

Small Towns in Minnesota Are Growing Again

by John Fraser Hart



PHOTO BY STEVE SCHNEIDER

Small towns in Minnesota got back on the growth track during the 1990s, after having been derailed temporarily during the recession years of the 1980s. The population increased by 5% or more in half of the free-standing incorporated places in the state during the 1990s, and only one-quarter of these towns lost more than 5%, in sharp contrast to the 1980s when only one-quarter gained and more than half lost (Figure 1). I counted clusters of incorporated places—such as Brainerd and Baxter, or all of the separately incorporated places in built-up areas of the Twin Cities—as single freestanding places, and I considered a change of less than 5% for the decade, or 0.5% a year, as slight.

During the 1980s, virtually the only places that gained population were within commuting distance of the Twin Cities or Rochester, or in the lake country

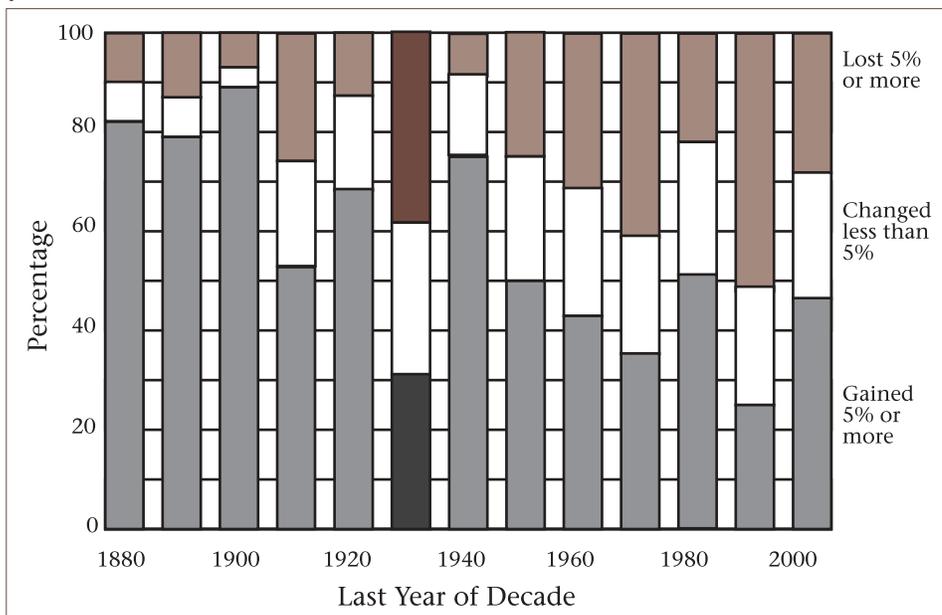
north of Brainerd, but during the 1990s growth was far more widespread (Figure 2). Between 1990 and 2000, most places within a 50-mile radius of the Twin Cities gained more than 5%, as did most places along Interstate 35 from the Twin Cities north to Duluth, I-94 northwest to Moorhead, and U.S. Highway 12 west to Willmar. Other growth strips were along U.S. Highway 10 from Moorhead to Brainerd, and U.S. Highway 14 from Owatonna through Rochester to Winona. The lake country north of Brainerd remained a growth area, as did the Twin Cities–Mankato–Winona triangle.

Most of the places that lost more than 5% of their population during the 1990s were in peripheral areas: the northwestern corner of the state, the Iron Range, the far southeastern corner, and southwest of the Minnesota River (Figure 2). These areas also had more than their

share of towns whose population changed only slightly during the decade. In detail, of course, the pattern of change is far more complex because most areas in the state had a mixture of towns that gained population, towns that lost population, and towns whose population hardly changed at all.

As with most previous censuses, for the state as a whole in 2000 the best statistical predictor of the population of any place was its population at the preceding census (Figure 3). The population of individual places tends to fluctuate—down at one census, up at the next—but within a fairly narrow range, and with a definitely upward long-term trend. Although most towns of about the same population size have grown at roughly the same pace, some towns that have grown in population at one census have lost population at the next, and vice versa. A few have broken out of the

Figure 1. Percentage of Incorporated Places in Minnesota by Population Change per Decade, 1870–2000



pack and gained population steadily, but the majority of freestanding incorporated towns in Minnesota have showed remarkable statistical stability (or an enormous amount of sheer inertia) during the 1990s, as they have for the entire 20th century.

