

Returning Home and Making a Living: Employment Strategies of Returning Migrants to Rural U.S. Communities

Christiane von Reichert

Dept. of Geography, The University of Montana
Missoula, MT, USA
c.vonreichert@umontana.edu

John B. Cromartie

Economic Research Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture
Washington, DC, USA
jbc@ers.usda.gov

Ryan O. Arthun

Dept. of Geography, The University of Montana
Missoula, MT, USA
ryan.arthun@mso.umt.edu

Abstract

This research focuses on return migration to rural areas in the United States and documents strategies that return migrants use for securing employment. Rural labor markets, due to their small size, limited diversity, and lower wage scale, can be challenging for people looking to make a living. To understand how these labor market constraints affect rural return migration, we draw on over 300 semi-structured interviews with stayers, outmigrants and return migrants. Conversations, conducted at 10- to 30-year high school reunions in geographically isolated rural U.S. communities, affirm the well-known challenges and significant barriers to employment in small towns. However, additional interviews with community and business leaders also document employers' difficulties in filling skilled work positions. Return migrants take on jobs both in the public and private sector, but quite a few carve niches through self-employment, mostly in service sectors. We also encountered a small number of return migrants who started internet-based businesses or otherwise worked remotely. A reoccurring theme highlights how return migrants accept career sacrifices in order to raise their children in a familiar, small-town environment. We conclude that return migrants can be a boost to the economic and social vitality of rural communities and that communities should make efforts to both attract and retain them.

Keywords: return migration, rural communities, rural labor markets, employment, geographic isolation, United States

1.0 Introduction

This research is about people who grew up in rural U.S. communities, moved away after completing high school only to later return. It focuses on communities in the contiguous U.S. (lower 48 states) that are in geographically isolated regions, with only moderate levels of natural amenities, and also suffer from net migration loss.

Given their remote location and lower levels of natural amenities, these areas are disadvantaged by their geography. As defined, the study area consists of roughly 950 nonmetropolitan counties, representing approximately 30% of U.S. counties and 5% of the U.S. population. The population in many of these counties has been shrinking for over 50 years. Amidst this persistent population loss, many rural communities are struggling to retain their vitality. Communities rightfully view the outmigration of young adults, much of it taking place immediately upon high school graduation, as a primary cause of demographic and economic decline. Young people leave rural places to pursue an education, to build a career, or to live life in a city. Many of them leave their hometown for good and rarely even visit, while others like to visit but do not plan on moving back.

Few if any economic development strategies exist to slow or reverse the outmigration of rural youth. One way of countering this demographic loss is to look for ways to boost in-migration, including return migration. Indeed, rather than pursuing efforts to retain high school graduates, federal, state and local policymakers are increasingly contemplating strategies that focus on encouraging return migration. Our work shows that, among initial out-migrants from geographically disadvantaged communities, a sizeable minority contemplates moving back home but cannot find a way of making a living in a small rural community. Then there are those who do return and the question is: How do migrants who move back to their rural community make a living? How do they overcome economic obstacles that appear to hinder others from moving back? Answers to these questions may be found by examining the paths that successful return migrants have taken.

For many years, demographic research drew heavily on economic theory to explain migration as primarily a response to employment and income differentials (Greenwood, 1975, 1985). Following the metro-nonmetro population turnaround of the mid-seventies (Beale, 1975), the jobs hypothesis of migration was challenged by the proposition that people move for non-pecuniary reasons, for instance for natural amenities (Graves, 1979; Judson; Rudzitis, 1999; von Reichert & Rudzitis, 1992). Among other quality of life factors, survey research showed that people often move for family reasons (Leistriz, Cordes, Sell, Allen, & Filkins, 2000; Rossi, 1955; von Reichert, 2002). Findings from our current research on return migration clearly support the importance of family-oriented moves. Our work shows that of those who move back to the community where they grew up, a great majority do so to raise their children, to be close to their parents, and for the quality of rural life. Most of the time, finding a job or a way of making a living is not the reason for moving, but instead is a precondition for returning.

The purpose of this research is to document employment-related barriers to rural return migration in the United States, to analyze the strategies that return migrants use for securing employment, and to highlight the types of jobs found by return migrants in communities that typically provide limited employment opportunities. Using data from over 300 interviews conducted at high school reunions, we are able to compare the experiences of people who grew up together but chose different migration paths. Though the analysis here draws mainly from interviews with return migrants, the contrasting perspectives of those who never left and those who have not returned provide a broader context for understanding the employment-related factors influencing return migration decisions.

