



Guest Editorial

Aging in Rural Communities and Small Towns

In rural areas of Canada, including villages and small towns, aging is an important reality; many places have as large a proportion of seniors today as the whole country will have at the peak of the seniors' boom forty years from now.

'Rural aging' covers a broad spectrum of people, occupations and regions. Some rural seniors are farmers, but many others have worked in the fishing, lumber or mining industries, or in the service occupations and retail trade in towns and villages. They represent a variety of ethno-cultural groups. Although many older residents of rural areas, villages and small towns have always lived there, large numbers of retirees are migrating from the cities to the country. Finally, the challenges of aging in a Newfoundland fishing outpost connected mainly by sea to St. John's are probably not the same as those in rural municipalities in densely populated Southern Ontario and they are likely somewhat different from the difficulties



The C.A.R.E Van is the pride and joy of the community of Antigonish, Nova Scotia

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MRS. PEGGY MacISAAC, ANTIGONISH, NOVA SCOTIA



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faced by farmers and ranchers in the West. Rural aging is a diverse reality.

Despite these variations, seniors in rural areas, villages and small towns share several common advantages. Country people are described as self-sufficient and resourceful, yet ready to help a neighbour anytime; the wealth of community activities and gatherings makes up for the lack of formal entertainment. The pace of life is slower than in the city and there is generally less crime and a greater sense of personal safety. There is fresh air, beautiful scenery and tranquillity in abundance. Country-bred seniors and the big-city 'transplants' can wax poetic about the advantages of rural life.

Yet life outside the large urban centres is harder in many respects as well and seniors in different regions agree on some of the major challenges. The community support services that enable seniors to maintain their autonomy as they age are fewer and more widely dispersed than in the city. There are generally few

housing options. Transportation may pose a problem for seniors who do not or cannot drive a car. For people who have independent transportation, the inclement weather for which Canada is rightly famous, may hinder their mobility.

No one solution to any of these issues is appropriate to all rural communities. Each area, and every group of seniors must participate in the development or adaptation of services to meet their specific needs. Fortunately, rural seniors are used to rolling up their sleeves and working together to get a job done!

Seniors in rural areas do not expect to have all the amenities of city life, but they do expect to have essential services available and to have access to resources that will allow them to maintain their autonomy and quality of life.

*Julia Best,
NACA Member,
Newfoundland*

A Country Sampler

Gil and Simone Plouffe moved from Ottawa to a grass marsh overlooking the Bay of Fundy near the small town of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, because they wanted to enjoy an active outdoor life in retirement. Many older adults live in this scenic area which enjoys a fairly mild winter climate; some, like the Plouffes, are 'new' transplants from the city with no family nearby; some are people who grew up here and chose to return after retirement; many have always lived in the area, working in farming, fishing or the lumber industry. Since her husband's death, Simone Plouffe finds it difficult to maintain a three bedroom house and large yard alone; although she drives, has many friends and is involved in several community and church groups, she feels

somewhat isolated from her children and grandchildren in Ontario and Alberta. Moving back to a large city nevertheless would be hard; she would miss the friendliness and close community ties of Annapolis Royal, the view of the river and mountains and the many varieties of birds that come to her feeder.

This vignette describes a little of the diversity of seniors in rural Canada, as well as some of the advantages and challenges for seniors living in these areas.

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What is Rural?

The definition of 'rural' can be limited to signify circumscribed regions with a population of less than 1 000 inhabitants, or it can be so broad as to include every place that is not a major metropolitan area. In the context of the present article, rural Canada includes sparsely settled countryside and farms, as well as villages and small towns with populations under 10,000.

Despite the diversity in rural environments and in the people who live in these environments, **Anne Martin Matthews** and **Audrey Heuvel**, sociologists from the University of Guelph, identify characteristics which are common to much of rural life.' These include low population densities, relatively large distances between population centres, isolation and difficulties caused by severe weather conditions. The conditions that make rural life what it is can be both a boon and a bane in later adult life.