When places are grouped by the size of their population in 1980 (or in any other census year), the growth of the average population of different-sized groups shows this same statistical stability (Figure 4). The population in most towns grew until 1920, but then sagged with the widespread availability of the automobile

and the motor truck, which enabled rural people to bypass smaller towns nearby for the greater range of goods and services that larger towns had to offer (Figure 1). The 1920s were far and away the worst decade for small towns in Minnesota history until the recession of the 1980s.

The smallest towns, those with fewer than 350 people, have never recovered from the setback they suffered in the 1920s. They are still hanging on—a town rarely disappears once it has been incorporated—but their growth has been stunted. They are too tough to die, but too small to grow. Once a place has

attained a population of around 350 people, however, it seems destined to continue growing, if erratically and spasmodically. Some decades have proven better than others, but the growth curves of places with 500 people or more are definitely (but not enthusiastically) moving upward (Figure 4).

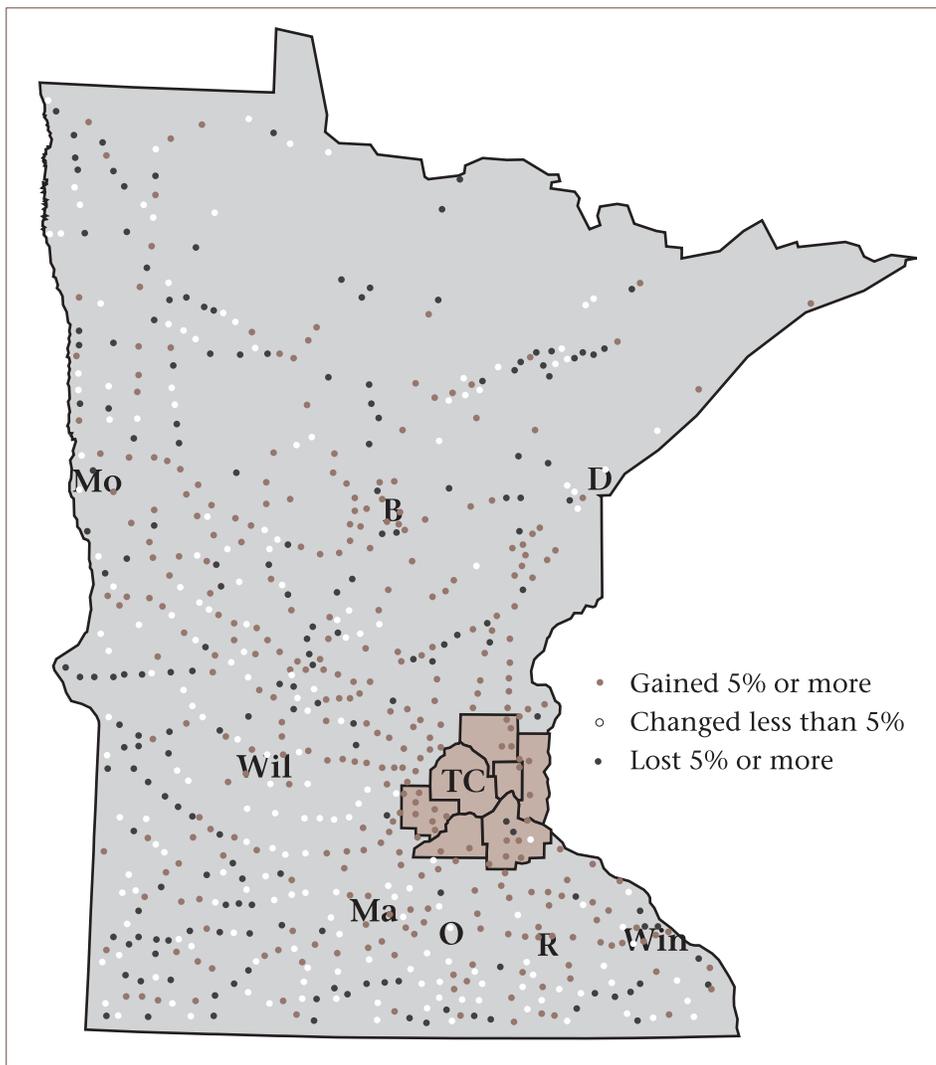
A town's population size appears to be related to the date on which it was incorporated. Towns that were incorporated earliest have had the longest time to grow, thus they are the largest today. The largest places in 1900 were still the largest places in 2000, and the smallest places in 1900 were still the smallest places a century later. The basic place network of Minnesota had been established by the turn of the century, or shortly thereafter, and it has hardly changed since 1910. More than half of the incorporated towns in Minnesota have celebrated their centennial year, and more than three-quarters had been incorporated by 1910 (Table 1). The places that have been incorporated subsequently have remained small: three-quarters had not attained a population of 500 persons by 2000, and 57% still had fewer than 250 persons.