2.0 Background

2.1 Return Migration and Changing Rural Employment

To understand the relationship between moving back to isolated rural communities and making a living, one needs to take into account the structure of rural and small town employment and consider how it may affect return migration opportunities to the types of counties considered here. Rural employment has undergone significant change over the last five or six decades, shifting first away from agriculture and into manufacturing and more recently into services. In 1950, nearly 20% of the U.S. population and over half of the rural population were farm dependent (Dacquel & Dahmann, 1993). Other primary sectors, such as mining and forestry, also played a much larger role in rural economies in the past. Since then, agricultural employment has dwindled to less than 2% of national employment and to under 6% of nonmetropolitan employment (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2009). Less than 20% of nonmetropolitan counties strongly rely on farming, measured as counties in which farm employment or farm income exceeds 15% (Economic Research Service, 2005).

The shift of rural employment in the U.S. from primary sectors (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mining) towards manufacturing and services is well documented (Fuguitt, Brown, & Beale, 1989; Vias & Nelson, 2006). Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, nonmetropolitan areas developed a strong manufacturing base, but subsequent industrial restructuring, off-shoring of routinized manufacturing, and other factors led to steady declines beginning in the 1980s. As in urban areas, service jobs have increasingly come to dominate rural employment. However, there are noteworthy differences between rural and urban services, including the much lower proportion of advanced professional services in rural areas. Nonmetropolitan counties also tend to have a higher proportion of government jobs, due to limited employment in other sectors and due to the existence of an irreducible number of employees needed to cover essential government services regardless of population size. (However, very small communities with extremely limited financial resources oftentimes rely on volunteers to offer essential services needed by a community, for instance fire protection and ambulance services.)

Many of the communities and counties in our study area (discussed in more detail below) experienced very large declines in agricultural employment extending through the 1950s and 1960s, but were unable to generate alternative economic opportunities. As a result, agriculture remains a dominant economic engine in roughly one third of these counties.

Some segments of the rural economy involving energy and food production may be well positioned for improved employment prospects, for example in oil and gas mining, wind farms, and corn/ethanol production if energy policy is continued. Growth in large-scale meat production and processing—not without controversy—has already boosted employment in a small set of geographically isolated locales. Increasing opportunities for self-employment represent another potentially promising development in the rural economy (Goetz, 2008). The types of counties studied here show higher-than average levels of self-employment due to their heavy dependence on agriculture, but evidence of declining compensation for rural self-employment raises concerns (Goetz, 2008). The ability to attract self-employed ‘lone eagles’ who create producer services for non-local markets is well

documented for rural places in high amenity areas (Beyers & Lindahl, 1996). It remains to be shown whether return migrants to places with less favorable amenity levels use similar employment strategies.

With the onset of the ‘Great Recession,’ employment trends for rural community are hard to predict. More isolated rural places did not catch the rising tide of employment growth during the 1990s and mid-2000s. While they did not benefit as much from the preceding economic upsurge, they have suffered much lower levels of unemployment during the economic downscaling that took hold in 2008. If relatively favorable—or less unfavorable—employment prospects were to continue in rural places, new migration as well as increased return migration could result. The findings reported here, however, come from decisions made prior to the economic downturn of the late 2000s. This study focuses on people who left rural communities after graduating high school 10 years (1998/1999) to 30 years (1978/1979) prior to the conversations with us. They have since returned and carved out a living during a period when urban environments generally offered better employment prospects than most rural places.

2.2 Return Migration and Wages

Job availability is not the only employment-related factor affecting migration. Once people have the prospect of a job, they also take into account the level of compensation for that job. Rural communities are placed at a distinct disadvantage by the sizable metro-nonmetro payment gap (Economic Research Service, 2006). Wage differences that are closely tied to urban size class can often be attributed to differences in the sectoral mix of rural and urban employment (Power & Barrett, 2001), and typically act as a disincentive to relocating and working in rural communities. However, low nominal wages may be offset by a low cost of living and other compensatory factors. Regions with high levels of natural amenities tend to have lower wages and higher housing costs, but attract migrants who view the scenic qualities as compensating factors (von Reichert & Rudzitis, 1994). Conversely, attracting people to low amenity areas could require higher wages, lower living costs, or some other type of compensation.

2.3 Wages and Jobs Implications for this Study

The areas chosen for this study are of moderate to low levels of natural amenities. As a result, amenity compensation in the form of wages is not likely a dominant factor. However, from the perspective of potential return migrants, the draw of family and home may represent a similar type of wage substitute. In addition, the communities studied are also relatively isolated, and such sparsely settled areas tend to have low housing costs. Whether or not the low nominal wage levels typically found in rural places are correspondingly low in real terms remains unresolved because of difficulties in accounting for place-to-place differences in living costs.

In most instances, the more likely challenge for those contemplating a move to a rural town is the limited range of employment opportunities rather than compensation levels. Typically, limited employment is simply a function of population size, though other factors such as sectoral concentration sometimes play a role. The communities we focus on not only have small populations but are also geographically isolated. Access to urban labor markets through commuting is therefore limited. Under these conditions, we expect to find discussions regarding the barriers to return migration to center more on employment than on wages.