Seniors and the Revitalization of Small Town Canada

Rural Canada has been undergoing a seniors' boom at a much faster rate than the rest of the country. Older adults have been migrating to small towns and the surrounding countryside. Some are coming home to places where they grew up before seeking employment in the city; others are moving because they enjoy an active, outdoor lifestyle. **Cynthia Patterson**, president of **Rural Dignity**

Canada, a rural advocacy organization, comments that "newcomers are attracted by cheaper housing, lower taxes, low crime rates and shorter walking distances.² According to researcher **Gerald Hodge**, of the University of British Columbia, the population of many villages and small towns actually grew during the past 20 years.³ Several new residents are retirees who have left the big city, as well as frail or widowed seniors who have moved into town from the open countryside. **David Foot**, an economist from the University of Toronto, predicts that this movement of retirees to rural areas will be one of the major social trends of the 1990s.⁴ The influx of seniors is especially welcomed by towns affected by a downturn in the local economy or by the out-migration of young persons who have moved to cities. In the Northern Ontario mining town of Elliott Lake, for example, a non-profit organization called **Elliott Lake Retirement Living** has been attracting seniors to the town to occupy the housing units vacated by former mining employees.⁵ The presence of the new residents supports the town's infrastructure of businesses and services and the seniors are delighted with their new home. In Perth, Ontario, new senior residents have helped create a stable tax base and the town is enjoying a small building boom of new houses, seniors' apartments and condominiums.⁶

Rural Challenges

Typically, there is a smaller range of public, professional and commercial services available in rural than in urban areas, including public transportation, home support, specialized health care and housing options. The relative lack of services is less problematic for vigorous, self-sufficient people of all ages, but often, as people advance in years, a more supportive environment is needed to maintain independence in the community. Even small towns that currently attract healthy younger seniors may be faced with unexpectedly heavy demands for health, social and environmental support when many of these seniors become frailer. As well, urban seniors who are drawn to an area because it is attractive in the summer may have difficulty coping with harsh rural winters.

Housing: Help Wanted

Rural seniors are more likely than urban seniors to live in older single-family houses with large yards. These homes may be less well-equipped than more modern homes, in need of repair and more difficult and more expensive to heat and to insulate. In addition, the amount of maintenance required to keep up the home and property may become onerous as the owners advance in years, or if one member of the couple dies. One rural older homeowner commented to University of Guelph student **Anne Macintosh**: "The

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houses here were not built for seniors."⁷ **Ron Corbett**, a geographer from Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, notes that rural seniors in Atlantic Canada were more likely to live in substandard housing than urban seniors.⁸

Elizabeth Cape, a researcher from the University of Toronto, observes that older widows living alone in rural areas often closed off most of the house and confined themselves to a few downstairs rooms.⁹

Seniors experiencing difficulty managing their homes by themselves report they rely on hired services—to mow the lawn, wash windows or floors or do home repairs. However, a common complaint is that the services are not reliable.¹⁰

There are few alternative housing options available in rural areas because the low population discourages private developers. A survey of seniors' apartment projects in Ontario towns indicates that several are located far from services and that there are deficiencies in design and construction.¹¹ According to the **Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens**, "The limited range of housing available to rural seniors may mean that those requiring services but still capable of independent living may have no choice but to move into an institution."¹²

Transportation: How much of a Problem?

Having a means of transportation is crucial to life in rural Canada, both to gain access to common services in town—from the grocery store to the doctor's office and pharmacy, and to get to other towns and major centres.



Public transportation is usually not available, and often taxi service is not either. Like other country people, most seniors drive their own cars, rely on others to drive them or, if possible, walk to their destinations. Within small towns, just as within cities, most services are within a mile's distance from residents' homes. Researchers **Peter Grant** and **Bruce Rice**,¹³ of the University of Saskatchewan, found, however, that seniors in villages and towns were more likely to walk to services than city dwellers, partly because of the absence of public transportation, but also because the small-town lifestyle is more conducive to walking. Seniors living on farms have the farthest to go to get to services, but they

are the least likely to report having transportation problems: very probably, those who do not drive or who do not have someone at home to drive them leave the farm.

Considering the unavailability of public transportation in rural areas and the more difficult access to major centres and to air or rail lines, it is surprising that

rural seniors in general do not report much more difficulty getting around than urban seniors. Thus, although it is important to provide transportation options in rural areas, the issue of transportation is not the only concern of rural seniors, nor is it the most critical one.¹⁴

Rural Transportation Options: Wheeling Partners

Although they are a minority, rural seniors who do not have reasonable mobility are more likely to feel socially isolated and unhappy. Grant and Rice¹⁵ also observed that seniors with transportation problems were more often widows aged 74+ who lived alone on a small income and were in poor

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health-in other words, precisely those seniors who need support to maintain their independence.

