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# Movers Find the Good Life in Small Towns

By Gary Maler and James W. Christian

**A**mericans move. We're a nation of immigrants, so perhaps it's a character trait. But our economy and our society are the most dynamic in the world, so our country constantly affords us the opportunity to move around, seeking our fortunes and making new life-style choices.

Historically, we've seen migrations from the farms to the factories, from the inner cities to the suburbs and from one urban area to another. In the main, those migrations went in the direction of cities. In 1950, 36 percent of the U.S. population and 37 percent of the Texas population still lived in rural (nonmetropolitan) areas. By 1990, the U.S. proportion had dropped to 22.5 percent, and Texas' had slipped to 18.4 percent. Indeed, Texas is home to three of the ten largest cities in America—Houston (4th), Dallas (8th) and San Antonio (10th).

As our urban areas have grown, the small towns around them have merged into metropolitan areas. Oldtimers might remember when Arlington and Grapevine could be distinguished from Dallas and Fort Worth, when Boerne, New Braunfels and Seguin weren't in commuting range of San Antonio, when Georgetown and San Marcos seemed more than a hop, skip and a jump from Austin, and Houston's daily orbit didn't exactly include residents of Katy, Sugar Land or Conroe.

Is this the future of small towns in Texas? Or will at least some of them continue to provide a life-style alternative to big city living?

The population data provide a partial answer to this question. So do visual impressions; if you drive Texas' highways and byways, you'll see a fair number of small towns barely hanging onto life, but you'll also find some little jewels, sporting a charm and vitality reminiscent of earlier days.

In more scientific terms, the population data show that while many nonmetropolitan counties lost population between 1980 and 1990, others could boast of population increases comparable to or greater than the counties that make up the state's metropolitan areas. For the record, the combined metropolitan counties grew by 22.6 percent, or about 2.3 percent a year, between 1980 and 1990. In absolute terms, the nonmetro counties weren't even in the same stadium with the metro counties. The metros grew by 2.6 million; the

nonmetros, taken together, fell just short of a population gain of 200,000. No contest.

Yet the fact that the nonmetro counties—home of the small towns—grew at all signifies that there's still a market for small town living. It gets more interesting when we look at the individual counties that grew a lot in the 1980s. Five distinct clusters emerged that are shown on the map. We applied working labels to these clusters—the Hill Country, the East Central, the Northwest Central, the Northeast Lakes and the Far South. The accompanying table details the high-growth counties in each of these clusters.

Head counts tell you people are making these choices but not why. And if you don't know the why of it, you can't evaluate the implications for Texas real estate.

For quite a long time, we've watched waves of retirees trade the hustle-bustle of the city for the simplicity of smaller, less expensive communities. A more recent phenomenon is the introduction of mobile phones, mobile faxes and ever-more-powerful laptop computers linked to the information highway. In the "Information Age," these innovations allow many professional service providers to earn a living from almost any location they choose.

No need to rule out companies big and small that choose to locate out of sight of skyscrapers and, in the process, provide employment for small town workers.

**"H**omecoming" is another motivation. Much as a large part of the baby boom generation kissed downtown goodbye when their children arrived and headed back to the suburbs (where they were raised), the same forces may be at work on young adults who were raised "in the country."

Reasons for moving to a small town may also include darker dimensions—the stress of the daily commute, the fear of urban crime and violence, dissatisfaction with the school system, the cost of urban living.

This, of course, is mostly speculation. Why not let recent movers speak for themselves? To do that, we sent questionnaires to 864 households who bought homes in our seven selected counties between May 1 and July 31, 1993. Their response rate was extremely high—more than 30 percent.

One third of the respondents to our questionnaire resided in the county before their recent home purchase;

two thirds (171 households), however, moved from another Texas county or another state. Because our principal interest is why people move to a small town, the responses of these 171 households are reported and analyzed here. This sample was further divided into three groups—the retirees, those aged 20 to 39 and those older than 39 but not retired.

Where did these people come from, and what's their statistical profile?

There's pretty strong evidence that many of the movers are returning to the environment in which they grew up. But that factor is more important for older movers. Roughly two thirds of the young movers—those less than age 40—grew up in the city, so "homecoming" is much less a factor for them.

**F**ully half of the retirees resided in a rural area or a small town before their most recent move.

But both younger and older movers still working previously lived in large and medium-sized cities. Interestingly, a significantly higher proportion of retirees (36 percent) moved from another state than did still-working movers (26 percent).

