

Youth movement?

By Mark Coddington

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ORD — As the new 25-year-old owner of the True Value hardware store in Ord, it didn't take long for Levi Landers to meet most of the town's residents when he and his wife moved in five years ago.

But getting to know people their own age was another story.

"For the first couple of years, it seemed like all we saw were older people," said his wife, Julie.

Now both in their early 30s and with four boys and a house of their own, the Landerses can laugh at how singularly young they felt after moving to Ord from Meade, Kan.

But their initial struggles are all too real for many small-town residents too old to hang with the high school crowd but too young to discuss kids and grandkids at the church potluck.

"After five years, I'm completely comfortable in this town. We have a good (group) of friends," Julie said. "But it was hard."

It's not just Ord. Nearly every corner of Central Nebraska — and the entire state west of Lincoln, for that matter — is leaking young people like a sieve.

According to a 2002 Nebraska Public Power District study of net migration — change in population after factoring births and deaths — Valley County lost 62.5 percent of its population ages 15 to 24, or 326 people, from 1990 to 2000.

Just north of Ord, Garfield County lost 57.6 percent of its 15-to-24-year-olds to migration, along with 13.7 percent of those ages 25 to 44. And nearby Greeley County fared even worse, with net migration of the 15-to-24 set of 87 percent.

But this isn't exactly the long-lamented "Brain Drain" in which young people are said to be fleeing the state in droves for the greener pastures of Denver, Chicago and Kansas City.

Instead, the top destinations by a wide margin for those leaving rural parts of the state are in-state cities such as Lincoln, Omaha, Grand Island and Kearney, according to the NPPD study.

The mass exodus has left many rural communities struggling to keep their school doors open, jobs filled and downtown businesses vibrant.

And the prospect of slowly slipping into obscurity has many community leaders concerned.

"With our aging population, if we don't have the young people to turn that business over to, if we don't have the young people to take those leadership positions, our communities will die," said Nancy Glaubke, the business development coordinator for Valley County Economic Development in Ord.

Why?

At first glance, the reason for young people's flight is simple: Just ask anyone who has been around small-town high school students.

"Every single one of those kids are like, 'Let me out of here right now,'" said Dr. Mindy Dorsey, a 30-year-old Ord optometrist and Arcadia High School graduate, who addressed a group of high school students there at an entrepreneurship forum last month. "I know in high school I was not coming back."

That sentiment seems virtually universal among American teenagers, but it apparently lasts much longer among natives of rural areas, who are far more likely to follow through with it than their urban and suburban counterparts.

One explanation is simple: The small-town way of life often just doesn't line up with what many young people are looking for.

In many aspects of rural life, the gaps in satisfaction between young and old are staggering.

According to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's 2007 Rural Poll, 60 percent of rural residents ages 19 to 39 said they were dissatisfied with their community's entertainment options, compared with just 28 percent ages 65 and over.

That dissatisfaction gap between the groups shrank slightly in other areas, to an 18 percent difference in restaurants and a 21 percent difference in arts and cultural activities.

But the net effect was still strong: While 65 percent of rural respondents ages 65 and over said their community was their favorite place to be, just 34 percent of those between 19 and 29 agreed.

Tom Lally has seen firsthand that disconnect between a town's strengths and young people's desires. As the human resources manager at the Procter & Gamble Pet Care plant near Aurora, he's faced with the task of trying to lure top college graduates to a rural town in a fiercely competitive headhunting industry.

At times, he admits, it's an unenviable one.

He tries to sell prospective employees on Aurora's proximity to Lincoln, its relaxed pace, its safe atmosphere. But those pitches often aren't enough.

"It runs dry quickly, it really does," Lally said.

And if he does succeed, keeping young people in Aurora is another challenge entirely.

"If they're not happy or they don't like the place they're living, they've got plenty of other places they can go, and we lose out on that talent," he said.

Of course, many young people in rural areas do love the kindness, security and calm of their small towns. In UNL's Rural Poll, 69 percent of those 19 to 29 years old described their community as friendly, and 63 percent called it supportive.

But even that has limits.

Rich Ballas, who moved to Aurora two years ago from New York City, said he enjoys the town's low cost of living and proactive efforts to remain vibrant and continue growing.

But at times, he has been put off by an unnerving coolness.

“For as many friendly people that you encounter ... there are just as many people that are very afraid of outsiders,” said Ballas, an accountant at Hamilton Telecommunications. “They don't want non-natives coming in, putting kids in their schools and taking their jobs.”

An employment enigma

But it's not just entertainment and attitudes — it's economics, too.

One potential explanation is purely numerical: There aren't enough jobs. The unemployment rates in many rural Nebraska counties are below 3 percent, far below the national average. And most smaller communities lack a handful of big-time employers that can keep a critical mass of jobs in an area.

Many rural Nebraskans say that's what's keeping a lot of their friends from joining them here.

“If you don't have a family farm or business to come back to, it's hard to make a living for your family,” said Levi Landers. “If they find a job, they'd be fine once they got here. It's just getting here that's the problem.”

Glaubke contends that there are plenty of opportunities for successful careers in rural Nebraska. In fact, she says some of those opportunities are actually greater than high-powered metro areas because the area's low cost of living makes dollars go farther.

Instead, she says, small towns' main challenge is letting young people know about those career prospects.

She gives the example of a hypothetical small-town store owner who's ready to retire.

He might tell his buddies at the coffee shop, but he has no idea that there's a graduate of the local high school now living a few states away who would love to buy his business and come back home. And that alumnus has no idea the business is for sale.

“It's a matter of matchmaking,” Glaubke said.

Randy Cantrell, a community development specialist at UNL's Rural Initiative, agreed that there's more to the work force issue than just jobs.

With more young people community-shopping online, many rural areas have been slow to realize that it takes aggressive marketing to lure them someplace they wouldn't otherwise have considered, he said.

And without that proactive approach, Cantrell said, it's difficult to reverse those ugly population trends.

“We look at it as if we could just create a bunch of jobs and a bunch of people would just flock to our door,” he said. “And I’m not necessarily sure that’s true.”