Several alternative rural transportation programs have proven their usefulness. In Antigonish, Nova Scotia, the **Kinsmen Club**, local businesses and many volunteers have cooperated to make available the **C.A.R.E. (Community of Antigonish Regional Expressions)** Van for less mobile seniors. The Manitoba government assists rural communities in setting up and operating handivan services through its **Program for Transportation of the Mobility Disadvantaged**. In other communities, school buses are used off hours or car pools with volunteer drivers are created. In Saskatchewan, the **Rural Transportation Assistance Program (RTAP)** was established to provide connection from isolated areas to towns on a commercial bus line.

To be effective and lasting, these local solutions must be run by each community to meet local needs. Fortunately, people in small communities are accustomed to 'pitching in' to make services available. The participation of volunteers is essential to keep costs affordable, and users are asked to pay a fee. Indeed, many people are more inclined to use a local transportation service if it is seen as 'transportation' rather than as a 'social service'.¹⁶

Social networks and Social Support

Seniors living in rural Canada are just as connected to family and friends as are urban dwellers. Telephone contact and visits with family and with neighbours and friends are frequent and nearly all rural seniors report having someone they could call on anytime in an emergency.¹⁷ Moreover, in rural settings as in the city, seniors needing care receive most of the help from family.

There are some notable differences in living arrangements and in patterns of socializing between rural and urban seniors. Seniors living on farms are more likely to share the house with other relatives (often unmarried adult children) or non-relatives than other rural or urban seniors. Seldom do unattached seniors live alone on a farm: those who do are more often men than women. Another difference is that rural seniors have more contact with neighbours than do city seniors, and neighbours in the country are more often considered to be friends. Social visiting in rural areas is usually informal and unannounced: country people 'drop in' on one another-a practice which is not common in the city.

In lieu of formal entertainment, people in rural areas organize their own fun. An Ontario couple wrote these words to the Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens: "There are lots of activities in the country, perhaps more than we had ever expected to encounter. People seem to create activities just to get

together."¹⁸ In Port Royal, Nova Scotia, several senior women go for a long hike and lunch every Friday morning. According to **Charles Montgomery**, of Perth, Ontario, "in a small town, people get on a first name basis quickly. It gives a sense of belonging."¹⁹ The opportunity to have a stable group of age-peers in a small community contributes not only to social integration, but also to one's sense of personal identity.

Health and Health Care

Rural seniors are as healthy as their city counterparts and just as likely to suffer from the health problems that are more common among seniors generally. A group of seniors in Northern Alberta considered themselves healthy if they could continue farming and trapping despite chronic problems such as arthritis.²⁰ Rural seniors do, however, appear to have more uncorrected problems with vision, hearing, dentistry and foot care.

Norah Keating, a sociologist at the University of Calgary, says that "these differences may be more a function of the lack of available health services than of lower levels of health."²¹

There are fewer physicians practicing in rural areas; this is particularly true of medical specialists.²² Based on findings from Manitoba,²³ rural seniors make fewer visits per year to doctors than do urban seniors although their health status is about the same. Also, hospital use is higher among rural than urban seniors. One

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reason is that there are relatively more hospital beds in rural than in urban areas; another is that home care services are less available in rural regions. Also, there are fewer long-term care facilities in rural areas and seniors requiring long-term care may be forced to move away from their families and friends. An alternative recommended by the **B.C. Task Force on Issues of Concern to Seniors**²⁴ is the development of family care homes, which provide a protective, supportive environment within a family home in the senior's community.

Rural and urban seniors report similar levels of happiness and no differences are found in the incidence of mental health problems.

Albert Kozma, Michael Stones and **James McNeil**, of Memorial University in Newfoundland, suggest that rural and urban seniors enjoy about the same degree of mental well-being because there is a trade-off of problems and advantages in urban and rural living.²⁵

Those seniors who do report problems of loneliness and depression often have physical health complaints; their poor health inhibits their mobility and their opportunities for socializing.

Mental health services are a rare commodity in rural Canada. In British Columbia, however, the problems of serving the rural areas of the province have been addressed through innovative community based mental health services. These include several multi disciplinary centres distributed throughout the

province and traveling geriatric psychiatry outreach clinics. These services are vital to the communities they reach.

Other Issues of Concern

Rural seniors may experience other difficulties to a greater extent than urban residents. These include uncertain or low incomes and problems related to communications.

Income problems may arise particularly for older farm or ranch men and women who typically have received no wages during their working lives, and no occupational pension in retirement. Other rural seniors with precarious income are those who worked at seasonal jobs for low wages with few benefits and with possible long periods of unemployment.

