

I have a confession to make. When asked where I'm from I have responded by saying with a chuckle, "Oh, I'm from the middle of nowhere!" Recently it was brought to my attention that this type of response that is painting a sad story for rural communities in North Dakota, and elsewhere.

A couple of weeks ago I attended "Rewriting the Rural Narrative" hosted by NDSU Extension and USDA Rural Development. Part of the event focused on how things have changed in Rural America. Ben Winchester's research shows there has been an 11% increase in rural population since 1970. Ben also pointed out that some rural communities are being absorbed by urban areas, but they are not disappearing. For example, Lincoln, ND was once a small town, but has been urbanized as Bismarck has grown wider.

One thing I found interesting was the kids who went away to college are not always moving back to their hometowns like we might assume. Research showed that only 36% of newcomers are returning to a community where they previously lived. As a person who moved to a new community where I had no past connection, I don't know why this surprised me... I guess I am one of many who decided to find a new place to call home!

Now, you might be crankily thinking, "Why are these people coming to my town and what kind of trouble are they going to bring?" Well, the truth is, most newcomers reported moving to a rural community for a simpler pace of life, safety and security, and low housing costs. Personally, I can confirm these reasons. My husband and I grew up on farms outside of small towns and wanted that same pace of life. We value the safety and security of knowing our neighbors, and it is more affordable to live here than in a city. THIS is the story we should all be telling about Grant County and other rural communities.

I encourage you to talk your town up! The next time you talk to a city dweller or an old friend don't talk about how bored you are, talk about Oktoberfest, Elgin Days, and the Grant County Fair. Talk about the two schools that are still providing quality education to our youth. Talk about the high school sports teams that are keeping our kids active. Talk about the health services offered right here. Talk about how close you are to a town where you can see a movie. Talk about the bowling alley. Talk about how nice it is to get supper in town or in a neighboring town. Talk about the grocery store that has all the necessities. Talk about the beautiful fall colors this time of year. You decide how the story should read.

In the past, when I made the "middle of nowhere" comment I said it with a smile and a tried to leave the impression that nowhere is where I want to be. Now, I will smile and say, "I live in rural North Dakota with neighbors who help each other out, plan fun events, and when I need something take a drive through the prettiest scenery to get to town." This response should leave no question that I am where I want to be.