Many people think that small towns are losing their population and slowly disappearing, but they are wrong. More than 50 years ago, two well-known geographers gazed into their crystal ball and solemnly predicted that “small towns, villages and hamlets will continue to fade away,” but they were wrong. In 2008, Richard E. Wood said that “for at least the last half-century people have been fleeing most small rural towns as if they were radioactive,” and he predicted that these places were doomed to become “twenty-first century ghost towns,” but he was wrong.

The 2010 U.S. Census found that the population actually increased by more than 5% in two-fifths of the incorporated places in Minnesota between 2000 and 2010, remained stable in one-third, and decreased more than 5% in a mere one-quarter. In this analysis, we considered the population to be stable in any place where it had changed less than 5% over the decade, or 0.5% per year. These ratios (two-fifths increasing, one-third stable, one-quarter decreasing) have not changed much since 1940 (Figure 1), which suggests that the settlement system of incorporated places in Minnesota is impressively robust. It was created by the railroads in the horse-and-buggy era, and it had essentially been completed more than a century ago. Few new freestanding places have been incorporated since 1910, and few have died; the state has only a few ghost towns in mining areas and at whistle stops on abandoned railroad lines.

Craig and Schwartau also noted impressive stability in the state’s settlement system. They focused on change in the trade-center hierarchy, but a significant underlying theme of their work was the fact that most places remained at the same level in the hierarchy between 1989 and 2009.

The impressive overall stability (or inertia) of the settlement system as a whole camouflages haphazard fluctuations in the population growth of individual places, some of which have grown erratically and unpredictably. Places that have grown in one decade have lost in the next, and neighboring places that seem similar have changed in opposite directions. Population change in five places in Lac Qui Parle County between 2000 and 2010 illustrates just how erratic such change can be. Madison plummeted from 1,768 persons to 1,551, but Dawson inched up from 1,539 to 1,540. Bellingham dropped from 205 to 168, and Nassau dropped from 83 to 72, but Louisburg vaulted from 26 to 47.

Despite such fluctuations, most places of the same size have grown at roughly the same rate, and they seem locked in to their relative position in the settlement system. Within each size range the fluctuations of individual places have balanced each other out, and their long-term trajectory has been gently upward. The whole settlement system has continued to expand, rather like a lumpy balloon.

Between 2000 and 2010, a greater share of the smaller places in Minnesota lost population, and a greater share of the larger places gained, with a steady progression from smallest to largest (Figure 2). Only four places with populations of 2,500 or more (Ely, Blue Earth, Jackson, and Granite Falls) lost more than 5% of their population during the decade, as did only eight places of 1,500 to 2,499 residents, but even one-quarter of the smallest places actually gained more than 5% in population.

Nevertheless, places of fewer than 500 people seem to be in a different category, and they better fit the popular image, because as a group their population is stagnant or slowly declining.

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2 R.E. Wood, Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), pp. xiii and xvi.
3 In 2010, the state of Minnesota had 729 freestanding incorporated places, ranging from the Twin Cities urbanized area, which we treated as a single place, to Tenney and Funkley, which boasted five residents each.
A place seems destined to continue growing once it has attained a population of around 500 people, but the population of smaller places as a group has been declining, and more than two-thirds of the Minnesota places that lost more than 5% of their population during the 2000s were in this category. They are too small to grow, but too tough to die.

You can sense the difference on Main Street. In places of fewer than 350 persons, Main Street typically has a “gap-toothed” look, with open plots of ground between the individual buildings, whereas in larger places at least one side of Main Street has a solid block of contiguous two-story buildings of brick or masonry, with stores or offices on the street level and residences above.

The Minnesota places that grew more than 5% during the 2000s were heavily concentrated in the commuter-sheds of metropolitan areas (the Twin Cities, Rochester, St. Cloud, Duluth, and Fargo-Moorhead) and along the transportation tentacles radiating out from and connecting these places, although Interstate 90 across the southern edge of the state has had remarkably little impact (Figure 4). Smaller clusters of places that grew were in the Twin Cities–Mankato–Winona triangle and in the lakeshore resort areas in the center of the state.

The places that remained stable or lost more than 5% were in peripheral areas, such as the northwest, the Iron Range, and especially the southwest, where the railroad towns of the prairies were too many, too small, and too late. The spacing of the railroad towns was appropriate for horse-drawn wagons hauling loads of grain to trackside elevators, but they were too close to their competitors when automobiles and trucks replaced horses.

Some people, when confronted with the fact that small towns of more than 500 people, despite their appearance, are growing, will invoke geography and say that they are merely “dormitory” or “bedroom” communities for larger places within easy driving distance. The automobile certainly killed Main Street by encouraging business to concentrate in larger places, but paradoxically today it provides life support for many places that have become dormitory towns.

Commuting from small places undoubtedly is helping to keep them alive, but the best statistical predictor of the population of any given place at any given census is the population of that
place at the preceding census: the oldest places, the first places that were incorporated in any particular part of the state, have grown the longest and are still the largest.5

Many small towns also have grown because they have taken on new economic activities, in addition to their function as dormitory communities. They have been transformed from central places serving the surrounding agricultural area, with which today they have precious few ties, into small cogs in the national system of manufacturing centers. Examples include seafood products (Morey’s in Motley), furniture (Foldcraft in Kenyon), packaging (Douglas Machine in Alexandria), compressors (Sanborn in Springfield), golf carts (NB Golf Cars in Hendricks), snowmobiles (Polaris in Roseau, Arctic Cat in Thief River Falls), and aluminum boats (Alumacraft in St. Peter, Crestliner in Little Falls, Lund in New York Mills).

Many of the new processing businesses, which we are reluctant to dignify as factories, are well disguised from the casual visitor in older buildings that have been recycled into new uses. The former schoolhouse, which was built solidly enough to keep the kids from trashing it, is an ideal candidate, but any solid old building will do.

Small towns that are fortunate enough to be in lakeshore areas have blossomed as resort and retirement centers. In the lakes area north of Brainerd, a new kind of dispersed metropolis—with more than 25,000 lakeshore residences—is quietly burgeoning.6 Some are still summer cottages, but many have been winterized and converted into year-round homes for retired couples.

Serving the needs of these elderly folk has generated jobs for local young people, who hitherto have had to leave the area in search of jobs when they finished high school. The affluent retired population has also attracted retail business; the four-lane bypass around Brainerd has spawned large new big-box stores, and it resembles the bypass strips around other metropolitan centers.

Of course not all places, especially the smallest, are growing. More than one-quarter of the small towns in Minnesota are home to fewer than 200 people, and these places are redundant to the needs of contemporary economy and society. Their storefronts are boarded up or converted into residences, and they neighbor overgrown weed-choked lots. They may linger on indefinitely, but few can aspire to any significant growth.

Perhaps these very small places of fewer than 200 people are ripe for euthanasia. Keeping them on life-support requires continuing public and private investment, however modest, and perhaps wise public policy should subsidize their residents to move to larger places instead of continuing to provide the public services that subsidize their tenuous existence.


Romantics might protest that communities would be destroyed if these places were to be cashiered, but few if any ever have been true communities. Their residents do have ties to each other, to be sure, but often these ties are less than affectionate, and some families have been feuding for generations. These smallest places are less than ideal places to live, and one must question the wisdom of continuing public and private investment in small places that have scant hope of significant growth.

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