3.0 Methodology

To answer questions about the causes and consequences of rural return migration, including how returnees make a living, we adopted a semi-structured interview approach. In 2008 and 2009, we traveled to 21 rural and geographically isolated communities in 17 states where we interviewed over 300 individuals at high school reunions. Reunions were chosen because they are the only venues that allow for simultaneous interviews with stayers (who never moved away), outmigrants (who moved away and now live elsewhere), and return migrants (who moved away and later returned).

To focus on people in labor force cohorts, we selected 10- to 30-year reunions. We also spent considerable time prior to or after each reunion interviewing community and business leaders and return migrants outside of reunions. This provided information about the economic context, employment prospects, and many other aspects of community life that could affect return migration decisions.

3.1 Delineating the Study Area

Our research focuses on nonmetropolitan U.S. counties with moderate to low levels of natural amenities in geographically isolated areas that also experienced negative net migration between 2000 and 2007. To capture amenity levels, we employed the widely-used Economic Research Service amenity classification (McGranahan, 1999). We devised a measure of geographic isolation by using a gravity-style model that accounted for poor access to urban areas and also included distance to transportation infrastructure (network distance to airports and straight line distance to interstate highways). Net migration estimates came from the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates program (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008). Figure 1, a map of the contiguous United States, shows nonmetropolitan counties that make up the study area, other nonmetropolitan counties, and metropolitan areas.

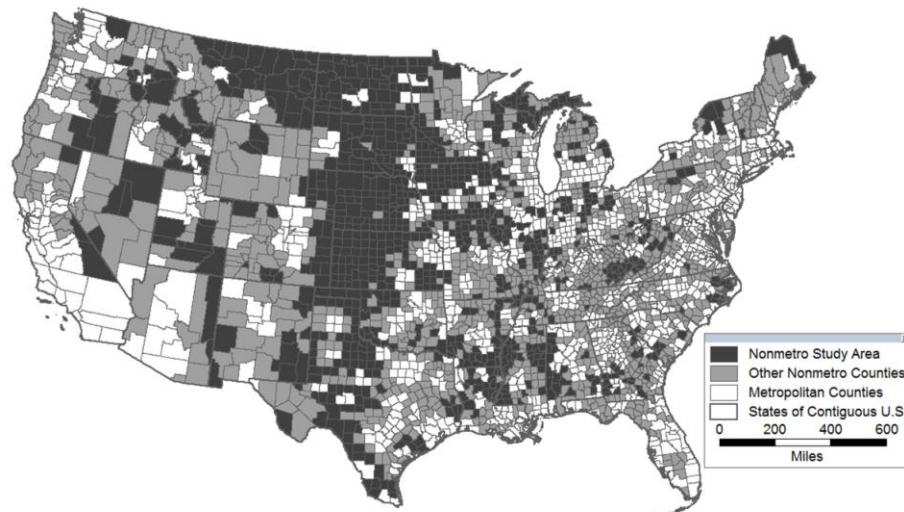


Figure 1. Study Area, Other Nonmetropolitan, and Metropolitan Counties of the Contiguous United States.

3.2 Selecting High School Reunions

The selection of specific rural communities to visit during high school reunion weekends began with a list of U.S. high schools in 2003 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) from which we identified high schools located within the study area. We excluded schools with less than 150 students because small schools tend to have small classes with few attendees at reunions. Small schools also tend to favor all-class reunions and prior experience suggested that the people sought out for this project (those in their late 20s to late 40s) are less inclined to attend all-school reunions than people in their 50s, 60s or 70s (von Reichert, 2000). After accounting for this exclusion, over 1,500 schools remained as potential candidates for site visits.

The next steps were time-consuming, involving calls to schools, newspapers, chambers of commerce, bars, as well as searches of community, school, and reunions websites, and social networking sites. Once a school had been contacted, considerable effort was made to identify upcoming reunions and reunion organizers. Therefore, our choice of towns did not hinge on easy access to information upon first contact. We further targeted communities to reach a reasonable cross-section of population sizes, isolation and natural amenities scores, and outmigration levels. At seven 10-year, one 15-year, eleven 20-year, and eight 30-year reunions, we spoke with over 300 persons who were stayers, outmigrants, and return migrants. A previous study had suggested that return migration was particularly relevant for people in their early 30s, and therefore prior to their 20-year class reunion (von Reichert, 2000). We therefore sought—and were successful—in reaching a greater representation of 20-year reunions. Figure 2 shows the number of interviews by reunion year and community size.

