

Rural Suburbs and Their People

**Current changes in population structure have
an impact on patterns of social behavior
which the informal educator must take into account**

WALTER C. MCKAIN, JR.

THE Agricultural Extension Service has witnessed dramatic changes in the rural countryside. It has seen some rural communities wither and die; it has seen others grow and flourish. Suburban development has been the dominant pattern of settlement in the middle half of the twentieth century, resulting in what may well be referred to as the rural suburb. The typical suburb in the 30's and 40's was located just outside the city limits. Following World War II people began to move to suburban locations some distance from large urban areas.¹ Housing developments mushroomed all over the countryside. Small rural villages became bustling suburbs almost overnight; peaceful country roads became lined with the homes of workers who made a long trek to the city to work every day.

Such changes in the population structure has become a major concern to educational institutions—particularly those whose programs have had primarily a rural orientation. The purpose of this article is to shed some light on such matters as: (1) the kind of community created when a suburban population inundates an area; (2) who the migrants are who are willing to commute long distances to work; and (3) the impact of such people on local social and educational institutions and patterns of behavior. Insight into these and

¹ W. C. McKain and R. G. Burnight, "The Sociological Significance of the Rural-Urban Fringe—From the Rural Point of View," *Rural Sociology*, XVIII (June, 1953).

WALTER C. MCKAIN, JR. is Professor of Rural Sociology, The University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut. This article is an adaptation of a paper "The People in Town-County Communities—Rapidly Growing Communities," published in *New Thousands in Town and County* by the National Lutheran Council, 327 South LaSalle Street, Chicago, Illinois.

similar matters is needed if we are to understand the circumstances in which informed educational agencies such as the Extension Service must work.

Two basic reasons account for these shiftings in the population. In the first place, commuting patterns were drastically revised during the war. Wartime jobs expanded normal labor markets as employers hired workers wherever they could be found. It was not uncommon for employees to travel 50 miles to reach their jobs. Housing shortages cemented these patterns—workers were unable to find a place to live near their jobs so they became adjusted to commuting distances that formerly would have been resisted. Secondly, rising incomes brought suburban living within the reach of sub-professionals and blue collar workers. The desire for a home in the suburb was so intense that many of these families were willing to buy homes far from the city. Housing developers were quick to sense this market and soon began to construct homes on a mass production basis in rural areas where land costs were low. The “lunch pail” suburb came into its own.

The 1960 census data reveal that the growth of extensive or rural suburbs has not abated. In Connecticut metropolitan areas rural suburbs thrive; for example, the more rural towns there grew at a rate of 69 per cent between 1950 and 1960. The more urban suburbs also had a healthy growth of 42 per cent, but the central cities grew only three per cent. Despite a change in definition that greatly increased the urban territory, rural Connecticut as a whole grew at a rate exceeding the national average for both urban and rural populations. Rural suburbs have arrived on the American scene.

A CASE IN POINT

In order to examine this kind of development firsthand, a study was made of a rural Connecticut town² that experienced a burgeoning of population following World War II. No claim is made that Hebron, the town chosen for scrutiny,³ is typical of other suburban towns in the Northeast or in other parts of the country, although it seems moderately representative of many rural suburbs in southern New England and may typify existing circumstances that are widespread. Hebron is located on the periphery of the Hartford

²Corresponds to a township in most states.

³The research was under the direction of Professor Robert G. Burnight. Certain liberties have been taken with the data and he in no way should be held responsible for the conclusions presented herein.

metropolitan area, about 25 miles from the central city of Hartford. It is a town incorporated in 1708 on land granted by Uncas, the famous chief of the Mohican Indians. At one time it had a number of small but thriving manufacturing plants and a growing population. Shortly before the Civil War the agricultural population began to decline as young people moved westward and cityward; just after the Civil War manufacturing also bowed to superior competition. As a result, from 1850 to 1930 Hebron lost population steadily and sometimes precipitously. The 30's and 40's were periods of moderate growth but not until the late 40's and the 50's did Hebron's population increase markedly.

