

SNG-Sun setting on rural IL-8-28-17

Is the sun setting on rural Illinois?

By Jim Nowlan

I gave a talk this past week about the future of rural Illinois to a gathering of presidents of Illinois community foundations.

Never above getting a twofer out of a talk, I penned this column. I write because I believe rural communities have contributed much to the development of America and of Americans.

I think presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan and Carter reached the pinnacle of public life in good part because they learned in their small towns that we're all in this together, and that working together makes sense.

[After decades away, I moved back a few years ago to my rural hometown of Toulon in central Illinois (pop. 1,300, if you include the nursing home, in Stark County, pop. 5,900). I found more vitality than I expected, as parents and grandparents rally round the schools and their young'uns.]

Yet the population and economic decline of rural Illinois has been relentless over the decades.

For example, in 1890 my farmland county of Stark had twice as many people as today!

As middle-class jobs have flown (actually many of them were in factories in nearby cities, where small town workers often car-pooled to their jobs), a white underclass has been developing.

Low-income residents from cities come to the low rents of unoccupied farm houses and shabby frame homes in town.

In response, some towns build modern low-income housing, which actually increases the numbers of low-income residents; those in the shabby frame homes move into the modern housing, and more low-income folks come out to fill the shabby homes.

Wealth transfer is another big problem for small towns. As farmland owners pass on, they are more likely today to leave their significant wealth in land to descendants who now live in Florida or California, rather to the son who would stay on to run the farm.

Small towns are not created equal. I have a theory of concentric rings around cities of, say, 100,000 people or so. Towns within the near-in ring 5-10 miles from city center will likely become suburbs, as folks who can move away from struggling schools and urban problems.

Small towns 10-30 miles from city center will be most at risk. They are close enough for shopping at the Big Box stores, causing many small town Main Streets to shrivel up, as many have.

Communities 30 and more miles out from cities will survive as market towns, just far enough away from the Big Box competition. Their service areas will continue to decline in population, but the towns will continue.

I have quipped that 19 out of 20 towns under about 2,000 population will probably become grease spots along the road in the coming two-three decades—but that 19 of 20 of those towns *believe* they will be that 20<sup>th</sup> town to make it. This is good, as it means these towns and their leaders will at least slow the often almost inevitable decline.

The towns more likely to survive are those with “a view,” those at the intersections of interstate highways, and those with strong, creative leadership.

An easy-on-the-eye town like Galena, near the Mississippi in northwestern Illinois, has become a model for wannabe destination towns that seek to serve the growing class of day-trippers and weekenders.

Galena and its scenic Jo Daviess County (pop. 3,000+ and 22,000, respectively) provide 1,600 jobs via tourism, more than the second biggest employer group, that of government-education-health care, with 990.

Great leadership is another key. Effingham has the Schultz Family and others like it. Town leaders in the city of 12,000+ developed CEO (Creating Economic Opportunity), an exciting business entrepreneurship program for high-schoolers.

Students meet before school at businesses to learn about how to become entrepreneurs; many do. The program is being replicated in towns across the Midwest.

It helps, of course, that Effingham is at the crossroads of two interstates, in the heart of America.

Towns most at risk are small towns under 2,000 located on fertile yet table-top flat, boring (to some) farmland, where declining school enrollments threaten the viability of the hometown school, the *raison d'être* of the town.

My friends at community foundations propose that prosperous folks—farmland owners, for example—contribute a slice of their legacy to groups like theirs. In this way, they could plow something back into the small towns so dear to them, and just maybe help keep them alive.

Some small towns are worth saving. We should rally round efforts to do so.