Railroad companies created the basic place network of Minnesota in the horse-and-buggy era. The railroads founded towns as collecting and shipping points for the products of the surrounding countryside, and the grain elevator beside the tracks is still the most imposing structure in many towns. The railroads spaced towns at intervals of 6 to

Table 1. Number of Freestanding Incorporated Places in Minnesota by Population Size and Date of Incorporation

Population in 2000	Date of incorporation						Total
	1869 or earlier	1870–1879	1880–1889	1890–1899	1900–1909	1910 or later	
10,000 or more	14	14	2	3	—	—	33
2,500 to 9,999	10	33	16	17	7	5	88
1,000 to 2,499	6	14	41	18	14	10	103
750 to 999	1	4	17	13	12	6	53
500 to 749	2	13	17	25	19	10	86
250 to 499	—	8	13	41	47	30	139
6 to 249	—	5	5	43	73	100	226
Total	33	91	111	160	172	161	728

Figure 2. Population Change in Minnesota Small Towns, 1990–2000



forces rather than from conscious local decisions. Originally small towns were collecting and shipping points, retail and service centers, and minor processing centers, but over time some functions have become obsolete while others have grown in importance.

The grain elevator, for example, is defunct because the prosperity of the small town is no longer tied to the prosperity of the agricultural areas immediately surrounding it, and agricultural service is no longer its principal function. Many of the storefronts along Main Street are boarded up because the retail and service function of small towns has been shriveling ever since the automobile enabled farmers and townspeople to travel greater distances in search of the goods and services they need.

Some people still cherish the romantic notion that Main Street is the heart and symbol of the small town, but Main Street has been dying a long, lingering death for more than half a century. Even in larger places, downtown has become a place of last resort, merely a convenience shopping area for the people who work there, and retail and other traditional downtown functions have moved to more accessible sites with easier parking.

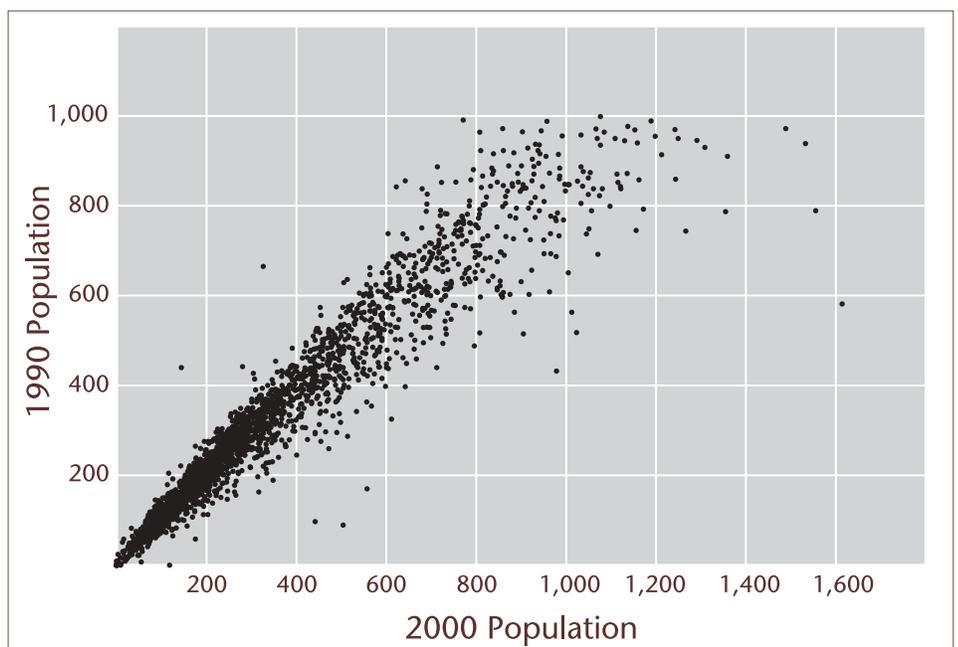
Many small towns have changed from central hubs serving agricultural areas into small cogs in the national manufacturing system. Their new “factories” are well-nigh invisible to the casual

10 miles, which allowed country people to drive their wagons or buggies into town, do their business, and drive home again the same day.

