Charles F. Cortese

Charles Cortese is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Denver. He is a native of Colorado and received his Ph.D. from Brown University. His major areas of professional interest include population dynamics, sociology of the community, social change, and the social impacts of energy development.

Bernie Jones

B.A. (Sociology and Psychology), University of Missouri at Kansas City; M.A. (Social Psychology), University of Missouri at Kansas City; Ph.D. (Sociology), University of Colorado. Previous experience includes extensive work with architects (coordinating needs in the design of public facilities), planners (conducting surveys and citizen goal-setting activities for comprehensive plans), and human service agencies and organizations (performing evaluations and leading workshops). Currently consulting Sociologist with Social Change Systems, Inc., and Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Denver.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF BOOM TOWNS

Charles F. Cortese

Bernie Jones
INTRODUCTION

After decades of relative obscurity, the sparsely populated and rugged western states of our nation have suddenly been catapulted into the national limelight by virtue of the area’s vast stores of mineral resources. Situations referred to as “the national need” or “the energy crisis” are being used to justify the launching of hundreds of energy projects, ranging from power plant construction (nuclear, coal, hydroelectric) to oil shale extraction. The Rocky Mountain and Northern Plains states of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Nebraska, North and South Dakota now have something to recommend them to the rest of the nation in addition to wide-open vacation lands, retirement communities, and vast fields.

One of the impacts of this development has been the emergence of “boom towns”—the rapid and extreme growth of population in communities adjacent to mines and construction sites. Current estimates indicate that there are 25 emerging boom towns in Colorado alone and over 200 such communities in the Rocky Mountain and Northern Great Plains region (Rocky Mountain News, 1977:16). We must be reminded that the boom town is not a new occurrence in this region, nor is it uniquely a result of the energy crisis. The history of the West is largely a history of boom towns (cf. Gripsrud and Gripsrud, 1958; Abbott, 1973). The gold rush in the late nineteenth century created boom and bust communities out of the rock and sand of mountain sides and creekbeds; the uranium boom of the 1950s revived “haunted” boom towns of that earlier era and created many new ones; the recreational boom, ski industry development, second-home and retirement home development have done the same during the 1960s and 1970s.

Several factors seem to distinguish energy-related boom towns from their earlier counterparts. First is the rapidity and scale of population growth; it is not usual for a community to double in size in two years. Second, the perverseness of the boom town phenomenon; hundreds of communities are being affected simultaneously throughout the western states. Third, and seemingly more important, is that these energy-related boom towns are not being created in the wilderness as were the gold rush camps. They are, for the most part, long-established, relatively stable agricultural communities, which, like Craig, Colorado, have grown more than 200 percent in seven years. Fourth is the fact that the construction of a large-scale power plant or the opening of a large strip mine affects not one, but a multitude of small communities in its proximity. Part of this is due to modern automobile transportation which allows workers to commute from outlying communities, and part is due to the impacts associated with the transportation of the coal by rail through communities along the line. It is tempting to say that it is the size of the federal government and the multinational energy corporations that allows for the construction of projects of such scale. That may not be historically accurate, however (cf., Allen, 1965). Nevertheless, we can accurately say that a fifth factor distinguishing energy-related boom towns from earlier forms is that the projects which create them are being monitored by a wiser, more skeptical, more environmentally conscious chamber. A sixth factor is that the construction of power plants involves large numbers of workers who leave when construction is finished; thus, a bust is built into the boom.
This concern with the social changes and potential social problems accompanying the boom-town phenomenon has contributed to the emergence of the field of Social Impact Assessment. Social impact assessments are multiplying almost as fast as the proposed energy exploration and extraction projects themselves. The literature on the social impact of energy boom developments and the research from which it emanates is notable primarily for its inconsistency of approach and its lack of an explicit theoretical base (cf., Freudenberg, 1976a). Many of these studies claim to look at the "socio-economic impacts," but, in fact, focus almost exclusively on economic impacts. Freudenberg discusses a 5000-page Environmental Impact Statement which devotes less than two pages to "disruptions in community attitudes and life styles" (Freudenberg, 1978:11). Much of this research conceives of "social impact" to mean only the effects of more people on facilities and services. As Freudenberg so aptly puts it: "One does not need to be a sociologist to know that people rarely attempt or commit suicide because of inadequate sewage facilities" (1976:12).