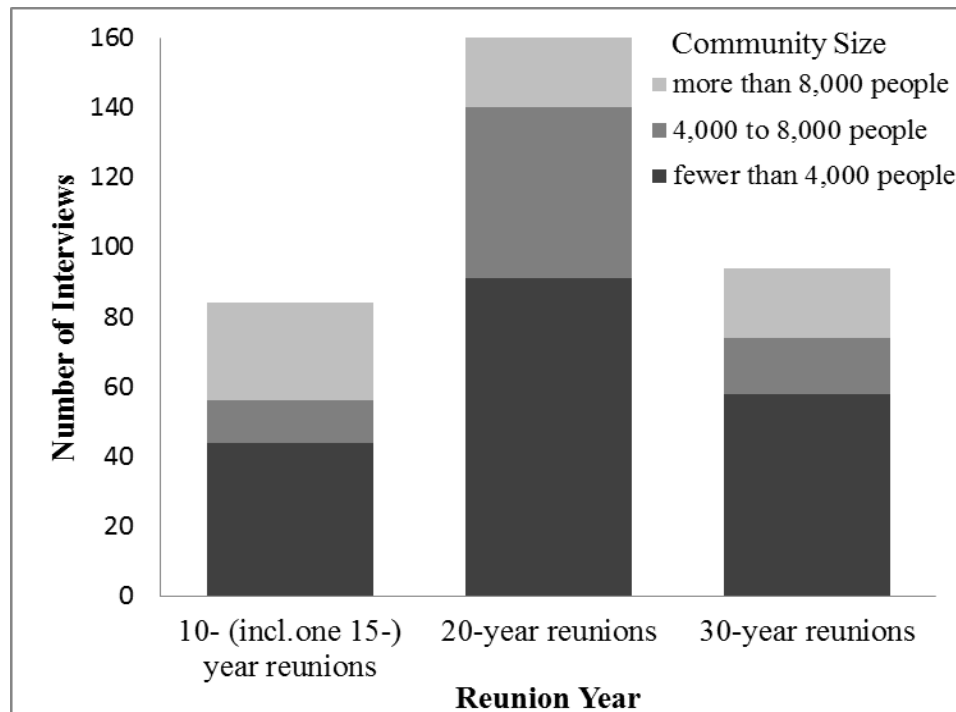


Figure 2. Number of Interviews by Reunion Year and Community Size.

Ultimately, the process relied heavily on the willingness of reunion organizers to approve our visits, to be supportive of our goal, and also to help develop a network of community contacts.

While at reunion events, such as mixers, family picnics, and ice cream socials, we conducted semi-structured interviews, making sure to ask a core set of questions to all interviewees while maintaining an informal, open-ended approach. Core questions differed slightly depending on whether we were interviewing stayers, outmigrants, or return migrants. Return migrants were asked what brought them back and what challenges to coming back they encountered, along with other migration-related questions and socio-demographic background information. With approval, the conversations, which lasted from a few minutes to a half hour, were digitally recorded. We later transcribed the conversations and identified themes using NVivo.

4.0 Findings

Conversations at high school reunions as well as with community and business leaders and other return migrants (outside of class reunions) affirmed the expected challenges to return migration caused by limited employment in small towns. Overcoming these employment challenges often required a combination of sacrifice, risk-taking, creativity, and patience. While some return migrants felt a strong sense of community support in their hometown, others felt more or less on their own when carving out a living. Interviews confirmed the primacy of family-related motivations among return migration: most moved back to raise children and be closer to parents. While some return migrants located employment opportunities that were quite rewarding, many more spoke of considerable employment challenges of rural labor markets. In contrast, community leaders repeatedly spoke of labor force shortages and difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified individuals for technical jobs and leadership positions.

The following sections discuss our findings in more detail. The themes that emerged from our conversations refer to rural labor market barriers, advantages of returning to rural communities as well as sacrifices associated with returning. Additional sections address the importance of ties to agriculture, opportunities in private and public sector jobs, the prevalence of non-agricultural self-employment as well as remote work. The sections below include segments selected from our conversations.

4.1 Economic Barriers to Returning Home

Limited employment opportunities in rural communities were cited by almost all who have left rural places and did not move back. When asked whether they would move back, highly skilled persons, especially those with advanced university degrees, repeatedly said: “*There wouldn’t be a job.*” Rural towns, ranging in size from 1,200 and even up to 10,000, simply offer very limited opportunities for specialized physicians, scientists, corporate accountants, and similar occupations. Another important economic barrier pointed out by a community leader was that most families are dual income families, and opportunities for dual income are not as great in smaller towns as in larger cities. In instances where both spouses were highly skilled, this barrier was significant.

The limited ability of the manufacturing sector to draw back returning migrants was striking. Community leaders and economic development professionals

repeatedly spoke about the need to create well-paying jobs by bringing in manufacturing plants. Indeed, some of the larger communities were successful in creating a sizable manufacturing base. At the same time, community leaders expressed concern about keeping these jobs as the manufacturing sector itself is declining. Notably, we encountered very few individuals during our community visits who returned for or later obtained jobs in manufacturing.

As expected, low wages were not cited as a barrier to the same degree as employment per se, but it did come up frequently in conversations, especially among stayers and outmigrants: “*We are still stuck in the very low paying jobs.*” Many respondents spoke of the rural-urban payment gap as wide and significant:

People love to live here because it's a nice place, it's safe. But other than agriculture there is just not much to bring people back, which is sad....