The railroad sold business lots on the main street to merchants, bankers, and others who purveyed goods and services to local people, and Main Street came to symbolize the town. Places with good waterpower sites at falls or rapids became minor manufacturing centers, and many small towns had creameries, butcher shops, and other processing plants that reduced the bulk of commodities to save the cost of shipping waste.

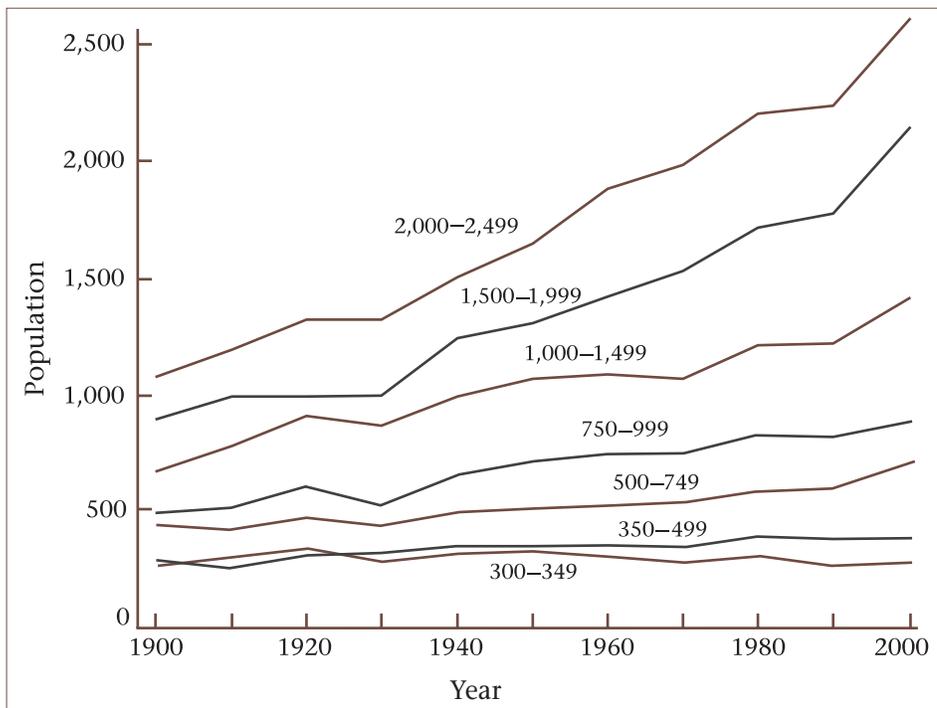
Today the horse-and-buggy spacing of small towns along railroad lines is much too cramped and congested, and most small towns are redundant to the needs of contemporary economy and society. They have had to change their function in order to survive and sustain their growth. Much of this change has resulted from inexorable economic

Figure 3. Scatter Diagram of Population of Minor Civil Divisions in Minnesota, 1990 and 2000*



* This diagram includes only minor civil divisions with a population of less than 1,000 persons in 1990.

Figure 4. Mean Population of Incorporated Places in Minnesota, 1900–2000 (Grouped by Size in 2000)



The function of small towns in Minnesota has changed, and those that accept and adapt to change will continue to grow. Their growth will depend on enlightened leadership that looks to the future, is aware that Main Street has had its day, and realizes that small towns have only tenuous ties to the agricultural areas around them that have been losing population fairly steadily for the last half-century. Small towns will continue to grow as manufacturing centers, as places of residence for commuters to larger places, and as service centers for resort and retirement areas.

John Fraser Hart is a professor in the Department of Geography. This article is an outgrowth of his long-standing curiosity about population change in Minnesota's small towns and villages. He appreciates the word processing prowess of Jodi Larson, the cartographic wizardry of Mark Lindberg and Jeff Matson, and the support and suggestions of Susy Svatek Ziegler.

observer because they are in older buildings, such as redundant schoolhouses, that have been recycled for industrial use. Some serve homegrown companies, some are branch plants of firms headquartered elsewhere. Much of this new manufacturing is based on the processing of locally produced crops and livestock, but far from all of it, because the small towns of Minnesota produce a truly remarkable variety of industrial products.

Some towns have become *bedroom* or *dormitory communities* for workers who commute to jobs in larger places (witness the growth of places near the Twin Cities and Rochester; see Figure 2), but even smaller population centers have spawned dormitory communities, especially places near major highways, which facilitate long-distance commuting. In northern Minnesota, some towns have become service centers for burgeoning resort and retirement areas, and our rapidly aging population suggests that these places will continue to flourish.



Increasingly, small towns in Minnesota have become bedroom communities for workers who commute to larger population centers.