The search for sociological literature pertaining to the social impacts of boom development has led researchers into several areas. First, the literature of classical sociology (most notably the works of Toennies, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber), stemming as it does from the social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, remains a rich source of theoretical knowledge about the impact of industry on the community. Carnes and Friesma (n.d.) have done a remarkable job of summarizing and relating this literature to the potential impacts of energy development on the Northern Great Plains. The case studies, longitudinal studies, and comparative cross-sectional studies that constitute the "Community Studies" literature provide many insights into the phenomenon in question (cf., Bell and Newby, 1972). Many of those working in social impact assessment have looked to the literature on the sociology of modernization but have had little success in finding much useful information on the transition process itself (Freudenberg, 1976:12-13). Also, the literature in human ecology, which still holds theoretical promise for this area, has been found lacking in applicable research findings. For example, the vast literature on migration produced by ecologists over the last fifty years says a great deal about the adjustment of rural migrants to urban settings but almost nothing about the adjustments of rural natives to the in-migration of urbanites.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The basic question underlying social impact assessment is, "What are the social changes that can be expected to occur when a community becomes a boom town?" The usual answer is, "It depends." While we believe that the advancement of social impact assessment necessitates the identification of those factors upon which differential impacts depend (cf., Cortese and Jones, 1976), the purpose of this paper is to take a first step in identifying those social impacts which seem to be universal generalizations applicable whenever small rural communities become boom towns. Also, our concern is restricted to impacts on the community as it existed prior to the boom; i.e. on the oldtimers or natives. More simply stated, our purpose here is to discuss those generalizable social changes which occur as a function of the interaction of the old and the new within the community.
METHODODOLOGY

This paper is based upon data from a larger study designed to compile a profile of construction workers on energy-related projects and the impacts such workers make upon small western communities (Mountain West Research, 1975). Nine western communities and fifteen construction sites were studied in eight western states as part of the larger study. One segment of that research project consisted of detailed community studies in three towns. The intent was to identify consequences which were not specific to the particular development acting upon the community. It is upon these detailed community studies that this report is based.

Three communities were selected for detailed investigation: Center, North Dakota; Langdon, North Dakota; and Rock Springs, Wyoming. They were initially selected because of varied sizes (populations of 900, 4,400, and 25,000, respectively) and different stages of impact. Center and Rock Springs were still in the midst of an impact period, while Langdon was entering its postimpact (after construction) stage.

Center is the town nearest a two-unit, steam-electric generating plant, on which construction began in 1967 and was still continuing at the time of the study. Langdon was the site for the establishment of an antiballistic missile base, with construction lasting from 1969 to 1974. Langdon's boom was not energy-related but was chosen as the postconstruction community since western energy boom towns have not entered this stage as yet. Since 1970, Rock Springs has faced a "triple threat" from the construction of a four-unit coal-fired electric generating plant and associated coal mining, increased trona mining activity, and renewed railroad business. During their respective booms Center grew from about 350 to 900 people, Langdon from 2,200 to 4,000, and Rock Springs from a population of 12,000 to 24,000. In each case growth occurred during a very short period of time, approximately five years.

Four collection techniques were used to obtain the data: participant observation, surveys, historical records, and available documents such as census data and previously published reports. A project sociologist lived in each of the communities for approximately two weeks, using community facilities, meeting residents, attending gatherings, developing informants, conducting informal interviews, and studying written records (e.g., arrest reports, welfare caseloads, city budgets, local newspapers, telephone directories, and planning documents). Household interviews were conducted with a random sample of 68 households in Center, 92 households in Langdon, and 482 households in Rock Springs as part of the larger study. From these samples a small cross-section of households was selected for depth, semistructured interviews by the three sociologists. Additionally, long interviews were conducted with institutional representatives—persons with responsibility in community institutions such as public officials, merchants, chamber of commerce officers, newspaper editors, school officials, social workers, physicians, and ministers.