Agriculture has been in the dumps for so many years—the last 20 years. I don't blame anybody not wanting to come back and eke by on nothing when they could be out making a lot of money someplace else.

The following quote is characteristic of outmigrants who expressed no intention of returning:

There's nothing for me here. My family doesn't live here any longer. I'm used to bigger cities. I like the convenience of bigger cities. I like the opportunities of bigger cities. After I'll leave the military I'll more than likely either continue owning a business, start another business, or work for the airlines. Really none of that I can accomplish here. So there's really nothing. We're not planning on having kids. So the kids and education, and idyllic life I was talking about—the Norman Rockwell—is really not a big factor.

The comments illustrate what emerged as a consistent theme: the choice of place is a family-lifestyle-jobs bundle that people consider simultaneously. If the pull of the family and the draw of the lifestyle are missing, people do not look for ways of making a living in their previous rural town. Alternatively, if people move for family and lifestyle, they make substantial efforts in locating employment. Accomplishing that proved considerably more challenging for some occupations than for others. Even those who were successful in finding ways of making a living often traded career opportunities and pay for family and lifestyle (as discussed in more detail below).

4.2 Economic Advantages to Returning Home

Labor markets in rural areas appear to have considerable limitations. However, these limitations were readily overcome by many who left for college or otherwise to improve their skills, but with the firm intent of coming back. Quite a few enrolled in two-year programs in accounting, mechanics, and the like. Several had a job waiting upon their return: in farming, in a family business, or with an employer who supported employee training. Some others, intent on returning,

obtained degrees in medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy. They commonly had nurtured a relationship with an established health practitioner in their rural community, who was approaching retirement. The opportunity to take over a practice allowed them to return home while still pursuing a career in their field.

Although many at reunions mentioned poor employment prospects in rural places, low unemployment rates and of a shortage of qualified labor were repeatedly mentioned by community leaders. Especially in sought-after fields, recruiting and retaining qualified labor was found to be a challenge for rural towns. The lack of urban-style amenities appears to be a primary factor, as pointed out in a conversation at an electric utility company:

You have to want to live here. This must be the kind of lifestyle that you want. We pay \$31 an hour. We are probably the highest paying employer in town. There is quite a bit of overtime. People can make over \$100,000.... We have a hard time attracting [employees].... We have started advertising locally because we need to attract someone who will stay here. If we hire out of state, from a bigger community, they'll come in and get in the system and move on to another larger community.... We try hard to recruit from the surrounding region.

On the positive side, this shortage of workers with sought-after technical skills offers opportunities for those with matching qualification and with an interest in moving to a rural town. The recruitment of rural return migrants provides employers an opportunity to fill these positions and offers outmigrants who would like to move back an opportunity to do so.

Although career opportunities in administrative positions are generally limited in rural locales, there is a small number of these positions in school and hospital administration, rural branch offices of federal and state agencies, and the like. Concerns about recruitment and retention for these administrative positions are similar to those of skilled technical workers. Return migrants who did come back to fill these positions commented on the attractive pay scale: *“My job is an anomaly in a place like this. [Normally] you don't get to make that kind of money and live here.”*

One of the economic advantages of rural communities could be the lower cost of rural living. Those who hold well-paying jobs recognize the benefits of low cost rural living. A return migrant from the class of 1998, for instance, was disgruntled about his urban job and left a city to return to his hometown. By weighing the pros and cons of urban and rural life, he took into account rural cost and lifestyle advantages:

I have a better job here than I did in the city.... My cost of living is lower and I'm around the people that love and support me.... I'm 28 years old and I own my own home! I'm able to do things that I probably would not have been able to do living in the city.

Throughout our research, we encountered return migrants who returned for lucrative jobs in the trades and in advanced career positions. However, returnees repeatedly stated that they had to exercise patience while waiting for a suitable job to open up before they could make the move back. Many others spoke of wanting to move back and hoping for a job opening that would allow them to make that move. For quite a few who graduated high school 30 years ago and now live elsewhere, that job did not come up at an opportune time. They ended up staying away, put down roots, and raised their children. Now, in their late 40s, they no longer pursue a return move. While their ties have grown stronger elsewhere (especially if they have children), they found that their ties to the rural community declined (especially if their parents moved or passed away). After waiting unsuccessfully for an opportunity to come back, people adapt to living elsewhere, and this effectively shrinks the pool of potential return migrants. This suggests that return migration intentions are subject to a window of opportunity that closes at a certain life course stage.