During the post-World War II years Hebron changed from a small rural town with a proud history to a rural suburban town with a face turned to the future. In these years its population fully regained the losses that accrued over the past 90 years. Many newcomers swarmed into the area; some stayed, others left, but the places of those who left were soon filled. But by most standards Hebron, with a 1960 population count of only 1,819 residents, is still a small town. Yet this represents a decennial increase of 38 percent, a rate of growth greater than in any state in the Northeast. Most of the newcomers are commuters to Hartford and other large urban places. In June, 1957, migrant families⁴ represented roughly two of every five families in town; only 10 families could report that both the husband and wife had been born in Hebron.

Source of Migrants

What kind of a community is created when a suburban population inundates an area? Who are these migrants who are willing to drive 25 miles to work each day? Why did they select Hebron as a place to live? What is their impact on local social institutions and patterns of behavior? We need to know answers to these and similar questions if we wish to understand this latest suburban wave. The 154 migrant families in Hebron willingly told their story. It is a collective story of concern to educators, to social workers, to Extension workers, to the general public, whether they live in places like Hebron, in metropolitan areas, or in sparsely settled rural areas. It is a story that may be retold many times and in many parts of the United States if some social prophecies are fulfilled.⁵

⁴ A migrant family is defined as a family that moved to Hebron since 1950. "Migrants" and "newcomers" will be used interchangeably.

⁵ Robert C. Wood, *Metropolis Against Itself* (New York: Committee for Economic Development, 1959).

One out of every five families who migrated to Hebron between 1950 and 1957 moved there directly from another state. Presumably, only a few, if any, of these families had prior knowledge of Hebron before finding a home there. Their attachment to the place is at best of short duration, and such hasty decisions may help explain the large turnover of Hebron's migrant families.

Those who moved to Hebron from elsewhere in Connecticut came from two general areas: Approximately one half moved from urban places (mostly the Hartford area); the other half came from rural areas of the state. The meaning of this is clear. Part of the postwar suburban growth may be attributed to much the same conditions that characterized early suburban growth, namely, a desire to escape the disadvantages of urban life and to combine urban employment with the advantages of rural living. This desire, quite apparent among white collar workers of the 30's,⁶ appears to have been transmitted to the blue collar workers of the 50's.

Part of the postwar suburban growth is a general by-passing of residence in a metropolitan area. Employment opportunities in cities have greatly expanded. But the workers from rural towns who found urban employment either could not find satisfactory housing in the cities or deliberately chose to live in a rural suburban environment. This would suggest that the rural-urban migration pattern has been considerably modified. Many families are moving from one rural area to another, either because it is closer to job opportunities or because it has some other presumed advantage. Most of those who moved to Hebron did not change jobs at the same time. This is especially true of those who left the Hartford area. It is also true for a large part of those who formerly lived in rural areas. Probably many of the migrant families who have left Hebron, in turn, moved to other rural towns.

Reasons for Moving to Hebron

Kurtz and Smith point out that migrants to a fringe area do not choose the area "because it has any special attributes on which they placed a positive valuation."⁷ In general, this same situation prevailed in Hebron—about half of the migrants listed housing as the chief factor in their decision to move. Some were able to find a good buy or a favorable rental. Others happened to find an old colonial

⁶N. L. Whetten, *Studies in Suburbanization*, University of Connecticut, Storrs Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletins 212(1936), 226(1938), and 230(1939).
⁷Richard Kurtz and Joel Smith, "Social Life in the Rural-Urban Fringe," *Rural Sociology*, XXV (March, 1961), 29.

home ripe for modernization; still others located a house with a view or with some other appealing attraction. In most instances had the good buy or the house-with-a-view been located in another rural town it would have been equally desirable—obviously, community life in Hebron was not the attraction.

For the most part Hebron was chosen more or less fortuitously (any rural town within 25 miles of Hartford would have served the purpose). However, the five per cent who had friends or relatives in Hebron would not have been attracted by just any rural suburb. The six per cent who got jobs in Hebron had an obvious reason for moving there. Such reasons as "within commuting distance," "wanted to live on an acreage," or "had to get away from the city" were mentioned by the remainder.