The methodology and survey instruments were presented in a pilot study of Green River, Wyoming, another boom town near Rock Springs. The research techniques were evaluated during and after the Green River test through "debriefing" sessions with the three researchers. After each
researcher returned from his study community, debriefing sessions were
again held, dealing largely with the ethnographic data and attempting to
formulate the basic patterns contained in the data. Data from the resident
interviews and institutional representative interviews were subjected to
only the most elementary statistical analysis for this report but were hand-
analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to detect trends. Thus, our find-
ings must be received more as those of the participant-observer, based
upon our interpretations after having "been there," and upon data from
what are more accurately termed informant data rather than a random sample
of survey respondents. Additionally, it should be noted that the data from
these three communities have been supplemented with information ob-
tained in the Green River protest as well as research conducted with similar
methodology during the same year in Hardin, Colstrip, and Forsyth, Mon-
tana. All three of these communities are being impacted by coal extraction
and/or power plant construction. The basic data, however, come from the
three communities discussed earlier.

FINDINGS

Institutional Impacts

Before concentrating upon the impacts on social structure and
people's lives, a brief overview of the impact process on community institu-
tions is advisable. We looked specifically at the effects of the boom ex-
erience upon the policy, the economy, education, helping services, religion
and recreation.

Government/Politics. The most visible impacts and, therefore, those
perceived as the most pressing types of impact made upon the local govern-
mental institutions in each community were those which dealt with the need
to provide basic municipal services to a rapidly expanding population.
These services included police and fire protection, street and road construc-
tion and maintenance, water supply, and sewage systems. Each communi-
ty's governmental units experienced strain in several of these areas. In
Langdon, for example, the water mains broke over 100 times during the
winter of 1973-74. These strains are usually perceived by the community as
quantitative impacts; that is, governments are being asked to do more of
something they were already doing. In Langdon the solution was a newer,
bigger, water system.

But less visible and perhaps more problematic in the long run were
those impacts upon the local government which were qualitative in nature.
Impacts where the local government was called upon to do something it
had not done before, such as planning and zoning, conducting new and com-
plicated intergovernmental or government-industry relations, devising new
taxation schemes, or seeking federal or state funds, are qualitative.
The basic phenomena occurring in these communities is that twentieth-
century municipal services and community decision-making processes are
being demanded of nineteenth-century governmental structures. Our inter-
views and observations of local government officials reveal a pattern of
amatuerism and informality. These are not liabilities in themselves except
when they result in a lack of clearcut policies, favoritism, and an inade-
quate understanding of the problems and their possible solutions.
The quantitative impacts are relatively simple. Meeting the demand for more of the traditional services is a concrete function—the government taxes the people and uses those revenues to provide more service. The conceptual solution is simple, but frequently the tax base is not there. Be it as it may, the demand for new services is more vague, and the solution cannot be provided solely by additional revenues. Local values have kept governmental units from engaging in many new activities (e.g., planning and zoning, seeking federal aid), while some governmental activities were clearly unnecessary in the past (e.g., intergovernmental and government-industry relations, creative taxation).