4.3 Economic Sacrifices of Return Migrants

We found that return migrants overwhelmingly moved for family and life style reasons. People adopted a variety of employment strategies to create an opportunity to raise their children in a rural environment or live closer to their parents. To be able to make a return move, many return migrants mentioned sacrifices, sometimes in the form of working for lower wages to accomplish these goals: “*If I didn’t have kids I’d be working somewhere else making more money than I am making right now.*”

More often than income sacrifices, returnees mentioned trade-offs in terms of job quality. Several described taking on part-time work, holding more than one job, being overqualified for the work that they have, or commuting long distances.

A return migrant couple in their late 30s had moved away after high school and lived in larger cities for nearly 10 years. They then moved back to raise their children in a rural environment that offered a slower pace of life. With their return move they encountered challenges that required them to be separated as a family during the workweek, a significant sacrifice.

I have friends that have moved from city to city chasing the jobs. [After moving back] we just decided to stay put and make ends meet.... The job I had for a while, I’d have to drive to Phoenix, nearly four hours away, on Mondays and come back home on Fridays. I had an apartment out there. I did what I had to do for a while, but I did not want to move my family.

The following draws on a conversation with a return migrant who brought an advanced service job with him and now tele-commutes. He spoke about career trade-offs, such as giving up promotions and taking on job insecurity, as a condition of his return move:

Moving back pretty much came down to a decision that I would probably not keep moving up in my career. But I was o.k. with that, I was happy with where I was staying. But the problem with that is that if I lose that job there would not be many jobs around here that would replace it—and not

replace the salary. I could probably find a job around here but make 60 or 70 percent of what I currently make.

The spouse of another return migrant in a small town in the High Plains resolved the employment dilemma by keeping his job with an energy company: *“I travel a lot for my job, and whether I was traveling out of Houston or traveling out of here; but if that jobs goes away, we’ll be out of here.”*

As the prior quotes illustrate, even after having been successful in obtaining or retaining employment, return migrants are fully aware of the limited options and uncertainties of rural labor markets. We spoke with several others who had moved back, but moved away again because of poor economic prospects. Many others, however, after weighing the pros and cons, agreed to take on sacrifices, expressed satisfaction with their move (*“This is the best thing that ever happened to me.”*) and expect to continue living in the area (*“In ten years, we’ll be living right here.”*)

4.4 Ties to Agriculture

Our interest in focusing on relatively isolated counties with modest scenic amenities and population loss meant that several of the communities selected for this study retained a strong agricultural base. Many people who left had grown up on a farm and many were attracted back by that connection. Nearly all who came back to farm were drawn back to a family operation without regards to any significant monetary payoff. They came back to either help elderly parents or to take over the farm once their parents passed away. Ties to the land and farming seemed to be strong in particular locales and return migrants used a variety of strategies to keep the farm in the family. In all but a few instances at least one spouse had other forms of employment. They were employees or self-employed, either immediately upon returning or after finding it challenging to make ends meet through farming alone.

One return migrant who moved away to get an accounting degree and then moved back to his hometown to farm explained: *“I grew up on a farm so [after moving back] I farmed for probably eight or ten years. But that wasn’t going so well, the finances and all. So I now have a CPA practice in Clinton.”* The challenges of making a living in farming alone are also illustrated by the following returning farmer. His wife retained a job with a national accounting firm and works from her home via high-speed internet. He is looking for ways to supplement the farm income by branching out into non-agricultural activities. He outright declared: *“Right now my wife’s job is bankrolling our family.”*

The personal and emotional ties to family, farm, and community are illustrated by the comments of a returning teacher:

I came back to farm.... Mom and Dad live on a farm and he's 68 and he needs help. I came back every summer, regardless of where I was. I came back and helped him on the farm and played baseball with our town team.... This felt like the right place to be.

4.5 Private and Public Sector Jobs

In several communities, a local service business (bank, insurance, or utility company) played a significant role as an employer. Typically, these firms have grown from serving a local clientele to serving a regional, statewide or even multi-state service area. They met their substantial and on-going need for qualified employees by deliberately recruiting from people who had left the area and sought ways of returning home. Besides looking for appropriate experience and skills, these employers valued return migrants for their tendency to stay and especially their work ethic and loyalty. They could also draw on their long-term knowledge of an individual or their family when making hiring decisions. The owner of one firm explains:

When I recruit people with some ties to the community, I have a better chance of keeping them. They won't be here just for a few years and then leave. If they have an understanding of the town before they move here, there is a greater chance for them to stay here The work ethic of the local people is the factor that makes you want to hire people you know. I mean, I KNOW that Peter [a return migrant] is a hard worker. He used to mow my yard for me when he was a kid. The guy never failed to show up You know how hard-working the parents are. It takes away the unknown.

