

HOUSING

The
Portland
Observer

Rural midwest disappearing

Bank president John Bryant remembers to the month when it began: March, 1982.

That's when the oil bust hit Cushing, a Payne County town of about 7,600.

"We got hit right at the front end of it," Bryant said. "I was charting it. It's been pretty flat these last few years. It's hard to grow a bank when your community's not growing," he said.

But since the beginning of 1996, Bryant's bank has grown — by more than \$2 million in assets. Local manufacturing business are continuing to expand, and a new private prison planned in the town should bring more than 200 new jobs — and more growth for the Bank of Cushing.

"We're doing pretty good right now," he said.

Bryant's experience in Cushing is an example of what's happening in several rural Oklahoma towns.

During the bust years of the 1980s Oklahoma's rural population fell by more than 29,000, while the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan areas grew by almost 150,000.

Incomes in rural Oklahoma fell as well. Total personal income earned by rural Oklahomans, adjusted for inflation, dropped by 22 percent between 1979 and 1989.

But much of those declines seem to have been reversed in the first half of this decade. Between 1990 and 1995, Oklahoma's rural population grew by more than 38,000, according to U.S. Census Bureau Estimates.

Total personal income, adjusted for inflation, grew in rural counties by more than 40 percent between 1990 and 1993, according to the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis.

This rural turnaround has been spotty, however, and many rural counties have not shared in the economic revival, said University of Oklahoma economist Robert Dauffenbach. And for the most part, rural Oklahoma has not kept pace with the growth seen in the state's major metropolitan areas.

Dauffenbach is director of OU's Center for Economic and Management Research.

"I'm seeing some improvement for rural counties, but I'm seeing a lot of disparity too," he said. "There are pockets of improvement, but I think that there is also a desperate kind of situation out there among many counties."

Counties along the Arkansas border and the eastern half of the Texas border, as well as counties near major metropolitan areas, are doing well or at least holding their own, he said. Most of the counties in Western Oklahoma, however, are still suffering.

Harper County, where the panhandle attaches to the body of the state, is one of those suffering counties.

While taxable sales in Oklahoma grew by 37.5 percent between 1980 and 1989 and by 23.1 percent between 1990 and 1995, sales in Harper county grew by less than 1 percent in the 1980s and by less than 5 percent since 1990.

Merle Swineford runs a radiator shop, an automobile air conditioner repair shop and a glass shop in the Harper County town of Laverne. He is also chairman of the local economic development committee.

Laverne doesn't have a high unemployment rate, he said.

"Either you have a job here, or you leave."

And in the past 15 years, about 900 Harper County residents took the second option, leaving only about 3,800 behind to populate the county's 1,034 square miles.

"Young people graduate from high school here and a large percentage go to college. But they never come back. There isn't anything here for them," Swineford said.

Among the 900 who left were two of Swineford's three children. They

and start up a business in your home and work by telephone," he said.

And Swineford said there is now a possibility that a large agricultural business, which would employ about 150 people, may come to Laverne before the end of the year. About 80 miles west in the panhandle town of Guymon, growth of a hog producing industry has created something of a boom town.

But growth has brought its own

problems.

Nowata County lost 13 percent of its population between 1980 and 1990.

But Nancy Shipley, manager of the city of Nowata, said she believes that has turned around since 1990. Nowata has become an attractive home for retirees escaping Tulsa's urban atmosphere, she said.

"We've got good hunting, we've got good fishing and the taxes are cheap," she said.

But growth has placed demands on city services that leave Shipley

unsure how the town will cope.

"You're working with a budget here where we can't repair a street," she said. "I need revenue bad for streets and for infrastructure."

Shipley has placed her hopes on a commitment from a start-up beef packing company to build a new packing plant and feedlot in Nowata. If everything goes as planned, the plant will be completed early next year and will eventually employ about 1,000 people.

She said officials with the new company, which is not yet incorporated, have promised to help the town.

"If we can't come up with some industry," she said, "I don't know what's going to happen to us."

In Chickasha, the Chamber of Commerce has organized a task force to address a local labor shortage.

Ken Myers, human resources manager for the Delta Faucet plant in Chickasha, said he could hire 40 people tomorrow if he could find qualified applicants.

They are temporary jobs that pay about \$5.25 an hour and offer no benefits. But Myers said temporary workers have first shot at permanent jobs when they come open.

Myers said finding temporary workers became more difficult two years ago, when a new manufacturing plant opened and hired an all-temporary work force.

"Until they came to town, that was 250 more people for us to draw on,"

"And as the young move away and the elderly die off, Swineford wonders what can be done to keep his town from disappearing from the map."

now live and work in Oklahoma City. A third son stayed in Laverne to work in the family business.

And as the young move away and the elderly die off, Swineford wonders what can be done to keep his town from disappearing from the map.

His town has good schools, he said. There is little crime. There's a decent highway and an air strip. And as of a few months ago, Laverne has local Internet access. Before, you had to dial a long-distance number.

"So we're not isolated," he said. "You could come to rural Oklahoma

The Future of Portland: Central City 2000

Continued from front

combination of floating trails and dirt trails, with an island feature near OMSI," he said.

"The east side has 20,000 jobs today," Siegel said, "that's supposed to double over the next 20 years. Transportation will be a central issue."

In addition to the infrastructure improvement there is a recommendation to extend SE Water Avenue from OMSI to SE Caruthers/SE Grand Avenue.