It might stretch things a little to say that the movers are "rich and smart," but almost half the total sample have household income greater than \$50,000 a year and slightly more than half have a college degree.

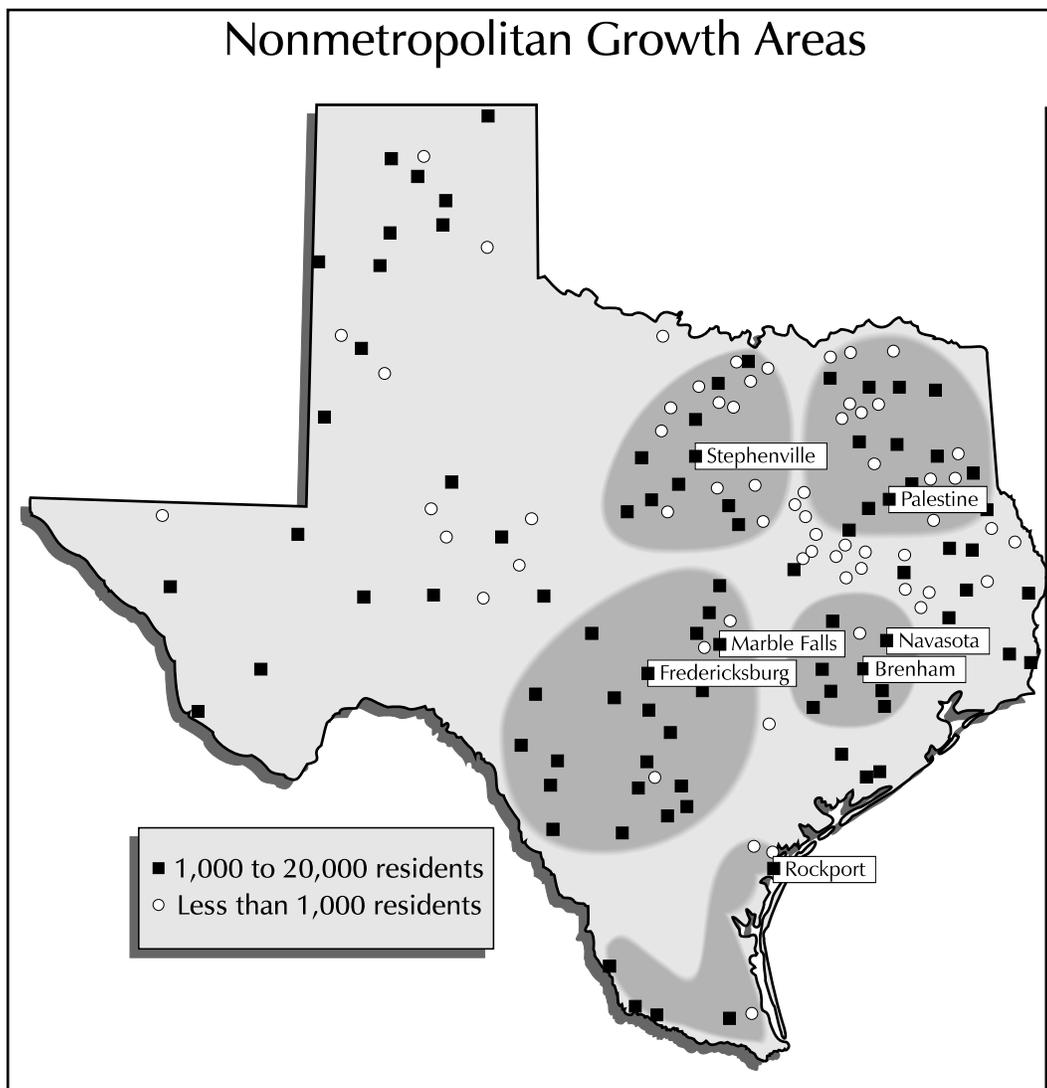
We'll concede that our sample consists only of homebuyers, which probably gives us an upward bias. Still, it's reasonable to assume that they enrich their new communities in more ways than one.

It's all about choice. Texans, in deciding place of residence, seem to be saying, "I'll select from a menu of qualities and characteristics that meet my definition of community." Sheer numbers alone tell you most of us are opting for the economic opportunities, cultural and entertainment attractions and services such as state-of-the-art medical care that Texas metro areas offer. Not every baby boomer or retiree is yearning to walk away from all that for a cozy place in a small town. Many of those who do trade their tailored suits for casual wear tend to keep the suits handy and one foot in the door to the not-so-distant city. Sixty-five percent of small town migrants in our survey say their ideal is to live within 60 miles or less of a metro area.