Local Economy. Certain economic impacts, both positive and negative, seem to be similar from one community to the other. Perceptions of economic impacts before they occur seem to ignore the negative aspects. Most people said that when they first heard of the project entering the community they believed the boom would bring a wave of prosperity in which everyone would benefit.¹ There was, in fact, more business for local businessespeople and incoming entrepreneurs, more jobs for local people as well as newcomers, and higher pay resulting from competition for workers. However, on the minus side were the inevitable increases in the cost of living, especially for the scarce commodity, housing; the need to update one’s business; and the inequalities in the distribution of the new wealth.² Salaried professionals, such as school teachers, found their work loads increasing dramatically with no corresponding raise in pay, with the cost of living fast outstripping what was a few years ago a comfortable income. In one community the school superintendent explained that an apartment traditionally occupied by incoming teachers tripled in rent in less than two years. Obviously, those living on fixed incomes, the aged and the chronically unemployed, do not benefit from the new prosperity and, in fact, experience relative deprivation as new high-income groups move into the community with the new project.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that while the boom is a period of opportunity for established business people, it is also a period of challenge, and not everyone is up to the challenge. For older business people, marginal enterprises, and those used to doing business in a “sleepy little town,” the job of updating, adopting more modern advertising, competing with newcomer entrepreneurs, merchandising, and refining is too much. In these communities a few businesses who felt they were going to “get rich” in the boom soon folded up, retired, moved away, sold their stores, or joined a national chain operation. For example, the only movie theater in one community experienced such a growth in business—and therefore problems of coping with hoards of adolescents faced with limited entertainment opportunities—that the owner simply closed the theater and turned it into a warehouse. In another of the towns, a local druggist was planning an early retirement because of the pressures of new business. It was not only the amount of new business, but the style of business being demanded of him. For a businessman used to the informal style of occasionally getting out of bed at 11 p.m. to fill a prescription for a neighbor, the pressure of doing it every night was too much. Unable to modify his personal style approach, he was planning to sell to the first buyer.

1. Little (1970), is a study of energy-related developments in the Lake Powell region, has reported similar findings.
2. See Clewens (1975, 1979) for a discussion of inequities in income distributions created by new industries in rural communities.
Education. School systems in boom towns are immediately affected by the population influx, which generally brings them more costs than benefits. With the large and rapid influx of new students, schools in the communities were not physically prepared to accept more students and overcrowding occurred. Except in Langdon, where the closing of the Catholic school necessitated the building of a new public school building just before the boom arrived, the building of new classrooms or acquisition of mobile classrooms could not keep pace with the new enrollments. A second type of problem in each community was the lack or lag of information. While many officials in each community told us they were not given adequate information on how many students to expect, several other officials admitted that at times information was provided to them, but the figures were so staggering they were disbeliefed. To complicate matters even more, the transience of the children of very mobile construction workers was seen as damaging the learning process for all students. Teachers stated that a great deal of their time was spent integrating new students into the classroom and this detracted considerably from the learning experience. Administrators and counselors were inundated with paperwork and record-keeping as students entered and left. One counselor stated that children of the more mobile construction workers would enter the school and leave again before their records arrived from their previous schools. Obviously, the work load was both increased and different from that with which educators were familiar in the previously stable schools.

The schools are also the place where the old and new populations come into the closest and most intense contact. In each of the communities educators reported the conflicts in values, commitment, and life style between the local students and the newcomers. Each community was concerned with the influx of drugs which they perceived, perhaps incorrectly, were introduced primarily by the new students. On the positive side, the new students and their parents bring into the community new standards through new demands placed upon the school system. This was most obvious in Langdon where many of the newcomers were engineers and other technical personnel who demanded educational experiences not previously found in the community. In Langdon, the curriculum has since been significantly updated and expanded.

Helping Services. The impacts upon service institutions, as was the case with government institutions, were both problems of numbers and problems of kind. Not only are there more people to provide with social services, medical and mental health care, but the nature of the problems are different from those to which small town social agencies are accustomed. Much has been written about the rise in alcoholism, child abuse, welfare expenses, crime, suicide attempts and divorce (cf., Gilmore and Duff, 1976:12-16; Kohers, 1974; Little, 1977). But in small towns like Center and Langdon, personnel who have been trained to deal with marital counseling, child abuse, and delinquency are not readily available. Social workers who

3. See Gak (n.d.) for a brief discussion of drugs in boom towns.
kept logs of their activities were able to illustrate how the nature of the problems they dealt with had changed dramatically with the boom.

