

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Rebirth of rural villages

Agricultural progress has placed tremendous pressure on the small towns of rural America. But are such towns doomed to failure?

There was a time not too many years ago when it was generally understood that as the older populations of such small agricultural communities passed away, the towns would decrease in population and would eventually die. But the rural scene is changing, breathing new life back into many of those villages.

Back in the horse and buggy days prosperous small towns were everywhere. Limited by the speed of a horse, a farmer was forced to shop in a community no more than a day's round trip from home. And so, thriving agricultural centers developed throughout the agricultural area. Each was a complete unit with farm services and supplies, markets, and the

consumer goods that farm people needed.

Typically, those agricultural centers provided banking, equipment sales and repair, a blacksmith, a general store, a doctor, and perhaps even some governmental service along with an array of other merchandisers. Small town merchants prospered and those small towns grew into economically sound units with good reason for existing.

Then came modern transportation. The advent of the farm truck permitted farmers to reach farther for the supplies, services and markets they needed. The general store in the nearby community became one of many stores where farmers could shop. They were no longer forced to sell their produce for the best price offered by one buyer.

As agriculture grew bigger and

the demands of farmers became more sophisticated, many of the small town services were no longer deemed adequate. Local implement dealers, grain elevators, and other such services were phased out or bought up by larger companies.

Where there once had been an implement dealer in every small town, there now were no more than a handful in a 100 mile radius. Those that survived grew larger, and were able to meet the demands of modern farming. In many cases, farmers drove right through the old hometown on their way to the large grain elevator or farm supplier 50 or more miles away.

The effect on that hometown was dramatic in many cases. This can be seen on the main street of so many rural villages where store after store stands empty and where old vacant buildings lie in disrepair.

Add another element to this mix and the problem of the small town becomes even more difficult. That is the advent of superhighways.

These interstates and limited access roads have been a blessing to motorists, but they bypassed so

many small towns leaving them virtually isolated from the rest of the world. Small towns that used to be on the main highway counted on passing motorists for business. Now those towns are no more than interchange signs to the hurrying traffic.

No doubt some towns have died and will never come back. But on the other hand, some have managed to hold on and now something's happening in rural America that may revitalize them. It's a general move back to the country.

People are fed up with the problems of urban living and are looking for ways to escape. One way is to move back to a small town, even if it means commuting long distances over those superhighways to an urban job.

And so those communities that were once the trade centers for a strong agricultural area are becoming bedroom communities for a commuting population. Those same interstates that bypassed the small towns now place them within commuting distance for thousands of would-be country dwellers.

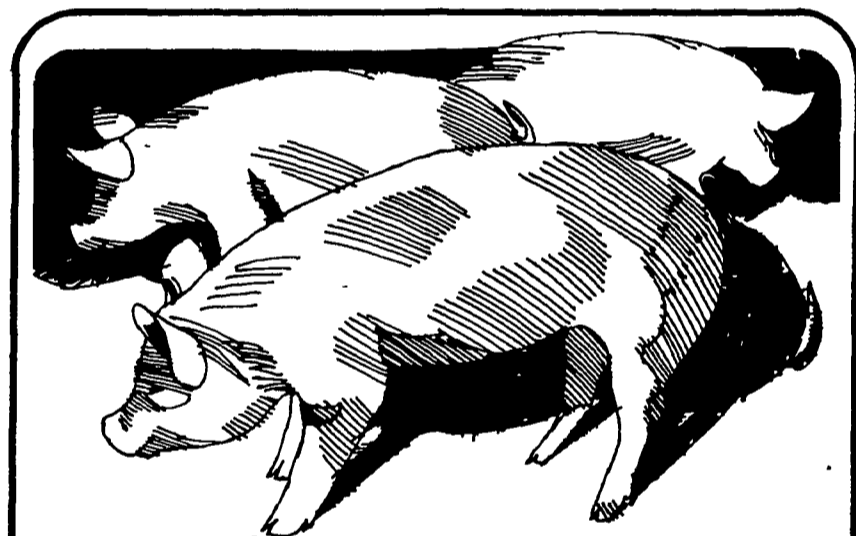
Not every rural town in America is within an hour's drive of a city, but many are and they're starting to feel the pressure of the back-to-the-country movement. Drive through the small towns of the area and you see new construction going on — old homes being remodeled and repaired and a general busyness that denotes a town that's making progress.

Granted, some of the stores are still empty, of if they're occupied it's by a different kind of tenant than in the good old days. A once thriving farm supply store now offers lawn and garden supplies. A country bank houses a boutique and the general store is now a mini-market.

There's no evidence that small towns will again become boom towns. There are those selected locations where tourism is bringing unheard of prosperity to otherwise dying communities. But, for the most part, small towns that are growing are doing so slowly and in a much different way than ever before.

Farm people may find this back-

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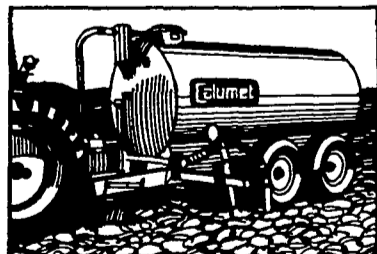
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