Telephone service is a concern among seniors in some rural areas, particularly in areas served by party lines. The constant ringing of party lines can be annoying or confusing. Also, in the case of lines with four connecting parties, access to emergency response systems is difficult. In areas where there are multiple telephone exchanges, people may be obliged to pay long distance charges to call neighbours.

The modification of postal services in rural areas also causes concern among many older residents. Roadside 'superboxes' can be difficult to access, especially in icy or snowy conditions; the closure of small-town post-offices deprives some people of an opportunity for social contact. Also, changes in mail delivery

eliminates the unofficial 'postal alert' service whereby the mail deliverer would notify other persons if a senior's mail was not being picked up as usual. Both the Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens and Rural Dignity urge Canada Post to reinstate full rural postal services.

Computer technology offers great possibilities for overcoming difficulties accessing information. The **Seniors Resources and Research Society** in British Columbia has recently set up **Infonet**, a computerized information network, data bank and message bulletin for use by seniors and people interested in seniors throughout the province.

Rural seniors are an increasingly large segment of the senior population in Canada. Although they are a very diverse group, they share many advantages and disadvantages by virtue of where they live. The issues of regional equity and reasonable access to services will always challenge Canada, and as the population ages, these issues will become more pressing.

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Fact File

- The provinces and territory with the highest proportion of their population in rural areas are the Northwest Territories (63.3%), Prince Edward Island (60.1 %) and New Brunswick (52.3%). The provinces with the lowest concentration of rural inhabitants are Ontario (18.7%), British Columbia (19.5%) and Alberta (20.2%).

Statistics Canada. *Population and dwelling counts*. Catalogue 93-301. Ottawa: 1993.

- Approximately 35% of the seniors in Canada live in rural areas and small towns.

Hodge, G. *The elderly in Canada's small towns*. Vancouver: The Centre for Human Settlements, University of British Columbia, 1987.

- Seniors comprise about 25% of the population of villages and small towns in Canada. *Ibid.*

- In 1981, 5.4% of the population of rural farm areas were seniors.

Stone, L.O. and S. Fletcher. *The seniors boom*. Catalogue 89-515. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1986.

- From 1971 to 1981, the population of small towns grew 45% faster than Canada as a whole and countryside populations grew four times faster.

Hodge, *op. cit.*

- There are about 9,200 towns and villages in Canada compared to less than 200 small and medium-sized cities and metropolises. *Ibid.*

- In 1981, Saskatchewan and Manitoba had the highest proportion of seniors living in small towns (almost 25%); British Columbia and Newfoundland had the lowest (10%). *Ibid.*

- There are proportionately more men among small town seniors than among urban seniors, especially in towns under 2,500 inhabitants; this is particularly true in the Western provinces. *Ibid.*

- A survey of seniors in rural areas and small towns in Atlantic Canada showed that 25% did not own a car or have access to a private vehicle.

Corbett, R. *Coming of age. A profile of the elderly in Atlantic Canada*.

Sackville: Mount Allison University, Rural and Small Town Research and Studies Programme, 1990.

- For the vast majority of Atlantic rural seniors, a number of critical services, including the doctor's office, groceries and prescriptions, were from 1 to 5 miles of their residence. *Ibid.*

- Typically, seniors in rural regions of Atlantic Canada are living in an older single family dwelling, built about 55 years earlier, where they have lived for 32 years. *Ibid.*

- At least 40% of seniors in rural areas of British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia pay over 30% of their income in shelter costs.

Hodge, G. and G.M. *Gutman. Housing the aged in rural Canada*. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1989.

- In 1987, 34% of rural senior women and 13% of senior men felt unsafe walking alone in their own neighbourhood after dark, compared to 55% of older urban women and 25% of older urban men.

Statistics Canada. *A portrait of seniors in Canada*. Catalogue 89-519. Ottawa: 1990.

- The majority (57%) of senior farm men and women are in the labour force compared to 8% of urban

seniors and 8% of rural seniors not living on farms. Statistics Canada. *Population labour force activity*. Catalogue 92-915, Table1, 1984. Ottawa: February 1984.

- Transportation problems are reported by 21 % of rural seniors and 15% of urban seniors in Saskatchewan.

Senior Citizens Provincial Council. *A survey of the transportation problems and needs of the urban elderly in Saskatchewan*. Regina: 1987.

- Rural seniors most likely to have transportation problems are very old widows living alone on a low income, in a village or small town, and who are in poor health and lonely.