As pointed out earlier, employment data show that public sector jobs are important to the rural economy. Not surprisingly, a good number of return migrants are employed in local, state, and federal government: as teachers, social workers, policemen, and as employees in state and federal agencies. Several point out that their knowledge of the community, the families, and the culture has earned them trust. This positions them to be more effective in their job, which in turn benefits the community. The following conversation with a return migrant employed at a federal land management agency demonstrates this phenomenon:

In this region there is actually a pretty big trust lacking between ranchers and the government that manages the land the ranchers are running on. When I came back I brought my knowledge, which I gained through college and just life experience, just work experience. But what I could do is, I could tie friendships that I had with ranchers, kids that I grew up. They are now running their own ranches. I had an instant tie with a lot of people that I work with now on a professional basis I had a trust with the agricultural community because they knew me. I'm honest with them and they're honest with me I think I've done a lot of good just by coming back because the people are willing to listen to me now—even though I left

for a while and I got a college education—because they know me. It has worked.

Others who spoke about their knowledge of the community as helping them in excelling in their job were teachers, coaches, community planners, police officers, and the like.

4.6 Non-farm Self-employment

Many return migrants have carved out economic niches by pursuing self-employment. This is not surprising given the high proportion of self-employed in rural areas (Goetz, 2008). One returning couple attributed the high incidence of self-employment to the prevalence of farming in rural areas and explained their own willingness to take on the risks of self-employment with their up-bringing in farming. They explain:

Wife: Our parents are farmers. They are self-employed, and that's what they have always done. That attitude or spirit has always been here. That's what people do. Husband: A lot of people are scared of self-employment, but that doesn't apply to me. To me, it's just another possibility.

Quite a few return migrants also acquired or started up a service business. Some were in professional or advanced service sectors (law or architectural firms); others were in producer services (refrigeration, electrical, or promotional products); still others provided consumer services. Traditional consumer services were as diverse as custom butchering, car window repair, or child care. Other return migrants specialized in urban-style consumer services. They operated restaurants, coffee shops, or day spas. Return migrants repeatedly built on experience and skills developed elsewhere to deliver what others commented on and appreciated as being a type of service not commonly found in smaller towns.

In several instances, return migrants transitioned into self-employment over a period of time. Some were employees in a business before acquiring it or before starting up a similar business of their own. Others held unrelated jobs for a period of time while starting their own business on a part time basis. When they gained sufficient experience and built a client base, they cut the “*umbilical cord*”—as one interviewee put it—and became self-employed full time. They therefore used strategies to reduce the risks of starting out in self-employment. Business failures are well known in any type of setting and are even a greater threat in smaller towns with limited markets. Rural businesses that expanded beyond local demand seemed to fare well, as the following cases attest. Their success stems from creative customer service, which allowed them to grow beyond the scale of their small rural town and gain a regional clientele.

The owner of a flower shop in a small rural town (who happened to be a stayer) illustrates how she had carved out a niche and established herself by specializing in weddings. Her service area includes a town of 30,000 or so roughly 30 miles away where she is supplying flowers for 100 weddings or more a year. In her own judgment, she outperforms the flower businesses in that much larger community by a wide margin. She attributes her success to customer service and to staying current:

What we do is cutting edge. I go to California and go to different places and see what the styles are, even celebrities. It's like if I did hair, I'd keep up on the styles. And so people are tracking me down.... If someone wants a certain flower, I'll contract it out of New Zealand or wherever and get it for the bride, because I want her to be happy.

Another remarkable success story is the case of a young return migrant and photographer in a town of 1,400. With own funds, a 15% supplement granted by a community enterprise fund, and a lot of sweat equity, she and her husband turned a decaying landmark building on Main Street into a regionally known photo studio. Being from the region, she is in touch with the place, local culture, and local taste. By combining that understanding and knowledge with her creativity, she produces photographs found by her clients to be remarkable and unique. Her children's and high school senior portraits have earned her acclaim throughout the region. Her wedding photos and family portraits are popular as well. Initially, she was concerned about having a "non-essential" business in a small community. Since, she has come to greatly appreciate the support she receives in her rural hometown and thinks of a rural place as a good environment for starting up and succeeding in a business:

They all think they have to go to a city to do it [have a business]. But there, you have competition on every other block. Here, you don't have to do any advertising. They know you are here. Word of mouth spreads. They want to support people that want to make it in their own community.

Encouraged by the remarkable local support, she spoke of other self-employment opportunities that could be realized by catering to businesses and consumers, such as web design, promotions and graphic-design businesses, health and fitness clubs, or dance studios. Other businesses owned and operated by return migrants were more conventional in nature, for instance insurance agencies or appliance repair shops.

For businesses that profit from visibility, vacancies in rural downtowns offer an opportunity to occupy central locations. This not only benefits the business but also acts to revive or maintain economic viability of the communities' downtown districts. Many communities have shown commitment to main street vitality by investing in renovation and beautification projects. Businesses started by return migrants can capitalize on these investments by occupying available storefronts in prime locations. Enterprising return migrants are adding to the range of local services available in rural towns and reducing the need for residents to travel to larger towns and cities for such services. Thus, self-employed rural returnees have done much to maintain and add to the quality of rural life. Leaders mentioned these benefits stemming from return migration in almost every community visited. Recognizing this, several communities supported business start-ups, either with funds (typically raised through a local sales tax) or with advice, technical assistance, and networking provided through their Chamber of Commerce and similar business groups. However, in other communities, return migrants felt on their own, without much support during the challenging period of starting up a business.

