Minnesota only 3 towns have dissolved in past 50 years
Rural Rebound

• Since 1970, rural population increased by 11%
  – Relative percentage living rural decreased

1970

203,211,926
(53.6m rural)

19%

2010

308,745,538
(59.5m rural)

26%
Rural Data

Population figures reduced by formerly rural places now designated as urban (since 1974)

- Iowa 473,312
- Minnesota 352,224 rural residents now classified urban
- Montana 120,261
- Nebraska 170,855
- North Dakota 181,639
- South Dakota 207,790

Urban areas have grown WIDER, not TALLER
Households Moving Between 1995 and 1999:

- 44% Iowa
- 46% Minnesota
- 47% Nebraska
- 48% South Dakota
- 49% United States
2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change

Rural Prairie County
2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change

Rural Recreational County
Core Metropolitan County
Buffalo Commons Research
Dr. Randy Cantrell and Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel
University of Nebraska
Newcomers: Why?

Simpler pace of life

Safety and Security

Low Housing Cost
Newcomers: Who?

- 36% lived there previously
- 68% attain bachelors degree
- 67% household incomes over $50k
- 51% have children in household

- May be leaving their career or underemployed
- Yet, Quality of Life is the trump card
Cohort Lifecycle

Avg. American moves 11.7 times in lifetime
(6 times at age 30)
Choosing Rural

• Brain Gain: migration to rural age 30-49
  – Also 50-64 but not as widespread
  – Brain drain is the rule, not the exception
  – Happening since the 1970s
• Newcomers look at 3-5 communities
  – Topical reasoning (local foods regions)
  – Assets vary by demographic
• Employee recruitment must get past “warm body” syndrome
Living in the Middle of Everywhere

★ where you live
X where you work

Circle around:
1. Shop / eat out
2. Play / recreate
The New Economic Narrative

- Brick and mortar is less indicative of local economic success
- People-focused (self-employment, 1099)
- Self-employment, multiple-job holding

- Warm-body Syndrome
  - Recruitment is more than just the job and work-related benefits, work-life balance
  - Especially in tight labor markets
All of this has happened before…

1968

1976

1990
and it will happen again…
Rewriting the Rural Narrative: The Demand for Leadership in Rural America
Context

• How many people do we need to run our town? (demand)
• How many leaders are available? (supply)
• We have numerous leadership programs currently training leader supply, but are we keeping up with the organization demand?
DEMAND TRENDS
Leadership Demand

• How do we measure the demand that organizations make upon the resident population?

• In the US, there are 90,052 governmental units
  – In Minnesota, there are 3,672 governmental units – about one for every 1,500 persons.
  – These government units include counties, cities, townships, school districts, and “special districts” such as those providing oversight for cemeteries, highways, water/sewer systems, and soil/water conservation areas.

• We also have a vibrant nonprofit sector…

Social Life is Not Dying
Nonprofit Growth: 1995-2010

1995-2000  13.6%
2000-2005  16.3%
2005-2010  13.1%

National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau
• Minnesota gained 8% in population and gained 19% in the number of nonprofits.
  – The most rural counties experienced a loss of 5% in population, yet the number of nonprofits increased 14%.
• This growth can be both good and bad news for rural places.

*National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau*
Nonprofit Change
2000-2010

[Map showing percentage changes in nonprofit organizations across Minnesota counties from 2000 to 2010.]
Lincoln County, Minnesota

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Nonprofits</th>
<th>Gov't Units</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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</table>

2000-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Nonprofits</th>
<th>Gov't Units</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln County</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</table>
## Selected characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lincoln County, MN</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Nonprofits</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number Filing 990</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Revenue (of Filers)</strong></td>
<td>$16,647,103</td>
<td>$20,697,391</td>
<td>$30,922,545</td>
<td>$38,362,137</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assets (of Filers)</strong></td>
<td>$26,388,811</td>
<td>$32,061,691</td>
<td>$40,367,549</td>
<td>$45,350,743</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Governmental Units</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Organizations</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Population, Total</strong></td>
<td>6,429</td>
<td></td>
<td>5,896</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Population Age 18+</strong></td>
<td>4,904</td>
<td>4,580</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Groups per 1,000 people</strong></td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Revenue per Organization</strong></td>
<td>$308,280</td>
<td>$356,852</td>
<td>$461,531</td>
<td>$532,807</td>
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<td><strong>Revenue per Person</strong></td>
<td>$72.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$116.33</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Population per Organizational Role</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The “Number filing 990” generally indicates filing by organizations with gross receipts of $50,000 or more.*
There are also gains and losses between these time periods, losses (or gains) don’t mean just losses (or gains).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Nonprofits</th>
<th>Gov't Units</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeker County</strong></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Minnesota</strong></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</table>
## Selected characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Meeker County, MN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Nonprofits</strong></td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number Filing 990</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Revenue (of Filers)</strong></td>
<td>$12,467,958</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assets (of Filers)</strong></td>
<td>$24,341,594</td>
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<td><strong>Governmental Units</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total Organizations</strong></td>
<td>167</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Population, Total</strong></td>
<td>22,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Age 18+</strong></td>
<td>16,535</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Groups per 1,000 people</strong></td>
<td>7.9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Revenue per Organization</strong></td>
<td>$93,744</td>
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<td><strong>Revenue per Person</strong></td>
<td>$6.22</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Population per Organizational Role</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The “Number filing 990” generally indicates filing by organizations with gross receipts of $50,000 or more.
Social Organizations

• Diversification of rural life socially, too

• Reflect the social interests at any given time

• Today is not 25 (or 50, or 100) years ago!

