

More folks take up rural living for better or worse

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Americans are returning to the country after 160 years of steady urbanization.

In the last decade, the population in rural areas and small towns increased by 15 percent, while

metropolitan areas grew by only 9 percent.

The latest U.S. population census showed that 62.8 million people lived in nonmetropolitan areas in 1980—8.3 million more than in 1970. At least 4 million of the newcomers

came from cities or from abroad.

"Much of the move to rural areas also reflects a regional shift," says Calvin Beale, USDA population analyst.

"Drawn primarily by jobs—but also by the benefits of rural and

small town life—several million have left the cities and suburbs of the northeast and industrialized midwest for the more rural southern and western states. For the first time, the country's population is centered west of the Mississippi River," he says.

This isn't a sign that urban areas are actually shrinking. Generally, states with the highest growth rates added people in both metropolitan and rural areas. In the south, cities grew faster than rural areas—the only region where this was true.

Nationally, however, urban populations not only grew at a slower pace than rural areas. Their pace also slowed considerably from the 17-percent urban growth rate of the 1960's.

In contrast, the growth rate of rural areas accelerated, even though total U.S. population growth slowed down. In the 1960's, the nation's rural population increased by only 4.4 percent despite the higher birth rate because 2.8 million more people moved out of rural areas than moved in.

Beale emphasizes while most rural areas showed renewed growth in the 1970's, some grew at fast rates, while others only lost people at a slower rate than before.

A vast, thinly populated rural area in the mountain west grew by 50 percent—easily the highest rate in the country. On top of a higher birth rate there, people came for the jobs in the energy, mining, and resort industries.

In addition, the trend toward early retirement and improved pension benefits increased the ranks of retired people, many of whom chose to settle in the west.

Florida's nonmetropolitan areas gained in population for the same reason.

Predominantly rural counties adjoining large urban areas also showed rapid nonmetropolitan growth, while the revival of coal mining drew people back to the coal regions of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia after a population decline there in the 1960's.

Some counties showed a decline in nonmetropolitan population—most of them in the Great Plains and western Corn Belt. There, nonfarm growth wasn't high enough to balance the decline in the farm population.

In the Mississippi delta region, the continuing pattern of black migration to the north and the trend to mechanization contributed to a drop in population.

Only Rhode Island, though, showed a statewide decline in the rural population.

While these populations growth figures signify real changes in where people are choosing to live, they can distort or mask more specific population trends if read too literally.

What's happening in rural counties adjoining large cities is a good example.

Metropolitan areas are defined as those having urban centers of at least 50,000 people. Adjacent rural counties are counted in these areas if they have certain metropolitan characteristics of growth, urbanization, and population density, and if 15 percent or more of the workers commute to jobs in the central county. More and more of

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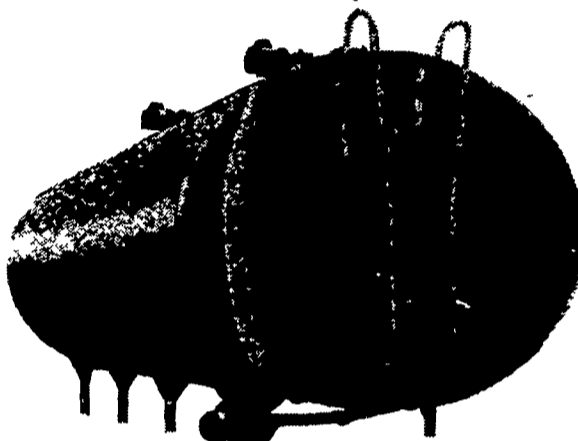
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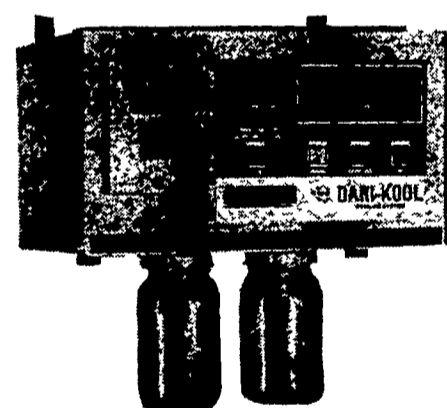
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