

# Rural Isn't What You Think

By Gary Sandusky

1990s POPULATION GROWTH

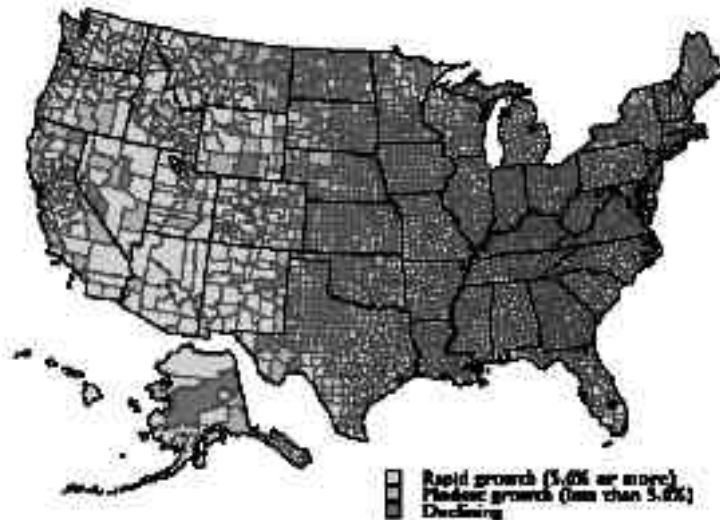
Use the term “rural” with an urban listener and you are likely to get a knowing smile and a joke about cows. Myths about rural life, its pastoral scenery, and Thoreau-like simplicity die hard. A current working definition of “rural” for much of America — including progressives — might look like this:

- Not in the city
- Population tends to have red necks
- Likely to find farm animals and men wearing boots
- Environmentalists like to go there

Rural communities have actually changed dramatically, especially during the 1990s. The demographic and economic trends that are changing rural life — particularly in the West — are already changing the political landscape. For instance, over the last 45 years, the farming population has dropped by some 26 million, from 31 million in 1940 to just over 5 million in 1994. Even more significant, in 1940, 90 percent of farm operators lived on the land they worked, in contrast to only 30 percent in 1994. The social and economic life of rural communities has changed, with the pace of change accelerating in the 1990s. Old assumptions about who farmers are and where they live no longer apply. Progressives in the West need to track the changes closely, because they represent a shifting of the political sands beneath our feet.

## A wave of in-migration

The map above provides graphic proof that rural counties are growing dramatically in Idaho, western Montana, Nevada, and portions of Wyoming, Oregon and Washington. This is in stark contrast to Great Plains states like South Dakota where the agricultural economy is still reeling and rural counties are losing popu-



lation. The vast majority of this new population growth is not due to “natural increase,” i.e. local families growing, but to migration. Nationwide, from 1990 – 1994, net population gain to rural counties through migration was over 1 million.

In Idaho, the results are quite revealing. In the early to mid 1990s, Idaho had the second highest percentage population growth of any U.S. state, yet it was among the bottom five for immigration from other countries. The inescapable conclusion is that Idaho’s growth is being fueled by in-migration from other states. Although much of this growth occurred in the Boise metropolitan area and a few other growth centers, nearly every rural county in Idaho also experienced high growth in a short period of time. In fact, of western states, Idaho experienced the most even growth statewide, with a greater than 7 percent growth rate for nearly every county.

## Who are the newcomers and what are they looking for?

Idaho is attractive to the newcomers in part due to the sheer amount of federal land. Nationwide there are 269 non-metropolitan counties where 30 percent or more of the land is federally owned. Most are in the West, and 33 are in Idaho. Ninety-four percent of these federal-land counties gained population in the 1990s, and 86 percent saw net in-migration. Sharon O’Malley, in an influential 1994 article

*Sandpoint, Idaho may be a suburb of Los Angeles in the 2000s.*

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in *American Demographics* summing up research says that the in-migration was prompted "mainly by younger people and retirees who are attracted by the scenery and mountain recreation."

In a later article O'Malley adds, "Recent migration data show that Californians are seeking small-town solace in Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Utah and Idaho." Californians, the people Northwesterners love to hate, have been joined by other newcomers flocking to rural communities.



