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Who Lives in Rural Minnesota:

A Region in Transition

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Why Everyone Should Care

Robert Franklin

Dan Ellison was preparing to start some field work on his family's Grant County farm that May day when the publicity hit. Ellison didn't get into the field at all that summer of 1994, when Herman, Minn., became a symbol of rural values.

Ellison then was economic development coordinator for Herman, a farm-oriented prairie town of nearly 500. He and his colleagues had calculated that bachelors ages 20 to 50 in the area outnumbered eligible women about 78 to 10. The town needed not just more women to survive and grow, but more good jobs for single women and for married women in two-earner families.

The findings became a network news story, then our *Star Tribune* story that was picked up by the Associated Press and sent around the world. In the resulting "Bachelormania," Herman men were covered by People magazine, Oprah, and other media, and became grist for a somewhat-fictionalized movie, "Herman U.S.A." Thousands of women wrote, called or visited the town, and a few stayed.

The women saw values in rural areas like Herman for a friendly, safe place to live, establish businesses, build relationships, and rear families.

And so should we.

Popular thought often divides Minnesota into regions of wealth and regions of relative poverty, of opportunity and struggle, of age and youth, of a go-go lifestyle and backwater culture.

Of course, different parts of the state have different challenges, but we are all Minnesotans, and we neglect to

embrace “one Minnesota” at our peril.

Metro area folks *should* care about the rest of the state for reasons that are personal, recreational, economic, environmental, educational, historical, cultural, or public policy and as an alternative lifestyle.

Yes, alternative lifestyle.

Ben Winchester has found some reversal of the rural “brain drain,” with numbers of educated young families moving out of urban areas to seek simpler lives. As Milaca real estate broker Brad Maitland put it to Pam Louwagie of the *Star Tribune*, “We sell a lifestyle.”

It’s easy to romanticize and stereotype small towns. Every town has a different character (and characters), but there’s some truth in common perceptions about safety, community, faith, schools, and a more-relaxed pace.

I once bunked in with a family in Herman that professed not to know where the house key was. Years ago, when Bellingham had a high school, I found that the lockers not only didn’t have locks, they didn’t have doors.

A writer once told me that, north of St. Cloud, you don’t need a horn on your car. A rural matron didn’t find a morning cafe break while visiting the Twin Cities and asked, “Don’t they have coffee?”

During 20-some years of reporting from every Minnesota county except Cook, I occasionally asked about rural-urban differences. One of the most thoughtful responses came from Paul Olson, then president of the Blandin Foundation in Grand Rapids, who said he felt comfortable in both rural and urban settings.

You can’t be anonymous in a small town, Olson said back in 1987, “and you order your life around that.”

“Small-town life has a little higher comfort level,” he said. And it’s often “a more physical, active lifestyle,” with people changing their vehicle oil themselves, snowplowing their own driveways, splitting their own wood, ordering their lives around the seasons and often creating their own entertainment.

“People are kind of...closer to the earth, more tied in to nature,” he said.

A former northern Minnesota public official put it another way: “Many people have fled here because they want to do what they want to do.”

I’ve had students who, of course, couldn’t wait to escape their hometowns, finding them too quiet, too conservative, too insular, too prone to conflict-avoidance. True for some older folks, too. Even after nearly a decade in city government, a former Iron Range mayor told me, “I never felt a part of the community.” And there’s not always something for a single person to do on a Saturday night.

While the rural lifestyle isn’t for everybody, food and jobs are. Consider other ties that bind urban and rural Minnesotans:

Economy and environment. Rural Minnesota is the cornerstone of the state’s \$13 billion-a-year agri-business, as well as timber and mining. Each job on the farm generates four off the farm, for a total of 350,000 jobs, making agrribiz the state’s second-largest economic sector, according to Michael Schommer, communications director of the state Agriculture Department.

Historically, entrepreneurs seem to have thrived in both urban and rural Minnesota. Sears, 3M Co., Hormel, the Mayo Clinic, Marvin Windows, and snowmobile companies boast rural roots, along with more recent developments such as wind power and ethanol and countless smaller enterprises.

Towns across Minnesota already have infrastructure in housing, public facilities, and often incentives for jobs. It seems wasteful not to maximize those advantages. That’s been a philosophy behind such efforts as the state-administered small cities grants program and the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund.

We also should care about rural areas because Minnesotans are mobile. With the Internet, more of us can work from home anywhere. “I can sit here and talk to China as well as you can,” Malin Sik, then school board chairman and police chief in Ivanhoe said more than a decade ago. And many tribal people shuttle between cities and reservations depending on jobs, family and seasons.

And we’re all affected by the rural environment. Farm

and small-town stewardship of land and water affects those downstream, along with hunting and fishing resources.

Problem solving. A lot of small-scale, grassroots problem-solving goes on in rural areas, not all of it long-lasting, but worth attention. Community efforts have preserved such staples as grocery stores, cafes, and other businesses.

After the grocery store in Okabena closed, the high school store stocked some grocery items. At age 17, Nick Graham brought back the defunct grocery in Truman. A high school entrepreneurship program opened a Radio Shack in Fosston and helped that town win an All-America City award. "Fosston beats Boston," our *Star Tribune* headline read.

