

Trouble in Paradise

Upper right, it has been some time since the Morse Bluff Leather Shop sold and repaired shoes . . . or anything else. Center right, small towns are good places to bring up kids, they say, and it's okay there if you stop in the middle of the street to say "hi." Bottom right, weatherbeaten boards, broken panes of glass—symbols of a small town trying to stay alive. Bottom left, farmer Ray Racek: "You could farm the whole United States and still not make any money." That's one of the problems of a small town.

Photos by Mike Gettino



family."

He said he doesn't mind the village becoming a bedroom community if the newcomers "are friendly and care about the town."

But another resident was more skeptical of growth. John Oberton, 44, a retired Army officer, said he likes things the way they are.

"Growth isn't always good," he said. "More people means more things like sewers and water systems and police. Those things mean higher taxes."

He said he would favor expansion if the new citizens also brought in new industry. He said the town could tax the industry then and not increase the individual's tax load.

"I've got only two complaints," he said. "First, the prices are too high here and second, we don't have any entertainment."

He said the town could use a chain-type supermarket which could offer customers bigger savings. However, he said, he doubts if any will be built until the town begins to grow faster. He said he believes more entertainment will come with a population increase.

Like Valparaiso, towns with something to offer have a definite future, according to Bert Evans, Evans, assistant professor of agricultural economics at UNL has spent 11 years as a UNL extension specialist in economic development.

"When we talk about saving our small towns," he said, "we're not talking about economics, we're talking about the quality of life. We want to help people decide under what conditions they want to live."

Evans said federal grants and loans are available for community development, but before the funds can be obtained, the town must make plans. He said federal regulations require strict planning before money can be granted.

He said he is working with the state and federal governments to educate people on the "background of the problems they're facing."

"If people understand what their problems are," he said, "they can solve them themselves. When people solve their own problems they do a much better job of it."

He said community leaders are asked to decide what sort of town they'd like and then are informed of what government aid is available. To do this, he works with the Nebraska Department of Economic Development (DED).

According to Mrs. Marie Arnot, director of the DED division of community affairs, more than 1,000 types of grants and loans are available from the federal government. Most communities don't know many of these programs exist, she said.

"It occurred to us as we visited communities across the state, that most of our small towns don't have the resources needed for development," she said. To help them, the department compiled a book, "The Guide to Nebraska State Services," which lists departments which can provide information on community development.

She said the book is partially a response to an upswing in interest in community development. One reason for the upswing is the Nebraska Community Improvement Program (NCIP), Mrs. Arnot said.

The program is similar to a contest between towns involved in development projects, she said. It was started by Nebraska's natural gas companies in 1963. The companies offer cash prizes to outstanding towns participating in any of five population categories.

A DED survey showed that communities participating in the NCIP had a higher rate of population, employment and industrial growth, she said.

DED is helping communities develop "areas of cooperation," Mrs. Arnot said. Through cooperation, towns could offer services more cheaply, she said, such as cooperative law-enforcement and waste disposal.

She said there is some opposition to state and federal programs in certain communities.

"Sometimes the red tape is burdensome," she said. "But when we run into a frustrated or angry crowd, well, we try to understand and not take it personally."

Although rural Nebraskans want public services, they are realizing they must try to provide jobs for their young people if their communities are to grow, said Bill Wheeler, industrial consultant for DED.

"Towns either grow or die," he said, "there is no middle ground. Right now, many communities in Nebraska are going broke. As the number of farms has gone down, these areas have lost their economic base. They know they must replace their old source of income."

He said 50 to 60 companies are looking into the possibility of locating in rural Nebraska communities. DED is encouraging existing industries to expand, too, he said.

The DED also is trying to solve what one official termed "the rural housing shortage." Don Sievers, DED housing consultant, said although no "solid facts are available" he believes there is a problem.

"Several of our communities have taken advantage of some federal programs," he said, "but they are mostly only building public housing for the elderly. They are ignoring all other types."

He said 70 per cent of all federally financed housing which has been built in rural Nebraska is for senior citizens.

"The problem is that many towns have only used one program out of more than 76 they could choose from," he said. Lack of local leadership, no uniform statewide minimum housing and building codes and noncooperation with the federal government all contribute to the housing problem, Sievers said.

Dislike for the federal government is to be expected in dying communities, Bert Evans said. The UNL professor claimed it is a national policy to build large urban centers while abandoning rural areas.

"No wonder they don't like the government," he said. "The final impact of national policy is at the local level."

He charged that the government is being influenced by "great economic powers" whose interests lie with the urban areas. He said it is becoming "extremely uneconomical" for cities to get any larger, and the trend must be reversed.

He said a National Broadcasting Co. survey showed that a city, after it reaches a population of two million, become "highly inefficient." He said the inefficiencies double the price of services to the taxpayer.

"If we are going to stop these inefficiencies then we need to stop the migration to the cities," he said. "Cities function best at about 250,000 people. We have to quit thinking 'bigger is better.'"

He said to change national policy will require a change of thinking on the public's behalf.

"If we don't change the present national policy," he said, "Morse Bluff will dry up and blow away — and it will be our fault."

But some of the people in Morse Bluff aren't ready to despair.

Bar owner Francis Sullivan says the westward expansion of Omaha and Fremont may help out the town. But no houses are available in Morse Bluff even if people wanted to move in.

The 25-year resident of Morse Bluff said that 10 years ago he thought the town surely would die. "But not now," he said. "Now there's some hope for the future."