Most of the newcomers to Hebron purchased homes (only a fourth rented properties). Many of those who rented did so in a recreational area bordering a large lake. The owners of quite a few lake-shore properties, in response to housing demand, winterized their homes and placed them on the market, either for sale or rent. Home hunters with their sights set on suburban living were attracted to these places, partly because of their competitive prices and partly because they afforded an opportunity for suburban life and summer recreation. Some of those who rented plan to purchase just as soon as they "find the right place at the right price."

Some of the older Hebron homes have been sold to suburbanites who have the same urge that prompted Mr. Blandings to remodel his dream house.⁸ Over a fifth of the homes lived in by newcomers are more than 100 years old; a few go back to colonial days. These fine old houses have been snapped up by city dwellers and by families who have grown dissatisfied with life in the more modern suburban homes. Such families are usually more affluent than the others and in many instances have transferred their love for old houses to the community itself which is rich in tradition and history.

Over half of the migrants live on acreages ranging from one to 100 acres (those living on a lake front tend to have tiny plots of land while lots elsewhere in town are quite large). The occupants rarely engage in any sizable agricultural operations—a small vegetable garden, one or two fruit trees, and several berry bushes represent the extent of farming. Most have no agriculture at all and are content to maintain a well landscaped lawn with the inevitable outdoor fireplace.

⁸ Eric Hodgins, *Mr. Blanding Builds His Dream House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

Characteristics of Migrants

Most of the migrants were young married couples with pre-school children, although a generous sprinkling of middle aged families also made the move. Over half of the household heads were under 40 and less than 10 per cent were 55 or over. Among the non-migrant heads of households only 35 per cent were under 40 and nearly 49 per cent were 55 or older. Over three fourths of migrant families included one or more children of school or pre-school age while over 40 per cent of the non-migrant families had no young children at the time of the study. If children serve to weld their parents into a well integrated community, the absence of young children in the non-migrant homes must be reckoned as a formidable deterrent to community integration.

Using years of formal education as the standard, migrants as a group were well educated. The average head of a migrant household had a high school education and fully one fourth of them had at least some exposure to college. The non-migrants had less formal education. But when age was held constant the educational differences between migrants and non-migrants tended to disappear. Approximately one half of each group in the 25-44 age bracket had at least a high school education. About twice as many of the migrants had some college training.

Table 1 shows the distribution of occupations of migrant and non-migrant heads of households. This information supports the claim that much of the postwar migration to rural suburbs has been by blue collar or factory workers. Over one half of the Hebron migrants had skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled jobs. This is not an

Table 1. Occupation of employed household heads by migration status, Hebron, 1957

Occupation	Migrants	Non-migrants
Total number	147	230
Per cent	100.0	100.0
Professional	21.8	7.0
Manager	5.4	7.0
Clerical & sales	8.2	4.3
Services	2.7	7.8
Farmer	3.4	17.8
Skilled	32.6	29.2
Semi-skilled	18.4	15.2
Unskilled	3.4	4.3
Farm laborer	4.1	7.4

"exurb,"⁹ nor is it the home of the "organization man."¹⁰ Information in the table also demonstrates that the farmer is only a small segment of the total population—most are factory workers. More recent migrants have a substantial block of professional people, most of whom are engineers who work in the Hartford area, while non-immigrants include most of the farmers.

The similarity of occupational interests is a potentially powerful force for community integration, but many of the migrant families left the city precisely to escape this type of identification. They sought the suburb partly as a status symbol and have no intention of submerging their individuality in any group composed of their fellow workers.

