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## The Functional Decline of Oklahoma Villages: A Case Study

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The relative decline of rural population as compared with urban population in the United States during recent decades is a phenomenon which has attracted wide attention. The general causes of these changes appear to be (1) the diminishing size of farm families, (2) the increasing mech-

anization of agriculture which encourages farm consolidation, and (3) the expanding opportunities for urban employment in manufacturing, commerce, and the service industries. Unlike in much of Europe, where the population of agglomerated settlements numbering up to several thousand people may be predominantly rural in occupation and interest, most of the people of even the smallest American hamlets and villages are urban in terms of employment and outlook. The small towns of our country are cities in miniature. They process and exchange commodities; they provide administrative and personal services; they centralize recreational and cultural opportunities.

In the state of Oklahoma, where settlement started late and matured early, we have experienced an overall decline in population during the past twenty years which is comparable to and illustrative of a decline which has taken place in the Great Plains region as a whole. The large cities in our state, however, and many of the medium-sized towns continue to grow. In general, the smaller the urban center the less likely it is to be growing, and very few of the centers with less than 1000 population are even holding their own. To illustrate why these towns grew so rapidly in the early days of settlement and then entered on a period of prolonged decline, I have selected for examination one particular village in central Oklahoma which I believe to be representative of many. My case study is Washington, Oklahoma, a village in central McClain County which reached its peak population of 400 less than twenty-five years after it was established and then began a slow decline, the end of which is not yet in sight.

Washington, Oklahoma, is located in the south central part of the state, about 30 miles south of Oklahoma City, 14 miles southwest of the state university center of Norman, and 13 miles by road northwest of Purcell, an old but growing railroad town of 3,500 population on the west bank of the South Canadian River. Some 15 miles to the northwest of Washington is Blanchard, a town of 1,300 people on the highway from Oklahoma City to Chickasha. Chickasha is a thriving market town of 16,000 population in the fertile Washita Valley about 30 miles west of Washington. Farther down the Washita Valley, about 20 miles south of Washington, is Lindsay, a town of 3,000 people, self-styled the "Broomcorn Capital of the World." Within a radius of ten miles from the village of Washington are perhaps half a dozen smaller hamlets or crossroads centers which sell staple groceries and gasoline, and may boast an elementary school, a country church, or a cotton gin.

The village of Washington is situated on the south edge of the valley of Walnut Creek, a mature stream with a low gradient and a mile-wide floodplain draining southeastward into the South Canadian below Purcell. The red shaly hills on which the townsite was laid out rise from 25 to 75 feet above the plain of Walnut Creek. Following a heavy rain, the red soil turns into a sticky mud, and until the recent surfacing of State Highways 24 and 74, such a rain left the village of Washington virtually isolated. Since World War II black-top roads have been built which provide easy all-weather contact with Oklahoma City, Norman, Purcell, and other neighboring communities.

Seen from a hill about a mile northeast of Washington, looking across Walnut Creek valley, the village water tower stands out on the skyline high above the level of the tallest trees. A few other prominent structures are apparent from this distance, the red brick school buildings which occupy a prominent hilltop at the south end of Main Street, two good-sized cotton gins, and a row of brick store buildings on the principal business block near the center of town. Along the far side of the valley we can observe the straight line of a railroad embankment, and as we approach the village across the flat bottomlands, a lush green in late fall with alfalfa and

winter wheat, we note that the channel of Walnut Creek has been artificially deepened and straightened to avoid flooding.

On a weekday forenoon in the cotton-ginning month of November, Washington, Oklahoma, is a busy little town. Some twenty automobiles, a half-dozen pickups or larger trucks, and a tractor or two are parked along Main Street, along with four or five delivery vans from Oklahoma City or Norman unloading bread, potato chips, general groceries and livestock feed. The principal business block which faces west along recently blacktopped State Highway 24 includes the following establishments: (1) a grocery and market which handles livestock feeds, flour, breakfast foods, canned goods, meats, soft drinks, and other merchandise; (2) a warehouse building for the store just mentioned through whose dirty window one sees 100-pound sugar sacks, blocks of rock salt, cases of Ball jars for home canning, cartons of toilet tissue, coffee, bleach, bundles of baling wire, barbed wire on a spool, and a variety of pig and poultry feeds in brightly-patterned percale sacks; (3) the Washington postoffice, with one hundred mail boxes of various sizes; (4) a new little white-painted concrete block building which houses the telephone exchange and a notary public's desk; (5) a grubby little cafe with six wooden booths, ten stools in a row by the counter, and the usual line of hamburgers, roast beef, roast pork, or fish; (6) a vacant store building with a sagging wooden awning and porch posts of crooked steel, temporarily used as a meeting place, judging by the thirteen unpainted benches and small lectern, the pot-bellied stove and the American Legion chapter certificate hanging on the wall; and (7) a help-yourself laundry with half a dozen non-automatic washing machines, rinsing tubs, and an electric ironer.