**C**hoices are characterized by tradeoffs. To live what they believe to be an idyllic way of life, small town migrants are willing to trade some of the amenities and services offered by urban living for qualities that are higher on their list of priorities. "Good schools, opportunity to get involved, a good place to raise children, pretty place to live, like the attitude and ethics of the people and neat place to retire"

are a few comments from surveys that reveal the list's diversity. By being highly selective, they can have the

## Nonmetropolitan Growth Areas



## Site Selection

Texas has many great small towns, and we could not possibly survey all of them. As a result, this study is not a definitive work providing all the answers, but it does probe into the issues of growth in Texas' small towns and provide some insights. Our principal interest is in the small towns of nonmetro counties that grew as a result of migration from other Texas counties and other states. The towns we selected were intended to serve as proxies for their respective regions.

Using census data, we screened potential areas to eliminate those growing primarily through natural increase or immigration from other countries. Small towns in deep south Texas grew primarily for those very reasons. We also looked at commuting patterns and eliminated small towns in metro counties because most function essentially as bedroom communities.

best of both a residence in an attractive, secure small town and occasional access to urban entertainment, shopping and services when and if they want it.

Mere mention of small towns evokes images of quaint, quiet little places where couples sit on front porch swings attached to painstakingly restored Greek Revival or Victorian houses, grandmothers of European ancestry wearing hand-sewn aprons, hayfields on the edge of town, wildflowers covering hillsides and roadways and picture post-card sunsets. In claiming such images as their own, small town migrants are seeking most a more relaxed, less stressful way of life.

Second on their list of ten reasons for choosing a small town is crime. Recent polls identify crime as a top concern of Americans. What politicians now vigorously discuss, small town migrants have been addressing by moving to places like Fredericksburg where the local newspaper reports the crime of the week: "One wheelbarrow, red in color, stolen from front yard, phone number to return it."

**M**arket researchers for the retailing industry have discovered it, and you see it in action more frequently as you shop. Friendly people—it is the third most important reason people choose small towns for residence. Fourth on the list of the "right stuff" that a town must have to attract residents is the appearance of the town. Migrants to small towns are looking for clean, well-maintained environments. As a new Brenham resident put it, "One that's thriving, not declining."

Aesthetic qualities such as natural beauty are ranked fifth. The quality of the area surrounding the town is almost as important as the town itself. The sixth factor, unpolluted environment, carries the quality and appearance theme further. In seventh place is access to water. Whether the nearby body of water is a river, lake, saltwater bay or beachfront, the recreational potential afforded by water is an important asset to the small town and its potential residents.

The appeal of homecoming is eighth on the list. The draw of hometown or relatives in the area may have a demographic basis as baby boomers confront care of elderly parents or contemplate retirement themselves a few years down the road. Ninth on their list is a factor with both physical and psychological dimensions: a sense of place and identity. As one respondent noted, "I felt a sense of belonging; I knew I was at home here from the very first visit!" Most small towns have few volume builders, so the commercial buildings and residences rarely take on the repetitive look of mass production. It's not hard to remember where you are. Another resident said it best: "You know when you get there."

Finally, economic opportunity and historical significance are equally important but last on the list. The quality of life's experiences has greater value than money they seem to be saying. Here some regional differences surface, however. Jobs are considerably more important to those moving to the Northwest Central and Northeast Lakes regions. Notably, a number of Fortune 500 companies operate in some of the small towns of these

### High Growth Nonmetropolitan Counties (Percent Change and Absolute Population Growth, 1980-90)

County	County Seat	Percent Change	Absolute Growth	County	County Seat	Percent Change	Absolute Growth
<i>Hill Country</i>				<i>Northwest Central</i>			
Bandera	(Bandera)	49	3,478	Wise	(Decatur)	30	8,104
Kendall	(Boerne)	37	3,954	Somervell	(Glen Rose)	29	1,206
Blanco	(Johnson City)	28	1,291	<b>Erath</b>	(Stephenville)	24	5,431
<b>Gillespie</b>	(Fredericksburg)	27	3,672	<i>Northeast Lakes</i>			
<b>Burnet</b>	(Burnet)	27	4,874	Rains	(Emory)	39	1,876
Kerr	(Kerrville)	26	7,524	<b>Anderson</b>	(Palestine)	25	9,643
Atascosa	(Jourdanton)	22	5,478	Van Zandt	(Canton)	21	6,518
<i>East Central</i>				<i>Far South</i>			
<b>Grimes</b>	(Anderson)	39	9,643	Starr	(Rio Grande)	49	13,252
Polk	(Livingston)	26	6,280	Zapata	(Zapata)	40	2,651
Walker	(Huntsville)	22	9,128	<b>Aransas</b>	(Rockport)	26	3,632
Trinity	(Groveton)	21	1,995				
<b>Washington</b>	(Brenham)	19	4,156				

