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Picture of small towns has changed

Summary:

(April 1, 2005)-Small. Rural. Agricultural. Disappearing.

Is this your picture of a small town? If so, read on.

Historically, small towns were sprinkled across the landscape of the Midwest. They were generally "dropped off" by the railroads, every 8 to 12 miles, and were seen as repositories for agricultural products, which, in turn, were transported by rail to urban centers.

As you drive across the Minnesota countryside, there is an openness not found in big cities. You are surrounded by open fields of crops with an occasional spotting of cows and, thus, you think this is a rural place. However, just because you do not see skyscrapers rising from the center of a small town, do not think it is solely an agricultural community.

Over the years, small towns have diversified themselves economically, culturally, and socially. There is no one "rural" economy, but rather many different economic bases - including telecommunications, recreation, retirement, energy, manufacturing, and of course, agriculture. "There are many different environments in which rural towns exist, environments which provide real diversity within the rural landscape," said Ben Winchester of the Center for Small Towns at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

In 2000, of the 853 cities in Minnesota, 727 are considered small towns of under 5,000 people. For every town above 25,000 - every town that has a radio station, a newspaper or a television station - there are 22 towns under 5,000 that one tends not to hear about. This lack of a coherent message both for and from rural Minnesota is a challenge that is not easily overcome.

Rural areas are not "dying" or "bleeding," not all of them anyway, between 1990 and 1999, 2.3 million more people moved from metropolitan areas into non-metropolitan areas, than did the reverse, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. "We are in the midst of a rural Renaissance. The rise of telecommunications and the ability to have a bank or a brokerage firm or a newspaper right in your own home provides an opportunity for people to make choices about where they want to live based on quality of life," said Winchester. In Minnesota, recreational and retirement towns have witnessed explosive growth. Those relying on agriculture and manufacturing have declined.

These topics, and more, are discussed at the Third Annual Symposium on Small Towns, held June 7-8 on the campus of the University of Minnesota, Morris. For more information visit www.centerforsmalltowns.org. The event is co-sponsored by the Center for Small Towns, Minnesota Public Radio, the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, and the Minnesota Association of Small Cities.

So, what's your idea of a small town? It may be exactly what you think, yet so much more than you can imagine.

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