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In the process, in states like Idaho, natural resources, once the cornerstone of the economy, are losing ground to recreation and new, high-tech companies. Some demographers predict that this is part of a larger shift, in which over the long term the U.S. population will disperse into smaller, less densely settled cities and towns driven by changes in technology, the decline of industrial jobs, and other factors like improved transportation systems that make distance less important. We may be seeing a new flight to the suburbs on a regional scale. Sandpoint, Idaho, may be a suburb of Los Angeles in the 2000s.

## Impacts on the political landscape

In the late 1980s, progressives in Idaho believed that the influx of urban people into Idaho would loosen up some of the traditional conservatism of the political landscape. However, as revealed in polling of new US West phone customers by Idaho Democrats prior to the 1994 election, the newcomers don't tend to be progressive.

In fact, combined with other factors, the conservatism of newcomers led to a watershed 1994 Idaho gubernatorial race. In the 1990 elections, Democrats held the Governor's

mansion and other important seats and were close to control of the Senate.

Previous experience suggested that North Idaho could be counted on to push a statewide Democratic candidate's race over the top for a win. In 1994, Democrat Larry Echohawk, the state's Attorney General, was predicted to win the Governor's seat by 10 percentage points.

However, in the intervening years, timber, mining, and agriculture jobs (traditionally the base of the Democratic Party) were lost, in-migration had become substantial, and same-day registration put in place. Conservatives and the Republican Party used same-day registration masterfully to turn out their previous base, as well as new Idaho voters.

Echohawk lost, and the Democrats fell from the status of a party in contention for power into a long-term slump. (There are currently four Democrats in the Idaho senate and twelve in the house.)

## In-migration and inequality

Meanwhile, there is considerable evidence that the new population influx does not necessarily result in uniformly prosperous or improved communities. Many rural communities lack access to capital and the public and social infrastructure to absorb the new residents. For example, in Idaho, nearly one half of counties have less than seven people per square mile and the thin public infrastructure that comes with such a dispersed population. Health care services are often quite limited in these counties. Many have no doctors at all.

Newcomers tend to be affluent and often

have inflated housing dollars from the sale of previous homes. But this affluence has not changed or noticeably benefited previously existing social problems in the counties where they relocate. Many of the very same rural counties that are growing rapidly continue to experience high public school drop-out rates and a high percentage of children in poverty. High mortgage application denial rates are still coupled with few banking options and high unemployment rates. The picture that emerges is one of a privileged new population living among less-well-off old timers.

### Progressive challenges

The trends identified here are not limited to Idaho. Similar growth in rural areas is occurring in a number of regions in the U.S., fostering demographic and economic changes with repercussions for the political arena nationwide. De-concentration — the continued gradual dispersion of the population in the future — means that political forces will continue to be realigned in ways we haven't seen before. An already conservative state, Idaho has swung farther to the right. In my opinion, this swing was directly related to changing demographics in primarily rural North Idaho. Idaho Republicans and their right-wing allies recognized the political opportunity and took advantage of it—after years of building a base by working on tax revolt and anti-gay initiatives, abortion, and term limits.

In fact, Idaho and other Northwest states have become incubators for right-wing issues that have helped propel people like Rep. Helen Chenoweth (R-ID) to national leadership. As progressives, we have major work to do to address this challenge. As we re-orient, I make these three suggestions:

1. Organizing that can recruit rural people and move them in progressive directions should be evaluated for its strategic importance rather than for the numbers of people potentially recruited, as has often been the case. Progressives need to take risks and rediscover how to do political work in rural America to counter the growing power of the Right.
2. Progressives need to take into account the



recent economic, technological and demographic changes bringing growth to rural communities if we don't want to continue to be surprised by the political potency of people like Helen Chenoweth. Even from a national perspective, rural work will become increasingly important.

3. The decline of natural resource economies in the Northwest means wrenching changes in the lives of rural people. The economic issues that rise as a consequence, like jobs, access to credit, health care, welfare reform, and economic development present opportunities for progressive organizing.

It is ironic that counties which now swing to the right in Idaho were once the site of some of the most aggressive left-of-center labor organizing in the country. In the old mining communities you can still find memories of the Wobblies and other strident union organizing. We need to cure ourselves of the national aversion to rural organizing, press the palms of rural people, and figure out how to win. 🐾

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