4.7 Working Remotely

Overall, interviews with return migrants suggest that self-employment is a widely used strategy for making a living in rural labor markets. Both the frequency of self-employment and the broad range of self-employment types are remarkable. On the other hand, we interviewed a small number of return migrants who had professional backgrounds and skill sets, which did not lend themselves to the types of self-employment mentioned above. They achieved a way of moving back by working remotely. Some of these were employees of an operation based elsewhere, with work that could be performed remotely and away from the firm's site. Others created internet businesses based in their rural town but operated on a national or international scale. Examples include a distribution center for online commerce or an online teaching center for one-on-one instruction and tutoring. Obviously, for these remote 'lone eagle and high flier' businesses (Beyers et al., 1996), local infrastructure that included high-speed internet access was critical.

In general, our interviews from 2008 and 2009 suggest that, at that time and in these particular types of rural communities, telecommuting via the internet is not how most return migrants overcome rural employment challenges. Only a small number of return migrants interviewed in these isolated, low-amenity areas were working remotely via the internet. This may change in the upcoming years as access to high speed internet continues to improve and projects funded by the National Broadband Initiative with initial investments made in early 2010 (Federal Communications Commission) will begin to operate.

5.0 Conclusion

Among people who graduated high school in rural communities, left the area, and later returned, we encountered hardly any who returned primarily for employment reasons. Almost all returned for personal reasons, and predominantly for family—to raise their children in a rural setting and/or to be closer to their parents—as well as the quality of rural life. Returning migrants in their late 20s to late 40s achieved these life style goals only after somehow securing employment in the more difficult rural labor markets. Finding or creating employment became the precondition for their return move.

Many accepted economic sacrifices in the form of lower wages, foregone promotions, greater job insecurity, and the like. They did this because they felt compensated by realizing other family objectives and lifestyle goals. Other research on rural migration to natural amenity regions found that people are willing to give up income, if they moved for scenic and climate qualities that are characteristics of high-amenity areas. In contrast to high natural amenity areas, which are favored by their geography, our research focuses on regions with lower levels of natural amenities that are additionally isolated and remote. In essence, our study concentrates on regions that are doubly disadvantaged by their geography. Remarkably, we find that rural return migrants to such areas also feel compensated for limited labor market opportunities. However, their compensation is of a different type: they can raise their children in a rural environment, be close to other family, and enjoy the quality of rural life.

Rural return migration therefore occurs in the context of a family-lifestyle-jobs bundle. If the family-lifestyle pieces are missing, outmigrants do not feel drawn to rural areas by employment opportunities and see no reason to search for work

there. Conversely, if their family and lifestyle goals are consistent with rural life, outmigrants make substantial efforts to locate employment, exercise patience until job opportunities open up, accept career sacrifices, or become creative and entrepreneurial in order to move back. If employment does not become available within a certain time frame, the window of opportunity for attracting return migrants back to rural communities narrows. Over time, outmigrants' ties to the rural home town diminish, while ties to a community elsewhere grow, especially if children are present who have grown up to become teenagers and young adults.

Our work revealed the employment challenges encountered by returning migrants as well as the opportunities they grasped or created. That information can assist rural communities in attracting outmigrants who think about moving back and in retaining return migrants who have already come back. Communities have long made efforts to attract jobs from outside, but few communities have programs to attract and retain return migrants by assisting with job searches, facilitating business transitions, and offering support for business start-ups. There seems to be an information gap between job openings and business opportunities on the one hand, and people looking for ways of moving back on the other. Filling that information gap and connecting vacancies with potential applicants has become a priority for some employers in rural communities. These rural employers have recognized the importance of connecting with qualified people who are seeking to move to a rural community and are inclined to stay. Many who left a rural community and would like to move back fit that profile.

Our interviews strongly suggest that attracting and assisting return migrants would benefit rural communities, especially in geographically isolated places, which are little known and likely attract few new migrants. At the very minimum, return migrants and their family members replenish the population pool. They typically add children to rural school systems, many of which have declining enrollments. Return migrants also add human capital as well as professional and life experience since so many left to further their education and gain work experience not available in smaller towns. They bring back new economic and lifestyle perspectives which they combine with an appreciation of rural and small-town ways. They are sought out by savvy employers, help maintain farms or other family businesses, or seek out new self-employment opportunities in the service sector. Service businesses acquired from a previous generation or newly created by return migrants are of value to rural communities as they maintain or add to the range of rural services. These businesses often fill downtown vacancies making for a more attractive main street. Last but not least, return migrants who move back to rural communities to raise their children add to the next generation of young people who grow up in, understand, and value rural places.

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