• The people today seem unable to “connect” with the existing social infrastructure
Changing Types of Involvement - The Social Organization (historical)

- Place-based
- Broadly focused
- Word of mouth

Green & Haines. 2007. *Asset Building and Community Development*
Changing Types of Involvement - The Social Organization (present)

- Cover wide geographic area
- Narrowly focused goals/self-interest
- Diverse social interests
- Technological – social media

The people today are challenged in “connecting” with the existing social infrastructure.

Green & Haines. 2007. *Asset Building and Community Development*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector Description</th>
<th>1995-2016</th>
<th>% change 1995-2016</th>
<th>Size of Sector, 2016</th>
<th>Sector Share</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A - Arts, Culture &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>2,536</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B - Education</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3,677</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>C - Environment</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>D - Animal-Related</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>211%</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>E - Health Care</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1,053</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F - Mental Health &amp; Crisis Intervention</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G - Voluntary Health Associations &amp; Medical Disciplines</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>H - Medical Research: Medical Research</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I - Crime &amp; Legal-Related</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J - Employment</td>
<td>-105</td>
<td>-10%</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K - Food, Agriculture &amp; Nutrition</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>L - Housing &amp; Shelter</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>M - Public Safety, Disaster Preparedness</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>N - Recreation &amp; Sports</td>
<td>1,524</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>3,866</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>O - Youth Development</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>131%</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P - Human Services</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>2,052</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q - International, Foreign Affairs &amp; National Security</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>148%</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>R - Civil Rights, Social Action &amp; Advocacy</td>
<td>-152</td>
<td>-59%</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>S - Community Improvement &amp; Capacity Building</td>
<td>-412</td>
<td>-14%</td>
<td>2,705</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T - Philanthropy, Voluntarism &amp; Grantmaking Foundations</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1,812</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U - Science &amp; Technology</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>V - Social Science</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>105%</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>W - Public &amp; Societal Benefit</td>
<td>-120</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td>2,166</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X - Religion-Related</td>
<td>2,636</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>5,232</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y - Mutual &amp; Membership Benefit</td>
<td>-484</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z - Unknown</td>
<td>-528</td>
<td>-274%</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,900</td>
<td>-28%</td>
<td>33,631</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUPPLY & DEMAND TRENDS
Population Per Organizational Role

**Definition:** Number of people each organization has available to them to locate a positional leader.

- Yes, people serve on multiple boards.
- Assumption of 3 per board is conservative.
- Age 18+ includes many age groups that are less active.
IMPLICATIONS
Opportunities for Engagement

- **New residents are more than warm bodies**
- **Younger people (Millennials age 18-34)**
  - Decentralized approaches to leadership
  - Simplified methods of communication
- Start with a small request
- Engagement before leadership
So, is your community WELCOMING?
Percent Owner-Occupied Homes Owned by Boomers

- 47.0% Cook
- 46.8% Lake o’ Woods
- 44.9% Washington
- 43.9% Anoka
- 43.7% Carver

- 33.1% Blue Earth
- 34.5% Stevens
- 35.5% Benton
- 35.6% Clay
- 35.8% Lyon
Percent Owner-Occupied Homes Owned by Age 70+

40.2% Aitkin
38.8% Traverse
36.0% Big Stone
34.7% Lincoln
34.6% Faribault

17.2% Dakota
16.2% Wright
13.8% Sherburne
13.6% Carver
12.8% Scott
Migration and the Narrative

- Migration patterns open the door to discussing the narrative
- There are varied reasons for people to move to small towns and rural places
- Our “rural” means more and more (network study)
Negative Narratives

- Would we allow this negative language to permeate a product or service we were selling?
- Why do we do it?
- Cannot continue to portray rural success as the exception

VANISHING POINT; Amid Dying Towns of Rural Plains, One Makes a Stand
The Rural Choice

These newcomers are:

• Creating groups, building their community
• Diversifying the economy
• Buying/starting businesses, working from home
• Living in a region (no longer a 1-stop-shop)
• More than warm bodies (employee recruitment)
The Rural Choice

The bottom line is people WANT to live and move here for what you are today and will be tomorrow, not what may have been!
Nebraska Buffalo Commons  
http://agecon.unl.edu/communitymarketing/buffalo-commons-survey

Minnesota Brain Gain  
http://www.extension.umn.edu/Community/brain-gain

(IA) Homebase Iowa  https://www.homebaseiowa.gov/
(KS)  http://www.getruralkansas.org/
(KS) Rural By Choice PowerUPs  http://www.ruralbychoice.com/
(ND) Find the Good Life  http://findthegoodlifeinnorthdakota.com/
(NE) Nebraska Rural Living  http://www.nebraskaruralliving.com/
(NE) Norfolk Now  http://www.norfolknorwak.org/
(NE) Wayne Works  http://www.wayneworks.org/
(SD) South Dakota Rural Enterprise  http://www.sdrei.org/bringbak.htm
(SD) Dakota Roots  http://www.dakotaroots.com
(SD) South Dakota Seeds  http://www.dakotaseeds.com/
Rural Issues and Trends Webinars
http://z.umn.edu/ruralwebinar/

Reddit: Rural By Choice
/r/ruralbychoice