Social Participation

Americans are considered to be a nation of joiners and their proclivity to join formal organizations reaches its apex in the modern suburb. Whyte describes in some detail the plight of the unwary organization man and his family who are pressured by circumstances to join and participate in so many clubs, associates, charities, churches, and organizations that their free time is engulfed.¹¹

This is far from the case in Hebron. Perhaps the rural suburb places a damper on the urge to meet. For one thing houses are well dispersed and families are not physically in the middle of things. Also there is more diversity of interests and backgrounds in a place like Hebron than there is in suburban communities like Park Forest and Levittown.¹² But even more important may be the presence of existing organizations that are already serving well defined needs. Part of the reason for joining a new club is for the satisfaction of building, of wielding power, or of meeting emergency situations. Hebron was a well-established community (with nearly 50 organizations already in existence) when the migrants moved in. Newcomers could join these but their time would be given to groups whose seat of power was firmly established and whose activities were already routinized.

Frequently, church-oriented activity is one of the best avenues for a newcomer to become acquainted in a community and to gain

⁹ A. C. Spector, *The Exurbanites* (New York: Street and Smith, 1955).

¹⁰ William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

acceptance by the older residents. (Research seems to document the importance of religious worship and membership in Sunday School or some other church group in suburban life.) However, there were very few differences in the participation patterns of the migrants as far as religious or non-religious organizations were concerned. Three-fifths of the migrants were not members of a single secular organization and 56 per cent did not belong to a church or a church-related organization. A substantial number of the families who did participate in some church activities were connected with a church outside the boundaries of the town. Some had not severed their ties with the church where they formerly lived. Experience has shown that even though such families may strive to maintain participation in the church back home, most of them sooner or later either move to a nearby place of worship or give up church activities altogether.

Citizen Participation

The voting behavior and office holding of the newcomers throw considerable light on their identification with the community. In a recent Hebron election for local town officials, 91 per cent of the registered non-migrants cast their ballots, compared with 77 per cent of the migrants. The lower proportion of migrants who voted may reflect their lack of knowledge about local candidates or it may suggest some apathy towards the local community and its government. In the national elections a year or so later nearly 98 per cent of the migrant voters in Hebron cast a ballot. Their political interest is strong, but it is not centered in the community where they live.

There are many elected and appointed positions in the local government of Hebron. In 1957, for example, there were 69 positions occupied by 58 different persons. Most of these positions are unpaid and frequently make great demands on the incumbents' time and energies. They do give a measure of status and afford an excellent opportunity for the newcomer to make his presence felt. Yet, only 34 per cent of these offices were held by migrants and most of these were in one area of interest—education. Four of the nine members of the Board of Education were newcomers and two of three local representatives in the regional school district were migrants. Obviously if a newcomer is sufficiently interested in one phase of local government and willing to serve, he can get the support necessary for election. (Observations in other Connecticut towns tend to support these Hebron findings.)

Commuters

Newcomers to Hebron have found the process of integration into the rural community a difficult task. Their lack of success can be traced to many things, some of which have already been mentioned. The most common explanation is related to the burdens of commuting. The daily routine of getting up early in the morning, driving to work, and returning late in the day is undoubtedly a time-consuming, enervating, and exasperating experience. There is little time to spend with the family, even less with the community.

Approximately seven out of eight newcomers commute to their jobs. For most of them this means anywhere from one to two hours of travel every day. However, there is some evidence that after a few years' residence even the commuters begin to take an interest in community affairs. For example, about 40 per cent of the non-migrant commuters (compared to one fourth of the migrants) have some church participation. The newcomer who commutes definitely puts the least into his community, and probably is shortchanged in the process.

When a relatively large number of people move into a community some of them are bound to be dissatisfied. Migrants to Hebron were queried on this subject and almost 30 per cent expressed a desire to live elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly the adjustment to a new community, particularly one that is suffering from the pains of rapid expansion, is largely an individual matter. Nevertheless, the community resources may be enlisted to remove a measure of the discontent that exists. The Agricultural Extension Service in these fast growing rural suburbs has an obligation and an opportunity to be of assistance to the ever-growing number of newcomers. A new way of life is in the making. The kind of life it will be depends, to a large extent, upon the patterns of community behavior that emerge in the formative years. This imparts a sense of urgency to the endeavor.