A universal problem in boom towns seems to be that of attracting and keeping skilled personnel. Despite large expenditures and community-wide efforts at recruiting, none of the study communities has been successful in solving this problem.

Religion. Churches in the study communities were affected by the boom in several ways. First, they increased in number and size; new churches were formed and old churches expanded their congregations. Second, greater diversity occurred as denominations previously absent from the community established churches. Third, some churches shared in the economic prosperity of their members, finding themselves taking in more collections, which enabled remodeling, expansion, or relocation. Fourth, some church bodies seem to have made changes in their orientations, adding more social service functions. These included counseling, efforts at getting oldtimers and newcomers together, providing recreational facilities and programs, and community development.

Recreation. The three communities of Center, Langusa, and Bok Springs shared a commonality of abundant outdoor recreational opportunities. Perhaps because of this and their small size, these communities lacked facilities and opportunities for indoor recreation. This shortcoming seemed to become apparent once newcomers arrived and found fewer indoor leisure-time opportunities than they had expected or experienced elsewhere. Dissatisfaction with entertainment opportunities was relatively high in all communities. Bars, restaurants, and other facilities which existed in these communities became overcrowded when the boom arrived and were often perceived by long-time residents as having been "taken over" by the newcomers. Newcomers also bemoaned the shortage of such entertainment facilities and a "nice restaurant where you can take the wife." The rise in alcoholism, crime and juvenile delinquency is often attributed, by longtimers and newcomers alike, to inadequate recreational facilities.

Social Structural Impacts

In terms of what this means for the social structure of each community, the process goes something like this: (1) the boom brings more people into the community; (2) many of the newcomers are different—different is their beliefs, values, norms, experiences, and life style; (3) more behavior settings (places for acting out social life) have been added to the community; (4) organizations are adapted as different institutional arrangements are made to meet the needs of the larger and more diverse population; and (5) each individual person becomes a smaller part of a larger whole. So the transition begins—the community moves toward a larger and more diverse population, the longtimers know a smaller percentage of their neighbors, there is a differentiation of interests and association, and more and more transactions between people become formal and contractual rather than personal and face-to-face. Thus, an example of small, rural, relatively isolated boom town provides, in microcosm, Warren's "Great Change" (Warren 1962:30-54), and possibly one of the few remaining and greatly speeded-up transition points between the classical contrasting social types of Maine (1964), Durkheim (1947), and Toonien (1940).
Our longtime informants gave indications that such changes were in-
deed affecting their personal lives and their communities, with most of
them freely reporting such experiences as: feeling less of a sense of com-
munity, not knowing a great many people in town, experiencing or witness-
ing poor intergroup relations, and seeing newcomers not integrating well
into the community.

An important aspect of basic changes occurring in impacted commu-
nities has to do with changes in roles that people play within their com-
munity institutions. We likened the process to a railroad roundhouse (in-
fluenced, no doubt, by our location at the time in a motel room overlooking
the railroad yards of Green River, Wyoming) where engines enter on dif-
f erent tracks, and a switching mechanism pivots around and points them in
different directions. The rapid influx of different kinds of new people as
well as the experience of longtime residents is something akin to that; they
arrive by different routes for different reasons and become part of a whirl-
ing mass where everything seems subject to change. In boom towns the
switching takes several forms:

1. Creation of new roles. The study communities offer a number of
examples of structural change involving the creation of new roles. Various
 types of planning committees are formed, with businessmen, housewives,
and professionals serving in new leadership positions. The schools find they
must create new roles such as “vice-principal” or hire new types of
teachers to meet the needs of an expanding curricula. Also common is the
creation of new roles in the local economic order as people start businesses
and services not previously available in those communities. In Green River
there are a number of these, from a new pizza parlor to a new taxicab
business. In Rock Springs and Laigo, a number of new social service
positions were created to cope with new needs such as personal and family
problems. New local government positions were also created, such as city
planner and police chief in Center, which had previously been served by the
county sheriff. Center is also getting a dentist, where before there had not
been one in the town.