It does not take long to survey the entire business district and evaluate the commercial-service function of Washington. Altogether there are three establishments selling groceries and general merchandise, another which is primarily a hardware store, one drugstore, and one cafe. In addition to the self-serve laundry already mentioned, the other establishments which mainly provide services are two welding shops, one of which does oil field work and the other repair and blacksmithing work on agricultural machinery brought in from nearby farms; three gasoline stations, all of which provide limited garage service, and one barber shop. A small produce station buys cream and eggs for shipment by truck to a large creamery in Guthrie. A locally-owned custom mill, established in the early days of the town, still does a thriving business grinding corn, oats and other grains for farmers in the neighborhood. Two cotton gins, both branches of ginning companies with headquarters in Chickasha, are active for a few weeks each fall but stand idle or nearly so the remainder of the year. The commercial function of Washington, then, is to retail supplies, mostly bulky or perishable, like livestock feed, groceries, and gasoline, which come in by truck from larger communities, to process locally grown coarse grains for a local market, and to collect, partially process, and ship out such surplus farm products as cotton, cream, and eggs.

Strictly service and professional functions are limited in Washington, Oklahoma. There is a barber shop for men, but no downtown beauty shop for the women. There are notary publics, but no accounting or financial services of any kind. An elderly doctor, who commutes from Norman, maintains an office in the rear of the drugstore, but there is no dentist or lawyer in the village.

The residential district of Washington includes between 80 and 100 homes, mostly one-story frame structures built thirty or forty years ago and little modified since except for an occasional painting. The homes are built on large lots, about six to each block, the majority of them facing two unpaved streets laid out in grid pattern parallel to Main Street. A few of the homes have well maintained lawns and flower gardens; more of

them are surrounded by nondescript fences, vegetable gardens, rubbish piles, chicken houses and outhouses. Although there is no central sewage system in the town, many of the more prosperous families have installed septic tanks and modern plumbing equipment. The principal type of domestic fuel used in Washington is butane, trucked in from Lexington, Purcell, Paula Valley, and Norman, and stored in individual steel tanks, some buried, more of them above ground. The poorer families in town who have not been able to afford the cost of butane, or more particularly the cost of the installations necessary for using it, burn bituminous coal. A Washington trucker picks up coal in McAlester and peddles it on a door to door basis. At least three men in the village make their living with trucks, hauling livestock and miscellaneous supplies.

Recreational and cultural opportunities in Washington are centered almost entirely around the schools and churches. There is no moving-picture theater, no pool hall or domino parlor, no tavern, no dance hall, and no recreation room for civic clubs. An irregular-shaped school district of approximately 50 square miles provides about 260 elementary pupils and 135 high school pupils; some of the high school pupils come from so-called "transportation districts" beyond the limits of the school district proper. Formal education is available in practically all of the standard academic fields encountered in the American public school system, as well as in home economics, vocational agriculture, and industrial arts.

Four churches have been organized in the village, and all of them have regular meetings. The two largest congregations, the Baptist and Pentecostal Holiness groups, are the only ones which can afford to maintain a parsonage and support a resident pastor. The smaller Methodist and Church of Christ congregations are served by part-time pastors who commute from Norman. All four of the churches have rural members in addition to members who live in the village. The newest and most rapidly growing congregation is the Pentecostal Holiness group, which seems to attract people mainly from the more migratory and less prosperous elements of the population. The Methodist church, with only 28 members, has the smallest congregation. As one elderly lady in the village put it to me recently, "Seems to me that nearly everybody who moved away from here or died lately was a Methodist."

The village of Washington was established and laid out in 1907 as a station on the new Oklahoma Central Railroad which opened a connection from Purcell up the fertile valley of Walnut Creek and west to Chickasha. Prosperity and growth came quickly in that first decade of the century, when the population of the entire state more than doubled. Washington soon had a stockyard with cattle-loading facilities, a fourteen room hotel, a lumberyard, a weekly newspaper, millinery and dress shops, and a state bank. All of these are gone now, even the railroad, whose tracks were picked up and sold to the U. S. Navy early in World War II for use on the training base at Norman.

From a peak population of 400 in 1930, Washington has lost nearly one-third (292 people in 1950) in the past twenty years. This loss can be attributed to or associated with a loss of urban functions, consequent upon three factors: (1) the depression and drought of the early 1930's, (2) changes in the land utilization pattern of the region, and (3) the improvement of motor roads and motor transportation. The price collapse of the early 1930's ruined several business establishments, including the lumberyard, and led the bank to move to Purcell. The change of emphasis in the cattle industry from beef to dairy cattle helped ruin the railroad. Instead of local cattle moving by rail to feedyards farther east, dairy trucks now pick up fresh milk from farms in the Washington area and haul it to Norman for processing. Cotton, once king among crops in the area, brought on eroded hillsides. Lower yields due to soil erosion and

insect pests brought declining acreage and the abandonment of one of Washington's three cotton gins. The improved highways give the people of the Washington community easier access to larger towns where they now go for nearly all of their clothing purchases, their banking and professional services, and their commercialized recreation. The only expanding function seems to be the educational one, for half a dozen rural school districts have been merged with the Washington district, and six bright orange school buses now bring in high school students in larger numbers and from greater distances than ever before. In spite of the enlarged school district, however, the decreasing number of children per family has led to a one-third decline in the number of elementary school children enrolled. The town seems to have an excessive proportion of people in the upper age brackets, and many of them are on state relief rolls.

What is the future of Washington, Oklahoma, and thousands of similar villages in the Great Plains? If they are doomed to continued decline because of a gradual loss of their urban functions—and it is hard to conclude otherwise—one wishes that at least they could decline with fewer heartaches and less physical ugliness than they customarily experience and display.

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