Notes: 1. A "nonmetropolitan" county is not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area, as defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Of the 254 counties in Texas, 49 were "metropolitan" and 205 were "nonmetropolitan" in 1990. As of 1992, 58 are "metropolitan" and 196 are "nonmetropolitan."  
 2. Counties in bold-face type were included in the study. Primary criteria for inclusion required selected towns within those counties to have a 1990 population between 1,000 and 20,000.

## Movers' Profile

	Total Sample	Age 20-39	Age 40 & Older	Retirees
	(percent)			
<b>Where Raised</b>				
Rural Area or Small Town	57.2	39.0	58.1	70.4
Small City (20-50,000)	11.9	17.1	9.5	11.1
Medium-Sized City (50-400,000)	13.7	19.5	12.2	11.1
Large City (400,000+)	17.3	24.4	20.3	7.4
<b>Residence Prior to Moving</b>				
Rural Area or Small Town	38.7	31.7	34.2	50.9
Small City (20-50,000)	8.3	4.9	9.6	9.1
Medium-Sized City (50-400,000)	24.4	31.7	24.6	18.2
Large City (400,000+)	28.6	31.7	31.5	21.8
In Texas	70.8	73.8	73.3	63.6
In Another State	29.2	26.2	26.7	36.4
<b>Education Attainment</b>				
High School Graduate	11.9	10.0	9.3	16.7
Some College	32.7	40.0	30.7	29.7
College Graduate	29.2	35.0	32.0	22.2
Graduate Degree	21.4	15.0	25.3	20.4
<b>Household Income</b>				
Less than \$20,000	11.6	7.7	7.2	20.8
\$20,000-\$50,000	45.8	56.4	37.7	50.0
\$50,000-\$100,000	30.4	28.1	43.3	12.5
More than \$100,000	12.3	7.7	11.6	16.7

Notes: 1. "Small Town" is defined as one with population less than 20,000, "Small City" as 20,000 to 50,000, "Medium-Sized City" as 50,000 to 400,000 and "Large City" as 400,000 or more.  
2. "Some College" includes associate degrees; "Graduate Degree" includes Master's, Ph.D., M.D. and J.D. degrees.

two regions. Other than the regional differences noted, the top ten motivators remain remarkably constant across all areas, all buyer profiles and all age groups.

Generally, here is what we learned from the study. Probably few, if any, communities "stand alone" or are totally independent in every sense of the word. Prospering small towns are clustered in several regions of the state. Those clusters include small towns, major and minor metro areas. To a large extent, all of them—though competitors for industry and residents—also complement each other in meeting the diverse needs of the market area.

For example, Bryan-College Station's emergence as a regional retailing center is somewhat dependent upon customers traveling from small towns in the surrounding retail trade area. In attracting residents of their own, those small towns are dependent upon the nearby metro to provide a higher level of entertainment, shopping and medical care than they can provide alone.

We also learned that the list of qualities a small town must have to grow is brief but definitive. The town is on display 'round the clock year-round; successful towns are clean and visually attractive. Low incidence of crime is vitally important, making it a consideration in real estate decision-making.

**S**mall town residents are the town's best or worst recruiting ambassadors. Characteristics of the town's people such as friendliness are critical. The world is obsessed with quality, so natural beauty, access to water and lack of pollution are givens, too. If there is anything unique about the architecture, history, culture or other facet of the town, save it, enhance it and showcase it, for ambience is a major draw to residents. And finally, job availability is important, but small town migrants are moved more by the good life (as they define it) than by life's goods.

We can't yet be sure what our research tells us about the character of the trend we see unfolding, but the quest for community and quality of life seems to be more pressing today than ever. As that quest ends in small towns for some seekers, those towns are transformed. Rather than recreations of the idyllic (and largely imaginary) rural community of an earlier time, they are vital new habitats taking their place in the spectrum of choices for the 21st century. ☐

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