2. Creation of more positions within existing roles. More people are
hired in occupations already existing in the communities or employment in-
creases. For example, more waitresses are hired as business increases,
more teachers are hired as enrollment figures rise, more neighbors are
created as newcomers move into the community. All of these are
 multiplications within existing roles.

3. Differentiation of roles. As the size and functions of institutions
change, roles become more differentiated and specialized. Teachers who
taught a variety of subjects now concentrate on only one; the operator of a
diner who cooked and served hires a waitress and now only cooks; and the
teacher who was a part-time administrator now concentrates totally on ad-
ministration.

4. Redefinition of old roles. As organizational responsibilities
change in the wake of a boom, old roles are redefined. A merchant’s role is
changed as he is forced to update merchandising, advertising, or financing.
Social workers suddenly find they are dealing with kinds of problems never
before encountered. A person serving formerly in a one-person law en-
forcement job now must direct a staff of five. A mayor now has to negotiate

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with an impact. Industry or write grant proposals. All of these represent redefinitions within existing roles, and in some cases the changes were such that former role occupants could not or would not make the change and vacated the role.

5. Replacement in existing roles. In each community there were cases of oldtimers being unable or unwilling to keep up with the changes demanded of them. Usually a newcomer to the community or another longtime resident took over the role. Some merchants and persons in leadership positions, many of whom a few months earlier had seen the boom as the opportunity of a lifetime, sold out, resigned or were fired. This happened a number of times with businesses, but more importantly, in every community in which we have experienced, there was a high and sometimes complete turnover in leadership positions. A veteran police chief was replaced by a person from a larger city who had more "professional" training; long-standing elected officials were replaced by youngster and in some cases, newer, members of the community; the director of one welfare department resigned under increased administrative burdens; local newspaper editors in several communities sold out; school superintendents and principals resigned voluntarily or under pressure. In all of these cases we were told there had been a need for more professional, more competent, more aggressive, or more energetic people. "He couldn't keep up," or "He didn't want to work that hard," or "It really wasn't his fault, he had just angered too many people during the crisis (e.g., the peak of the impact)" were comments often heard in these communities. In several cases it seemed that the role incumbents had taken the blame for unpleasant impacts such as overcrowding, rising crime rates, personnel turnover, or necessary changes in procedure. In other cases it seemed that the boom had created strains that opened old wounds or created breaks where strains had existed for some time. The boom was not the straw that broke the camel's back, but the ton of salt.

6. Elimination of old roles. The elimination of some roles is one more logical possibility for a role change, although our data provide no clear instance of it. It is easy to imagine some positions, such as Ma and Pa grocerystore owners, being eliminated, but whether this is an elimination of a role or simply a role redefinition is a matter of perspective. One might argue that with the increasing scale, rationalization, and bureaucratisation of retail establishments, there is an elimination of the "shopkeeper" role and the creation or adaptation of a "managerial" role. We once saw the role of shopkeeper as involving not only retail trade but also keeping an eye on children passing by and other acts of social control, and the managerial role as being preoccupied with the retail trade in a more impersonal way, then perhaps there has been an elimination of former roles.

Impacts Upon the Local Culture

In the semistructured interviews with longtime residents of the three communities of Rock Springs, Center and Langdon, residents were asked to characterize the community as it existed before the boom and as it existed at the time of the interview (during or postboom). To assist in this, respondents were provided with the following list of eighteen adjectives: beautiful, clean, competitive, difficult, dirty, disorganized, dull, exciting, expensive, friendly, harmonious, isolated, lonely, progressive, relaxed, rewarding, rundown, and traditional. The comparison of adjectives used to
describe the community then (preboom) and now (during boom or postboom) were particularly revealing, indicating that certain cultural changes were occurring. Combining the responses for all three communities (although we have no assurance that this particular sample was statistically representative), the communities seemed to have become less relaxed, friendly, traditional, isolated, harmonious, and run down; and to have become more expensive, difficult, progressive, and competitive.

