



# City



By Bob Evancho

**R**ecently, a regional publication lamented the ongoing urbanization of the American West, making reference to “cappuccino cowboys” and fretting over what seems to be an inexorable march toward widespread yuppiedom.

Some Idahoans refer to this trend as the “Californication” of their state — what they alarmingly foresee as a glut of bistros, regional malls and sushi bars dotting the urban landscape. Others view it favorably as a logical by-product of the state’s growing popularity — evidence of an increasing “big-city” sophistication.

While it wouldn’t be entirely accurate to juxtapose these two camps as Old West and New West, there is a certain “urban vs. rural,” “recreation vs. extraction,” “yuppie vs. good ’ole boy” quality to the debate.

“The arrival of a lot of people is seen as a negative factor in the culture of Idaho and surrounding states,” says Mark Lusk, chair of the Boise State social work department. “People of the Old West need to come to grips with the fact that the



# Life ... Country Strife

New West is happening inexorably, and there is nothing that can be done by those who espouse Old West values to change the migration pattern.”

Maybe so. But in regard to Idaho cities, how clearly defined are the sides? Will the current influx of city-dwelling, white-collar types shift prevailing sociopolitical attitudes from the Old West where the land is worked to the New West where land is preserved for its intrinsic value?

It probably depends on the city, says Boise State political scientist Stephanie Witt. One factor, she says, is the economic health of the city in question. “There are some cities whose economies still revolve around extraction and agricultural industries, and their politics and attitudes reflect that. But many of them are dying on the vine,” she says. “Then you have cities that have made the successful switch to service industries or high tech — and those are in Idaho’s major growth areas. So perhaps these growth areas have somewhat of a luxury of treating the land as something to preserve.”

Which Idaho cities have that “luxury”? Certainly not the Filers and the Firths of the state. Twin Falls serves as a prime example.

**Small towns  
come to  
grips with  
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urbaniza-  
tion.**

In Idaho’s Magic Valley, Twin Falls is enjoying what Stephen Hartgen calls a “concentration of economic power” that has transformed Idaho’s sixth-largest city from just another medium-sized town into a regional economic hub.

Hartgen, publisher of the *Times-News*, Twin Falls’ daily newspaper, says the city began to emerge as an economic heavyweight about 10 years ago with the construction of a regional mall. Retailing giants Costco, Shopko and Target set up shop nearby, and the building of ancillary retail stores, restaurants and other businesses ensued.

Consumers from around the Magic Valley flocked to the mall area to spend their money. Small retailers in the outlying areas suffered; some went belly-up. “The [major retail] stores began to underprice the smaller stores in the surrounding [rural] communities, which effectively formed an economic magnet in Twin Falls,” says Hartgen. “From a strategic standpoint, the mall is perfectly placed just off the interstate. This creates easy access for consumers from all around the valley and creates this concentration of economic power. You



*BSU political scientists Jim Weatherby and Stephanie Witt, co-authors of a book about the urban West, predict that political clout in Idaho will remain with the state's resource-based industries.*

can see it in Twin's retail sales figures and the number of people who travel into the city. Twin Falls only has a population of about 30,000, but on any given day that might swell by 10,000-15,000 people coming in from outlying areas to work, shop and purchase."

Twin Falls' good economic fortune reflects what appears to be a trend in the growth patterns of Idaho's large cities. While the population of the entire state has increased by almost 11 percent from 1986 through 1993, the growth in Idaho's 10 largest cities — Boise, Idaho Falls, Pocatello, Nampa, Lewiston, Twin Falls, Coeur d'Alene, Moscow, Caldwell and Rexburg — was nearly 16 percent.

"This difference in growth rates indicates that much of the new population growth has occurred in the urban areas and that individuals have left other areas in the state and have moved to cities," says Jim Weatherby, director of Boise State's public affairs program, in a recently published executive summary sponsored by BSU and the Association of Idaho Cities.

The Department of Commerce reports that while Idaho gained nearly 10,000 workers between 1983 and 1992, it lost 8,000 farm-related employees. Meanwhile, manufacturing jobs increased by 15,000. These numbers might suggest a gradual shift toward a more urban-oriented work force in the state.