Grant, P.R. and B. Rice.

"Transportation problems of the rural elderly: A needs assessment." *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 2, 3, (1983): 107-124.

- As of 1986, almost 20% of general or family practitioners were located in a rural area, serving the 25% of the population who live in rural Canada. However, only 5% of medical specialists had a rural practice.

Canadian Medical Association. *Report of the Advisory Panel on the Provision of Medical Services in Underserved Regions*. Ottawa: March 1992.

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Notes

¹ Matthews, A.M. and A.V. Heuvel.

"Conceptual and methodological issues in research on aging in rural vs urban environments". *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 5, 1, (1986): 49-60.

^{2,6,19} Patterson, C. In "Home, sweet home: Canadian retirees leaving cities for that good rural life." *Ottawa Citizen*, September 4, 1992, A3.

³ Hodge, G. *The elderly in Canada's small towns*. Vancouver: The Centre for Human Settlements, University of British Columbia, 1987.

⁴ Foot, D. In "Home, sweet home: Canadian retirees leaving cities for that good rural life." *Ottawa Citizen*, September 4, 1992,

A3.

⁵ "Elliot Lake wooing seniors."

Oshawa Times, July 4, 1992, 20.

^{7,10} MacIntosh, A. "Health and social supports for elderly persons in a rural environment." M.A. Thesis. Guelph, Ontario: Faculty of Family Studies, University of Guelph, 1988.

⁸ Corbett, R. *Coming of age: A profile of the elderly in Atlantic Canada*. Sackville: Mount Allison University, Rural and Small Town Research and Studies Programme, 1990.

⁹ Cape, E. "Aging women in rural settings." In V.W. Marshall (ed.). *Aging in Canada*, 2nd edition. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1987.

¹¹ Hodge, G. "Assisted housing for Ontario's rural elderly: Shortfalls in product

and design." *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 6, 2, (1987): 14 1-154.

^{12,18} Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens. *Rural roots. Aging in small and rural communities in Ontario*. Toronto: 1992.

^{13,15,17} Grant, P. and B. Rice.

"Transportation problems of the rural elderly: A needs assessment." *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 2, 3, (1983): 107-124.

^{14,21} Keating, N.C. *Aging in rural Canada*. Toronto: Butterworths, 199 1 .

¹⁶ Grant, P. "Creating a feasible transportation system for rural areas: Reflections on a symposium." *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 2, 1, (1983): 30-35.

²⁰ Raiwet, C. "As long as we have our health: The experience of age-related physical change for rural elderly couples." MSc. Thesis. Edmonton: University of Alberta. (in Keating, *op. cit.*)

²² Canadian Medical Association. *Report of the Advisory Panel on the Provision of Medical Services in Under serviced Regions*. Ottawa: March 1992.

²³ Shapiro, E. and L.L. Roos. "Using health care: Rural/urban differences among the Manitoba elderly." *The Gerontologist*, 24, 3, (1984): 270-274.

²⁴ British Columbia Task Force on Issues of Concern to Seniors. *Toward a better age*. Vancouver: April 1990.

²⁵ Kozma, A. et al. *Psychological well-being in later life*. Toronto: Butterworths, 1991.

Speakers Available!

Two roles of the National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA) are to disseminate information and to stimulate public discussion on aging. To do this, NACA members are available to speak about the Council's research and concerns regarding the following topics:

- achievements of seniors in the past decade
- the barriers to independence and coping strategies
- the Canadian health care system and seniors
- the economic situation of Canada's seniors
- elder abuse
- gerontology education
- housing
- quality of life in long-term care institutions
- older workers

Our current speakers are:

Julia Best, Southern Harbour, Newfoundland
Andrea Boswell, Scarborough, Ontario
Ruth Carver, London, Ontario
Jeanne Chartier, Saint-Hyacinthe, Québec
Evan Dickson, Fergus, Ontario
Donna Ford, Williams Lake, British Columbia
Barbara Gregan, Fredericton, New Brunswick
Marguerite Hogue-Charlebois, Montréal, Québec
John MacDonell, Antigonish, Nova Scotia
Wilma Mollard, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Abe Okpik, Iqaluit, Northwest Territories
Noëlla Porter, Sainte-Foy, Québec
Médard Soucy, Baie-Comeau, Québec

For more information:

Please contact Sylvie Bérubé at the Secretariat, (613) 957-1254, to discuss the terms of participation.

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