

May 7, 2006

IDEAS & TRENDS

Americans Head Out Beyond the Exurbs

By [FORD FESSENDEN](#)

ARCHER COUNTY, Tex., the place that "The Last Picture Show" made into a symbol of the decline of small-town life in the 1950's, is growing.

New houses line the farm roads that lead north into Wichita Falls, the nearest city, and arrivers now outnumber leavers at a level that puts its rate of influx in the top 10 percent of American counties.

"For \$250,000 or \$300,000, you can live in a big house," said Paul Wylie, the county judge.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of Americans pick up and move to someplace new, and they are increasingly choosing places like Archer County.

The [Internal Revenue Service](#) monitors the peregrinations of taxpayers by counting the number of households leaving from and arriving in all 3,142 United States counties. The New York Times looked at the most recent five years of this data, highlighting places that gained a net of 6 percent or more of their taxpaying households during that time — that is, the top 10 percent of gainers.

With the single exception of Las Vegas, no city proper makes the list of substantial gainers; American taxpayers by and large are outward bound. But this isn't uniformly a migration to exurbs, or to traditional Sunbelt or Western destinations like Florida or Arizona.

The trails often lead north, to the lakes of [Minnesota](#) and [Wisconsin](#); to the foothills of northern Georgia; to the forests of northern California; to the fields of northern Michigan. Cass County, Minn., 120 miles from Minneapolis, is on the list, as is Shasta County, Calif., 180 miles from San Francisco.

While Michigan, hard hit by auto industry cuts, is losing population overall, six of its counties are among the top gainers.

Yet the logic is not obscure: The new destinations are precisely the places, like Archer County, that have been undervalued — whether by industry or agriculture or mass leisure or urban flight. They are the places where you can still get something that feels like a good life, without the salary of a chief executive.

"South of the Twin Cities, it's much richer soil, and more intense farming, and the land prices are high," said Marty Ringham, a real estate agent who lives 80 miles north of Minneapolis in the heart of a remote boom area. "Here the soil has more clay content, and the agricultural value is not so high. It's not an exact science, but we figure that the same house is about \$1,200 cheaper for every mile you go north."

William H. Frey, a demographer at the [University of Michigan](#), said there were "whole regions that people have been locked out of" by high housing costs.

"People are forced to look beyond the trendy areas," he said. "These are places that are beyond the exurbs, it would seem."

The movers represent multiple demographic trends. Many are retirees, but young families are involved as well. Some are successful 50-somethings, who can buy lakefront property in a place like Vilas County, Wis. — another notable destination, 220 miles from Milwaukee and Minneapolis — for less than half a million dollars. Some are just people with a dream and an Internet connection.

"We get a lot of people that have jobs where they don't have to report in daily," said Joanne Fischer, a real estate agent in Blairsville, Ga., which is 80 miles north of Atlanta. "I just sold a house to a woman who works at the [Centers for Disease Control](#), but she only has to go in to work one day a week."

Worries are growing in some precincts about what gas prices will do to this trend. "That's the big question," said Warren Karlenzig, an executive with [SustainLane.com](#), a research organization based in San Francisco. "Are the people moving to these areas dependent on jobs and services far out of their area?"

His group recently published a study of the best places to live during a gasoline crisis. That study concluded that New York City, because of its density and public transportation, was the place you should be when prices hit \$100 a barrel.

Amanda Peterson, 27, a machine shop worker, moved from Zimmerman, Minn., a fast-growing exurb 40 miles north of Minneapolis, to Milaca, a small town 20 miles farther out, to find a house she and her fiancé could afford. "We saved forty to fifty thousand dollars on a house, and that buys a lot of gas," she said.

"It's always a tradeoff between housing costs and commuting costs," Dr. Frey said, "and up to now people have said the commute is something I can put up with to get a nice house. But when you get to \$100 a barrel, that's different. That could be the one thing that stops the American movement" from spreading farther out.

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)