Other rural school-sponsored enterprises have run programs as diverse as a lumberyard, soda fountain, and fish farm, and have sold products from barbecue sauce to snowmobile stands.

Labs for diversity. Recent years have brought new cultures to many rural areas, sometimes providing the children who rescue school districts from dwindling enrollments. MinnPost's Sharon Schmickle found that about 40 percent of Pelican Rapids residents are minority, and they have been mostly absorbed into the community "with remarkable levels of peace and civic grace." Sleepy Eye sent educators to Texas to learn how to better teach children of migrant workers in Minnesota.

Heritage. Many Minnesotans care about the state as a whole because they grew up in rural areas, visit rural relatives, have business ties, vacation at a resort or cabin "up north," or travel through the state to other destinations.

There's a lot for urban eyes to see, too, whether it's the waterfront at Duluth, eagles around Wabasha, Indian quarries at Pipestone or the Lindbergh home and museum at Little Falls. Plus some of the wackiness that seems to thrive in rural areas — Francis Johnson's Ball of Twine in Darwin and Ken Nyberg's Big Toe sculpture in Vining.

Knowing where we come from helps us chart where we're going. Many small towns preserve vestiges of their immigrant heritage, history, and architecture (think Louis Sullivan's

National Farmers' Bank in Owatonna, now part of Wells Fargo, for instance).

Joe Amato, the retired dean and historian at Southwest State University in Marshall, and his colleagues have produced books on the rich immigrant history in a region that includes Belgians around Marshall, Poles in Ivanhoe, Norwegians in Hendricks, Danes in Tyler, and Dutch in Edgerton.

And more recent immigrants—Asians, Africans, and Latinos around Worthington in Nobles County. For those who look askance at the newcomers: As late as 1910, 70 percent of Nobles County residents were first- or second-generation immigrants, Amato wrote in the book *Southwest Minnesota: Place of Many Places*, and before World War I, Minnesota published its Constitution in 10 languages.

Schools. Minnesota has invested huge amounts in its networks of public schools and state colleges and universities. And these turn out graduates who often migrate to urban areas. "Sometimes the best thing we give to the Cities are our young people," Ellison said recently from Herman. "They bring their small-town values."

Historically, emphasis on high school education helped rural youth cope with technological changes in agriculture and manufacturing, according to an article in *The Atlantic* of July / August. "High school made the children who stayed home better farmers and gave the rest the tools to leave," and to be successful in urban areas, sometimes more successful than their urban counterparts, the magazine said.

Education has helped solve small-town problems, too. At the Jackson campus of Minnesota West Community & Technical College, teacher Donna Mielke won a national award for preparing high school and college students to help combat a shortage of small-town emergency medical technicians.

Public policy. All of us have a vested interest in good schools, good highways, good jobs, good Internet connections, and a good quality of life statewide.

Many counties in Minnesota contribute to the state's economy through agriculture, natural resources,

manufacturing, and tourism, but they don't have a large number of people to contribute to the local tax base. The flow of government policy doesn't stop at county lines. Revenues from income, sales and other taxes are invested in people and programs across Minnesota. In some rural counties, those investments have been critical, especially where the largest single source of income has been "transfer payments" —Social Security, public assistance, and unemployment compensation.

When I first covered the Minnesota Legislature in the 1960s, the top officers of the House and Senate came from Caledonia, Redwood Falls, and the Walnut Grove area. The chairmen of both spending committees came from Marshall County, near the state's northwestern corner. Power has shifted since then, but rural legislators and rural voters still have enough clout to be courted and to have their concerns understood.

Looking ahead. In some areas, these concerns are a matter of survival. Some towns lack broadband Internet. Some small schools are too far apart for easy consolidation. Some counties have dwindled to the point where there's a critical shortage of community leadership and many services have to be outsourced.

"The challenge of Minnesota's future will involve avoiding a state composed of two contending groups of strangers: one engrossed in a world of expanding opportunities, the other preoccupied with the consequences of irretrievably failed frontiers," Amato wrote nearly 20 years ago in *The Decline of Rural Minnesota*.

Still true. "Our institutions are going outside of us," he said recently. Growing towns will continue to grow, he predicted, and dwindling ones will continue to decline.

One prairie town. Herman, nearly 40 miles west of Alexandria, has lost some population since its Bachelormania days. And it's lost its grocery store, a cafe, bakery, car dealership, and drug store, said Ellison, who is now president of the Herman Development Corp. But the farm economy is good, the town still maintains its K-12 school, the municipal liquor store is being converted to a privately owned restaurant, and the town has annexed 55 acres for a big

CHS fertilizer plant.

Plus, Ellison said, a lot of younger women have found good jobs in such fields as dental hygiene, legal aid, and banking, often in nearby towns like Morris.

In a series of public meetings, “we found a lot of people who really care about Herman and want it to do well,” he said.

Some women moved to Herman. Some started businesses. Some married bachelors (and some of the marriages, including Ellison’s, didn’t last).

Was all the fuss worth it?

For Ellison, who says he’s publicity-shy these days, of course it was, in the person of his 12-year-old son, Spencer, who lives with him.

Beyond that, “it was our 15 minutes of fame that lasted a whole summer,” he said. The town became a movie, and “how many towns can say that?”

In addition, “we showed the best of small towns to the whole world, and I think that’s an honor.”

