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Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 19

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OASIS OF EDEN



Lester Sloan—NEWSWEEK

Motel owners in fast-growing Yucca Valley: To some the trend is 'scary'

A Boom in Small Towns

The historic population shift from country to city is over. According to preliminary census figures released last week, rural areas and small towns are growing faster than the nation's metropolitan areas (except in the South) for the first time since 1820. The suddenness of the shift is remarkable: in the 1960s rural areas lost 2.8 million people; in the 1970s they gained 8.4 million—a 15.4 per cent increase. The cities, meanwhile, grew only 9.1 per cent. The trend may well continue as a younger, better-educated, higher-paid population—aided by better transportation and communications—flees the cities to follow manufacturing shifts, energy booms and its own desires for a simpler life. NEWSWEEK correspondents visited two of America's booming small towns and filed these reports:

Brewster, Mass., is nestled on the inside bend of the elbow of Cape Cod, formerly one of the poorest stretches of the state. The historic hamlet is still considered "the boonies" to social-register types in sprawling Hyannis 10 miles away, but to the U.S. Census Bureau it is the fastest-growing town on the cape, which in turn is the fastest growing county, Barnstable, in Massachusetts. Since 1970 the town's population has tripled to 5,219, its budget has increased from \$750,000 to \$5 million, and its payroll has more than quadrupled to 150 workers. Old-timers are used to annual influxes of summer vacationers that swell the town to 22,000, but they find some of the new settlers and their desire for small-town "atmosphere" more difficult to deal with. Brewster general

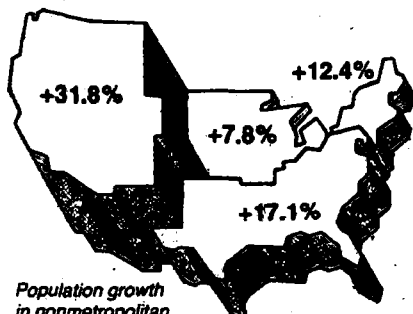
store owner Robert Dibble, for example, had to fight a newly arrived architectural preservationist just to put vinyl siding on his landmark building. "It was like World War III," says one local construction worker.

A lack of water held back the town's growth, but in 1972 wells and mains were drilled and developers arrived, subdividing lots that lured throngs of retired people (28 per cent of Brewster is 61 or older). They increased the demand for small retail and service businesses, still the basis of Brewster's struggling economy. More recently, young professionals have put down roots, making Brewster's per capita income the second highest on the cape, buying condominium units as soon as they're built and commuting dai-

Marta Norman—NEWSWEEK

THE SIMPLE LIFE

The 1980 census shows Americans flocking to rural areas—especially in the West and South.



Population growth in nonmetropolitan areas, 1970-80.

Source: Dept. of Agriculture, Census Bureau

ly to Boston, 90 miles away. "You can't get rich here," says Linda Harwood, a native of Kalamazoo, Mich., who settled with her family in Brewster eight years ago. "But it's part of the old hometown atmosphere."

Preserving its wood signs and distinctive salt-box architecture is the least of Brewster's problems. Newcomers have helped drive up prices, and jobs outside the construction industry are scarce. The largest employers in town are an old-age home and a small plastic-bottle manufacturer. A planned industrial park is still a sweep of barren land because it lacks electricity. Like other small towns, Brewster stands to suffer proposed Federal budget cuts. An estimated \$100,000 may be lost in programs that help local families pay their fuel bills. "It's a choice between eating and heating," says Lawrence B. Doyle, 71, chairman of Brewster's board of selectmen—which may have to help pick up the cost.

In 1945 Yucca Valley, Calif., had a population of 50 and all postmistress Hilda Hardesty needed to sort the mail was a shoe box. When she retired in 1975 the population had already swelled to 11,000, mostly retired folks delighted with the dry climate, cheap land and quiet surroundings offered in abundance by the high desert town 130 miles east of Los Angeles. In the last six years Yucca Valley has continued to grow, and now the retirees have been joined by a legion of young families, three new supermarkets, several banks and a handful of fast-food joints. "It's scary, frankly," says Hardesty, 65. "I think we've lost a lot."

Yucca Valley has no agriculture and virtually no industry, yet its population stands today at 15,000, and town fathers predict it will easily maintain its 7.8 per cent annual growth rate through the next decade. For many, the lure of the smog-free outpost 35 minutes from Palm Springs is sheer economics: a custom-designed home can be bought for as low as \$50,000, and Los Angeles native Jim Luyben, 28, claims business has quadrupled in the four years he's owned the town's lone sporting-goods store. "There's nothing that I miss about L.A.," says William Miller, 34, a state policeman who moved his wife and two sons to a \$32,000 home six years ago. "I'm real happy with the way things are."

Others aren't so bullish. "The gears are stripping as far as adjusting to this is concerned," says local newspaper editor Art Mitz. The elementary school now holds double sessions to educate a thousand children in facilities designed for 450. Beyond that, jobs are scarce, the town lacks a sewer system and its governmental decisions are made at the county seat in San Bernardino, 45 miles away. Still, most residents say they'd never move from Yucca Valley—unless, of course, it becomes too big.

MICHAEL REESE with PHYLLIS MALAMUD in Brewster and JOE CONTRERAS in Yucca Valley