Also on the table are plans to fix up the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Grand Avenue facades; enhancing the general look of those streets with additional lighting and street improvements.

In the University District, which encompasses Portland State University, the issue is "expanding housing and job capacity," Siegel said.

The task force recommends building 1,500 new housing units, constructing an Urban Center for PSU's department of urban and public affairs, building a University Plaza, acquiring the old US West building to house PSU's school of engineering, extending the transit mall south to University Plaza and building an

elementary school.

"We're trying to be more than just a university with this additional housing," PSU director of facilities Brian Chase said.

"Most cities are dead after 5 p.m. Portland's made a commitment to change that by incorporating all types of housing into the downtown area," he said.

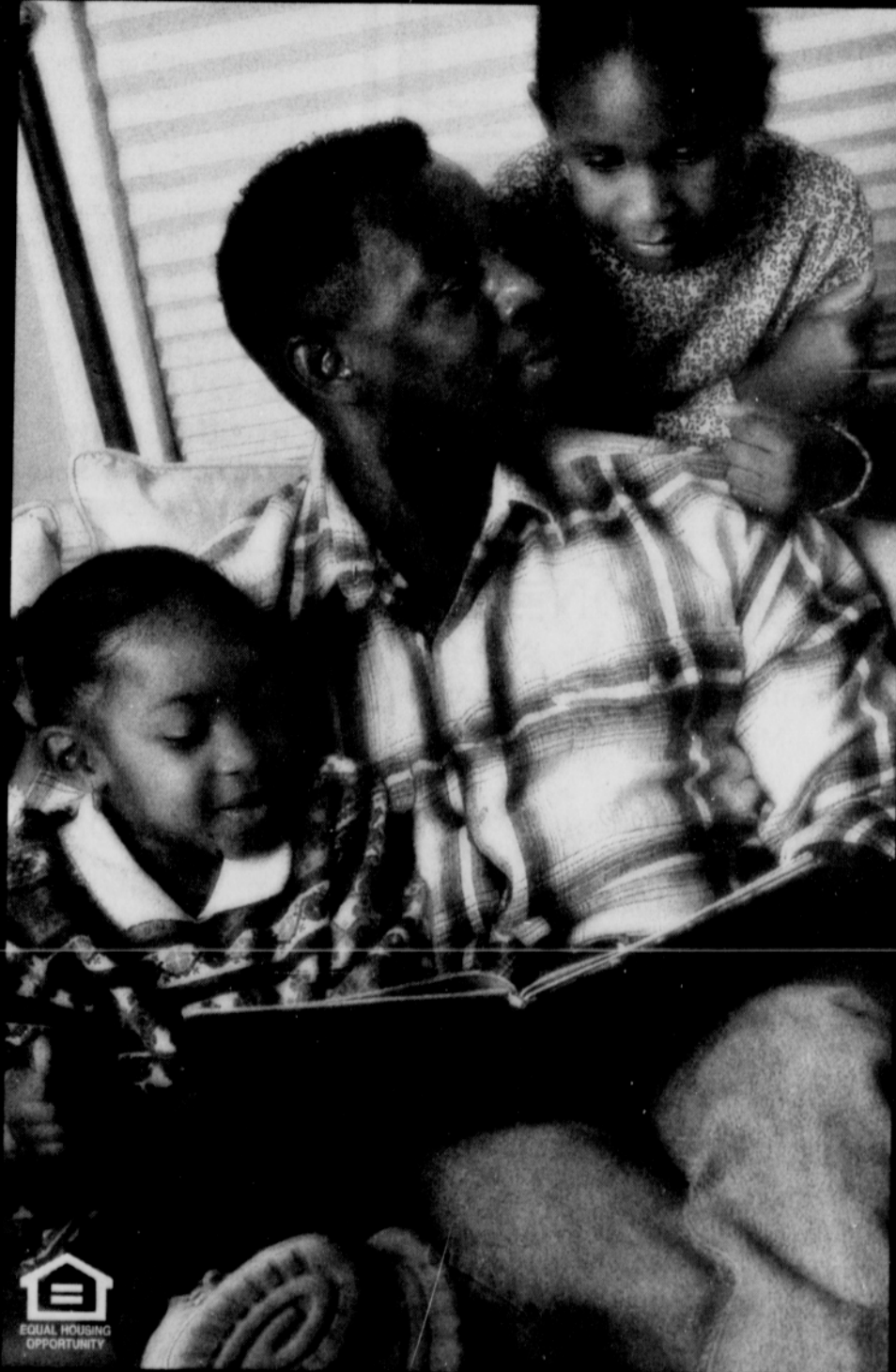
Other major improvements to Portland's infrastructure recommended in the plan include constructing a Central City Street Car that would connect Northwest Portland, the River District and University District.

Thoughts on the likelihood of the overall success of the recommendations vary.

"These are good solid recommendations," Siegel said. "It's likely most of them will succeed as long as there's a good serious attempt made to do it."

PSU professor of economics Tom Potiowsky had a different opinion. He was skeptical of the city's ability to incorporate 75,000 new jobs. "There's not a lot of land available for businesses to locate," Potiowsky said, "it's hard for me to imagine they're going to have that kind of employment here."


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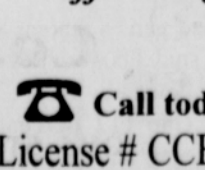
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