Says Weatherby: "If we are to continue the current growth trends, I think we will see a number of Idaho cities, the larger cities, becoming more and more involved in the service economy and having less and less of an interest in Old West concerns. This could lead to greater conflicts between the Old and New West — between urban and rural parts of the state."

That does not mean, however, that some of Idaho's rural towns are not adjusting to these economic challenges. "The real trick," Hartgen says, "is to recognize niches and fill them." He points to Jerome as an example.

In the wake of losing much of its retail base to Twin Falls, Jerome has emerged as a key manufacturing and processing center in the Magic Valley, Hartgen says, adding that the growth of the dairy industry in Jerome County is "nothing short of extraordinary."

In addition, Jerome has established itself as a bedroom community. "I think in time Jerome will re-form its retail base when it grows in size and people get more of a disposable income and decide they don't want to shop in Twin Falls," Hartgen comments.

Perhaps Jerome's adjustments to Twin Falls' concentration of economic power illustrates a portion of the urban-rural conflict and the clash of Old West and New West priorities. But both Weatherby and Witt hasten to add that it isn't all that cut-and-dried. Witt cites research that she conducted with fellow BSU political scientist Les Alm on urban and rural environmentalism that used Idaho as a case study:

"There were some differences you would expect between urban and rural people, and to some extent I think that reflects the Old and New West. For example, urban people are more likely to say that if you had to choose between the economy and the environment you should choose the latter. But over half the people from both sides were saying you should choose the environment.

"I think it's too simplistic to say people in rural areas, or the Old West, don't care about the land or aren't concerned about the environment; I think it's a matter of semantics."

Along similar lines, Witt draws a "conservationist vs. preservationist" comparison between the two camps. "Both are concerned about the land, but conservationists maybe see it as having utility, either economically or recreationally; toward those ends the land is to be responsibly used and lived off of," she says. "Preservationists are more like your wilderness people. Set it aside and lock it up, forever untouched. Conservationists would say, 'I care about the land, but it's vital to our economy.' Again, I think that taps into some of the dimensions of the Old West vs. New West debate."

Lusk agrees with Witt's analyses and suggests the two sides identify similarities rather than differences. "The dichotomy is a false dichotomy," he says. "Certainly, one doesn't want to disparage the Old West in welcoming the New West. The two can live in concert; both constituencies value the quality of life in the West and the environment we live in.

"The question isn't to stop the migration pattern — I don't think that can be done — but to find ways to maintain the quality of life that Old Westerns value and New Westerns are migrating here to participate in. The safe streets, the clean air and the recreational opportunities are a draw," he says, "and when you think about those things as a zero-sum limited asset, that is to say there is only so much to go around, you expect that those resources can be managed effectively for a variety of users."

Needless to say, the use of those natural resources is at the crux of the Old West-New West debate. And state Rep. Lenore Barrett, who represents the rural counties of Lemhi, Custer, Clark and Jefferson in District 26, is not so willing to allow the New West to gain

a toehold on Idaho's political and economic playing field.

"I don't view this clash as urban vs. rural as much as I look at it as the natural-resource industries — agriculture, timber, mining, recreation — vs. the environmental movement, which in its essence is not bad because I think most Idahoans in the natural-resource business consider themselves responsible stewards of the land," she says. "But I think the more radical members of these environmental groups are not using common sense.

"I don't want to see the economy based strictly on service. That simply implies to me that we're all eventually going to end up poor. A simple premise that we all learned in grade school is that the wealth of a nation is determined by the production of its natural resources. Just sitting there and looking at them isn't going to feed anyone."

Another consideration in the conflict is the growing number of new Idaho residents who are unfamiliar or unconcerned with the interests of Idaho's resource industries. While many rural Idaho families have a heritage of growing their own livestock and crops, many newcomers to the state's urban settings don't give much thought to such matters.

"I think new people coming in bring a different set of values than longtime rural residents," comments Witt. "A lot of these people are fleeing an already unsatisfactory urban environment, California or Seattle — places that aren't dependent on mining or farming or forestry or cattle-raising. They don't see the tradition or the value of these industries. And a lot of people are coming into places like Ada County and possibly diluting the concerns of the Old West."

