

#107 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 8, 2009

Baby Boomer come-heres and been-heres form rural communities
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—Many Americans move from the place where they were raised. College, work, marriage and retirement turn millions of us into newcomers each year.

Rural America has witnessed a lot of comings and goings since the 1920s. Many left -- and still leave -- to search for jobs and opportunities. Those who moved in since the 1970s were searching for more scenery and less stress.

The leavers tend to be young; the comers tend to be older. The leavers can't afford to stay and buy property; the comers can. The stayers bear the weight of the change.

This demographic shift is most noticeable where the countryside is pretty, or has a moderate climate or features lifestyle amenities. The motivation for relocation is simple: metropolitan residents see a net gain for themselves, a less expensive and better quality of life out here.

Rural settings and small towns will feel more of this shift during the next decade. An August, 2009 USDA report, [Baby Boom Migration and Its Impact on Rural America](#), by John Cromartie and Peter Nelson, suggests that if Baby Boomers follow past migration patterns, the non-metro age group 55-75 will increase by 30 percent to 14.2 million between 2010 and 2020. Boomer migrants will represent about one half the gain in this rural age group. (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err79/err79.pdf>)

The comers are moving to cheaper places, but they are, as a rule, not moving to the cheapest places—the high-poverty counties, the casualties of environmental sacrifice and communities with long-term economic problems like the Great Plains, Mississippi Delta and Central Appalachia.

Boomer relocation produces an uneasy layering and blending in small places. The stayers often feel besieged by the comers, taken over, occupied and left out. The comers often feel scrutinized, unappreciated, relegated to second-class citizenship and...left out.

When property is newly purchased in rural communities, the comer may be assigned baggage that doesn't carry his name tag.

When we moved here 26 years ago, a woman, who I have yet to meet and would not know if she sat in my lap, started a rumor that we were growing dope in our pasture behind a neighbor's barn. Patrol planes flew over for

several summers. I waved. If I wanted to grow marijuana, I would not have chosen to cultivate it 50 feet behind my neighbor's kitchen window in an open field populated with hungry cattle. Truth is a time-delayed defense against such rumors. But the bad taste lingers and still makes me angry.

Rural places, of course, are just like New York City: people talk about each other.

Small places are simply more intimate. Information gets around to everyone; everyone knows what is thought to be known. After a while, everybody gets used to everybody.

In some places I've lived, newcomers are called "outsiders." The slightly gentler version is "come-heres," bestowed by the "been-heres."

Rural communities are small places, even when they're large in awareness. Each new face is appraised...and should be. If you've ever been the new kid in school, it's like that. The scoping goes the other way too. Both sides are looking for common ground and, sometimes, reasons to be dismissive.

Each group brings its past to its present with the other. Individuals also carry their conscious and unconscious preconceptions about others, along with embedded media images, memories of earlier encounters and understandable caution.

The stayers have reason to be angry. Many have found it increasingly difficult in their home communities to make a living, buy property and keep their kids close. As sellers, they find themselves getting inflated prices for their family lands from people, who as a group, they resent selling to.

Rural real estate -- with the exception of working farms -- is typically priced for the metro Boomer buyer who is looking for a second home, pension-supported retirement spot or investment.

This pricing pattern exaggerates the barbell-shaped age distribution in these communities—kids and seniors at either end with a relatively few middle-agers in between. I can't name a single young adult or couple from around here who has bought a farm in my county during the last 25 years.

Newcomers bring their knowledge, cash and needs as well as their connections. Communities can benefit from all four, especially when they're folded into local knowledge, cash, needs and connections. The knitting takes effort.

I've found that small rural places are usually extremely tolerant of differences they know. Familiar strangeness is just taken as part of the neighborhood, like the blind curve on the road into town.

A newcomer's eccentricities, however, are unfamiliar. They are grist that seems to need grinding. Many mills operate. A grain or two is produced. The milling trade works back the other way as well.

Some newcomers enter better than others.

They accept the obvious—that not much is private in a fishbowl. Anonymity evaporates. Everyone knows who the newcomer is before he knows anybody.

Newcomers are tested. It's best to deal squarely with everybody, building a public record on the widest possible base. Sooner or later, someone will try to take advantage of your local ignorance. Nothing is gained by cooperating in snookering yourself.

Finally, everyone is improved to the extent that individuals deal as individuals with each other, not as representatives of a group with an assumed unified way of thinking and behaving. In more than three decades of living in rural communities where I was not raised, I've learned that all groups are a mix of people I like, people I don't and those in between.

Metro Baby Boomers will continue to change the economics and politics of rural communities. In the worst case, they will self-segregate. In the best, they will mix around.

When communities divide between come-heres and been-heres, nothing is gained and no one benefits. Separation is the easy way, not the best way. It's a lot harder to build bridges than to burn them.

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