These changes, when taken together with our observations and other data, translate into various sociological categories indicative of important changes. First, the communities were becoming more culturally diverse as new people brought in new ideas (e.g., an expanded curriculum in the schools, new recreational demands, a multiplication of religious denominations, new life styles). Second, diversity meant that the towns were becoming less provincial and isolated. As the responsibilities of community institutions grew, more people were brought in to run these institutions (e.g., a new police chief, new social workers, new school superintendents, more professional business people). This represents a third trend toward professionalism and respect for expertise; for example, in one community the city government was reorganized. This type of action and the examples given in the earlier discussion of the creation of new roles and role differentiation suggest a major trend toward specialization and bureaucratization. Also implicit in each institutional growth is a fifth trend; namely, a growing belief that bigger is better, as well as more efficient and cheaper. This kind of value shift was revealed also in the number of chain operations that appeared in the boom towns and the often-boast that the town now had a major supermarket. Thus, a sixth trend, centralization, was spreading into these towns. For some long time residents the profit motive had been strengthened, a seventh change in the local culture. Many of our friends who live in these towns might sneer and remind us of the profit motive of wheat farmers and cattle barons who homesteaded that land. But it was they who complained that landlords were “jacking up” rents to whatever the market would bear, and that the local merchants had forgotten their old friends (the longtimers) and catered to the newcomers in quest of the almighty dollar. “It wasn’t like that before,” they told us. “People would give up making a few bucks to help each other out.” As the community grew and more and more strangers moved into town, many people started to rely more on institutions, an eighth cultural shift. A social worker noted, for example, that family problems, once handled at home, now end up in her office more often. Socializing takes place more through church socials and club activities where newcomers and longtimers can meet each other or, conversely, feel comfortable with their “own people.” Neighboring seems to have declined with the movement of newcomers into old neighborhoods, although we have no hard data on this. One elderly couple complained that the young newcomers who had moved in next door and whom they didn’t know very well had “a big dinner party” and “although they were all in the back yard and we could see them, they didn’t invite us.” Although such an occurrence would hardly seem odd to an urban dweller, these longtimers seemed greatly insulted that the party-givers would invite people from across town but not invite their next-door neighbors. A ninth change is that, at the same time, people become more demanding of their institutions. “The churches (or the police, city council, schools) should do something about that.” was an often-heard complaint. Also, the lack of medical and dental facilities in these communities has been a long standing situation, but only now were residents starting to demand such care.
In combination, these mutually reinforcing cultural changes add up to the process of urbanization or, depending upon one’s orientation, modernization. What is most significant is that these communities are going through changes in four or five years which took decades elsewhere.

**Impacts Upon Lives**

With the changing of the community institutions in which people live, their lives and the culture that those institutions express and embody, individuals acting out those institutional roles and living in that culture will change as well. It is a sociological cliché that the nature of social life is such that social units—persons, roles, institutions, and culture—are intimately bound up in a universe as a system. When one component changes, other components will change as well.

Among longtime residents, the cultural and social changes take a certain toll as they see a way of life slipping away or perhaps already gone. “The severity of the impacts varied from one community to another. While in Center and Langdon, one saw a nostalgic pining for yesterday’s way of life, in Rock Springs one saw pathological responses expressed in a ninefold increase in the mental health center caseload over five years (Gilmore and Duff, 1974/7).”

Many of the longtime residents realized that the changes were coming eventually, and some even recognized them by names such as “urbanization,” but that did little to make the alterations more palatable or easier to make. Furthermore, the speed of the change exacerbates the situation. As mentioned earlier, much has been written on the adjustment of migrants (cf. Thorndyke, 1976:328-31; Killian, 1968; Brown et al., 1968; Boestad and Bauder, 1965) and this adjustment is seldom easy (cf., Kiser, 1969). But we would argue that the migrant at least is prepared to experience change. In some cases he or she is totally resigned to it and, often, eagerly looking forward to it. “For many, it is simple enough: ‘moving day’, an old one-liner in the Deep South goes, ‘consists of calling the dog and splitting on the fire’” (Stein, 1975:16). But the longerterm in a boom town wakes up one morning in his own bed but in a different town. He doesn’t even get a chance to spit on the fire. For longtimers, at least four modes of responding to the social and cultural changes occurring around them were observed:

1. **Make the change.** For the largest number of people, trying to take the changes in stride has been the mode of response. The overworked social worker accepts the larger caseload and works harder; the police chief starts keeping better records, sends his men to in-service training, and in general modernizes his department. The merchant realizes he had better “spiff up” the store if it is to attract the expanding market and resigns himself to working longer hours. The longtime resident goes next door and welcomes the new resident. For most of these people, making the changes seemed easier if they were made in the name of “progress.” But this term is more easily applied to simple role change and other aspects of change in the social structure that it is to changes in the cultural system and the long-standing normative order of these communities.

2. **Maintain the status quo.** Some impact community residents seemed to be taking the approach of doing things as they always had, while sometimes mourning the passing of a way of life (which may be becoming...
more romanticized the farther away it gets). If these people were in government, they did not hold more public meetings, pass more ordinances to regulate growth, or hire more staff to deal with new problems. If in business, they did not remodel or expand their inventory. Such persons were the ones most likely to find themselves bumped from their roles by newcomers or other residents.

3. Deny the changes. Although it is increasingly hard to do in these boom towns, denial of the structural and cultural changes is the response of some residents. Perhaps they fear they cannot make the changes, maybe they simply refuse to do so, or maybe they feel things will blow over and everything will return to normal. In the Rock Springs/Green River area, the "memory of past cutbacks in coal mining and rail employment makes it easy for many to assume that much of the present growth is temporary and that the problems are equally so" (Gilmore and Duff, 1974:26). We observed that some political leaders, in particular, were accused of this approach as the demands upon them become excessive.

4. Leave the situation. Flight from a bad situation can take the form of leaving the role that is changing (sell the store, resign from public office) or it can take the more extreme form of leaving the community entirely. We did not find many longtimers who were seriously considering leaving their communities. An earlier survey of the Sweetwater County area (Rock Springs and Green River) indicated that a majority of these residents anticipated spending more than five years in the area and 45 percent expected to spend the rest of their lives there (Bickert, 1973:38). The people with the shortest residency expectations, however, were newcomers, career construction workers, and individuals who had moved frequently in the last five years. Our data indicate that only in Rock Springs does a majority of newcomer respondents feel they had made a mistake in moving to the area.

CONCLUSIONS

The boom town experience as it affects preimpact community residents can be better understood within the theoretical construct of urbanization and modernization. Our investigations clearly show that the social impacts of boom-town growth involve changes far beyond the mere increase in population, strain on municipal services, and the mental health problems usually attributed to such strains and which constitute the bulk of "socioeconomic" impact assessments. Less visible but considerably more important for the long range are the underlying changes in the social structure and cultural systems that are, and will continue to be, precipitated by energy-related boom-town developments. Such changes are not seriously mediated by providing more "adequate" housing, by "professionalizing" the police department, or by building a mental health center. Such solutions are, in fact, ports of the problem. That is, such innovations add to the process of increasing anomosity, differentiation, bureaucratization, centralization, impersonalization, specialization, and orientation of local community units toward extracommmunity systems.

It is this "great change" (Warren, 1968; Wirth, 1938; Dewey, 1969) occurring so rapidly that gives sociological meaning to the energy boom-town phenomenon and places the logic of such impact assessment within the mainstream of sociological thought. We have no romantic ilu-
sions about the quality of rural and small-town life. Had we had any, study-
ing and living for a time in preimpacted communities would have erased
them. Also, we found many longtime residents of these communities who
might welcome many of the benefits of being jolted into the changes we
have described. However, our major point is that the focus of the study of
social impacts should be directed toward structural and cultural changes
that are occurring in these communities and that those communities which
still have some ability to decide whether or not they should be impacted be
made aware of the ultimate effects of that choice.
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