Quite possibly. Ada County planners estimate that Boise's population will swell by nearly 80,000 residents — to 283,000 — between 1990 and 2000. Boise's population grew by more than 25,000, or 12 percent, in just the first three years of this decade.

"I would guess some of these newcomers are from rural areas, but most of them are coming from urban places," says Witt. "They see this great, beautiful state and say, 'Hey, we better preserve this.' They don't see things the way a person from a small town or a rancher see it."

"I think this idea of the New West is designed to make us feel like a zoo," says Barrett, a Republican from Challis. "Just throw us an occasional bone and have people come out and look at us. Well, that's stupid.

I sure hope people recognize the sheer stupidity of it. Ideas like that are not useful and not workable. If people in the New West like that ... well, God help us."

Despite Barrett's concerns, Weatherby and Witt, who collaborated on a book on the urban West, don't anticipate major changes in the state's political power base in the near future. The pair predicts that most of Idaho's political clout will remain with the traditional resource-based interests.

"You would assume with these population changes would come a shift in political power. That may occur, but I think it will be a slow shift," Weatherby says. "I don't think the [political landscape] is as clear with the reapportionment actions taken by the Legislature over the last few years. ... I also don't think that representatives from cities necessarily see themselves as representatives of urban areas."

Nevertheless, Hartgen sees prevailing Idaho politics changing. "I see us becoming more centrist, more moderate, probably more liberal — maybe even more Democrat, but I'm not certain about that," he says.

However slow, a shift in the state's political power base appears imminent, says Hartgen. He has already observed such changes in the Magic Valley. "In this area we have traditionally been represented in the Legislature by people connected directly to agriculture. I think if you look at the total picture of this community and the 15-20

people from around here who are in the Legislature, only three or four are directly connected to agriculture today.

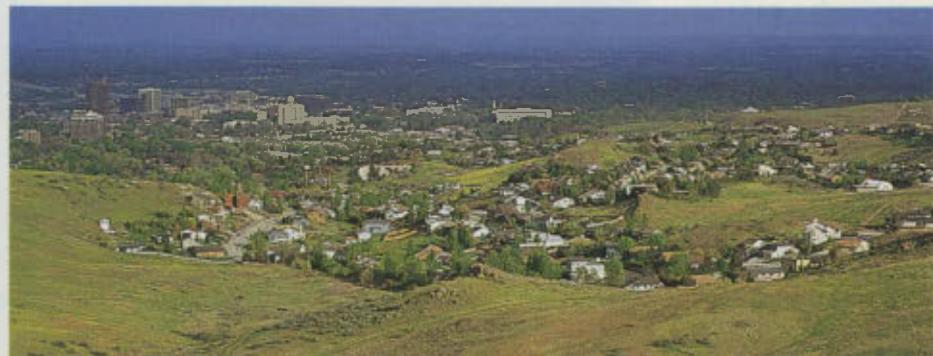
"The legislator [who is a] farmer-rancher is now more typically in business, education, law — a whole range of professions that you tend to see coming out of the Boise area. This clearly means a weakening of the old kind of domination of Idaho law and legislative power by agriculture interests. Clearly, over time that dominance is fading. Whether that's good or bad I guess depends on your perspective."

Lusk believes that the sooner the Old West acknowledges the sociopolitical changes taking place in Idaho the better it will be for the entire state.

"We should welcome [New Westerners] in the spirit that they're adding to the economy, that they are bringing the kinds of industries into Idaho that don't leave much refuse behind," he says. "What they're bringing in is wealth. They generate jobs and raise the standard of living."

While the Old West vs. New West attempt to settle their differences, one thing is certain: The clash is having a major impact on Idaho and its national identity.

"What is happening in Idaho is kind of exciting and fun to be in on because for a long time the West has been viewed by the rest of the nation as some backwater, a kind of Alabama with mountains," Hartgen says. "That isn't the case anymore." □



STEVE BLY PHOTO



CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

*From Boise's foothills to remote sage-covered desert, population growth is changing Idaho's political and environmental makeup.*