Americans on the Move

THE POPULATION of the country as a whole increased by 8 million during 1930-40, less than half the increase of the previous decade. But, more important for its economic significance is this fact: while the total increase was 7 per cent, cities with a population of 25,000 or more grew only 4.7 per cent. This is the first time in the history of the United States that cities have not grown faster than farm areas, villages and towns.

New York shows an increase of 6 per cent and Chicago remained stationary, whereas the growth of each city during the previous ten years was about 25 per cent. Pittsburgh, St. Louis, San Francisco, Boston and Cleveland lost population. Buffalo remained the same. Baltimore, Detroit and Milwaukee grew 6,3 and 2 per cent respectively.

Statistic-worshipping sociologists are hunting in the labyrinth of esotericism for explanations of this phenomenon. The big cities are too big; they have no place for children to play; speeding automobiles jam and imperil their traffic; their death rate exceeds that of the country; their rents are high.

Yet the answer is so obvious in the story told by the latest Census that one wonders how even the erudite could miss it. It is to be found in the very fact that the trend of population during the past ten years has been away from cities, to the rural communities.

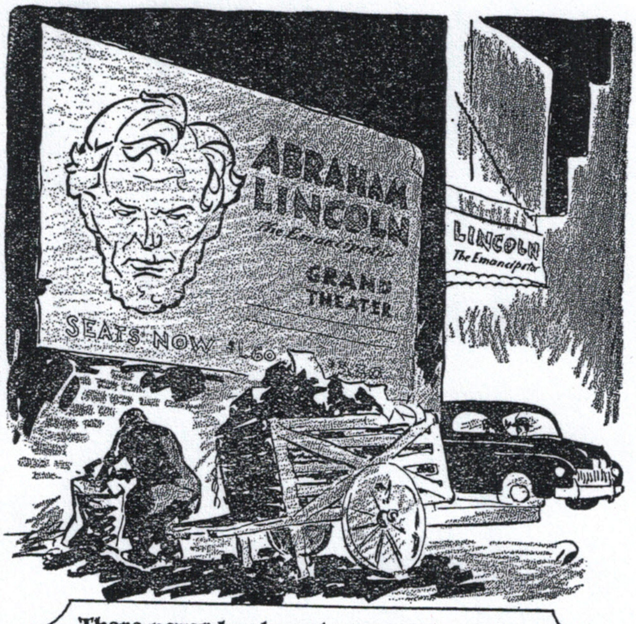
In 1932, at the close of the late lamented Hoover-Coolidge prosperity, it was revealed by the Department of the Interior that the rural population then was as great as it had been ten years before. Running away from "no help wanted" signs had set in long before the big boom burst.

It was about 1922 that the bottom of crop prices had begun to leak very badly; the inflationary land values of the war period were punctured, mortgages were being wiped out, the speculative rent line began to shrink to the economic line. Land was cheap.

Labor is mobile. It moves quickly from where there are no jobs to where there is the prospect of work. So when the factories shut down the fields began to beckon. The hitchhiker and the rod-rider covered the countryside. Cheap land was to be had in the farm belt. Or maybe something to do could be found at the old homestead; if not, there was at least a meal to be had.

By the time the New Deal began to pour tax dollars into the weakening backbones of the land speculators—including the insurance companies and the banks—the exodus to the farm was in full swing. The deflationary movement drew many a former farm boy away from the elusive wage levels of the city to the more substantial wages back home. Farms were being offered without any down payments; title could be obtained by mortgaging a portion of the crop over a period of years. In the meantime a living, no matter how meager, was possible.

Then came the billions of AAA grants and subsidies, and the deflationary process was halted. That is to say, land owners had been saved. Mortgage prices stiffened. The fields no longer beckoned the unemployed. They were locked out. There was no use, they knew, to try the cities again. They became loafers, or, as the Washington euphemism goes, "surplus farm population." Thanks to relief they have been able to exist in that ignominious state. That's where they are today. And that's the explanation of the urban-rural hegira.



There never has been but one question in all civilization and that is how to keep a few men from saying to many men: You work and earn bread and we will eat it. ~ ABRAHAM LINCOLN.