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Dorothy Ruth Mutz

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BENSON: A RESIDENTIAL SUBURBAN COMMUNITY

by

Dorothy Ruth Mutz, B. A.

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in the
Department of Sociology
of the
Municipal University of Omaha

no. 11288 October 1, 1935

UMI Number: EP73185

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Introduction

Before making a study of the social life of a particular area it is essential to classify the area as to type and character with reference to the surrounding area. (Various interpretations are given the terms "community" and "neighborhood", the terms often being used synonymously. The term "suburb", a comparatively recent sociological term, is also open to diverse interpretation.) Thus in order to systematize the variety of terms only those interpretations will be analyzed which seem to apply most directly to the area studied.

1

(According to R. D. McKenzie, the neighborhood is a term synonymous with the term community. The neighborhood, as he defines it, has three characteristic elements: spacial proximity to some focus of attention; physical or cultural differentiation from surrounding areas; and intimacy of association among the inhabitants of the area.)

Elliott and Merrill carry the third element characteristic of the community still further in defining the community in terms of its tendency to act together in all matters which

1

"The Neighborhood", American Journal of Sociology, Vol. XXVII p. 344.

2

Social Disorganization, p. 24.

directly concern the group. It would seem that as fewer matters directly concern the group of people in the community over a period of time the area is in the process of losing its identity. Insofar as these matters are essential to the social welfare of the group, the group is undergoing a process of social disorganization.)

(A "community of interests" is another basic consideration in determining whether or not an aggregation of people may be classified as a community, according to J. F. ¹Steiner.)

(Growth in size seems to be one of the goals of the average small community. The expanding population of the city makes the goal an actuality, since "expansion first follows natural gateways. . . Actual growth consequently proceeds by a series of radial thrusts along these lines of least resistance." ²Traditional community life tends to be destroyed as it becomes fused with the metropolitan district. If the community is not able to maintain its own independent political and/or economic machinery it is absorbed by the larger central city. This situation seems to be particularly true of the residential community which has no means of subsistence

¹
The American Community in Action, p. 24.

²
Douglass, H. P., "Suburbs", Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, p. 433.

except the adjacent city. The community primarily composed of city workers is defined as a residential suburb, from the urban sociologist's viewpoint.¹

H. Paul Douglass defines the residential suburb as one which has less wage earners than the parent city and one in which there is slighter congestion of living conditions and specialization upon the activities and interests involved in consumption.²)

From the standpoint of this study, (Professor Douglass' most recent analysis of the suburb is pertinent:)

("The metropolitan district typically includes a rural fringe of intensified agricultural production catering to city markets. . .Sociologically speaking. . .political status is no final criterion of a suburb, which should include all areas, whether located within or without city boundaries, that reflect the basic suburban characteristics."³

⁴
C. E. Lindeman differentiates suburbs from other types of communities. He states that suburban inhabitants of a community maintain a dual citizenship, their chief economic, commercial, or political interests being outside the

¹
Ibid.

²
The Suburban Trend, pp. 87, 89, 90.

³
Douglass, "Suburbs", op. cit.

⁴
The Community, p. 347.

suburb. Contrary to Douglass' contention that the disintegrating influence of the urban mode of life results in the heterogeneity of the suburb, Lindeman believes that the suburb is likely to suffer from too much homogeneity. This difference seems to depend upon the size and character both of the suburb and the central city.¹

A "residential suburban community" may be defined as a local group of people living in a metropolitan area which shares important interests and activities, and is more concerned about those things which it has in common than about those things wherein it differs.²)

(This town)
The present study will attempt to record observed phenomena in the light of the broader classifications given above. The *study* is an attempt to present a functional study of the contemporary life of a residential suburban community in the light of trends observable in it during the past half-century, with particular emphasis on the trends during the past quarter of a century.³)

1

Cf. Chapter X

2

Cf. Queen, S.A., "What is a Community?", Social Forces, p. 381 and Gillen, J. S., and Blackmar, F. W., Outlines of Sociology, p. 17.

3

Cf. Lynd, R. S., and H. M., Middletown, Introduction.

(Group behavior is reflected in the suburban trend; in the heterogeneity and homogeneity of the group's interests; in economic specialization of the suburb. This behavior may be described in terms of historical trends; community activities of a political, educational, and recreational nature; and in the pathological conditions.)

The analogical approach is basic to the study, since a great deal of material pertaining to Omaha is available with respect to the suburb of Benson. The suburb selected is, however, distinctly different in character from the other residential suburbs of the city in that it combines the rural character of the country village and the urban aspects of the metropolitan sub-center of trade. The community must therefore be compared with suburbs in other metropolitan areas.

Since growth in size is a characteristic of the residential suburb, both the historical and statistical methods will be employed. A quantitative analysis of the activities of the community in terms of institutional participation is made, as well as measurement of the institution's contribution to the major life-activities of the community.

The case method as a cross-sectional view of the various institutions with particular reference to a particular area is used.

The ecological method is also employed in the study. By the use of this method the spacial and temporal aspects of the community are objectified. The map¹ used not only shows inter-relations between societal phenomena within the community, but also forms a basis for comparison with similar phenomena in the city as a whole, and for comparison with the other suburbs of the city.

One limitation of the study lies in the fact that it fails to reveal to a sufficient degree the historico-developmental aspects of each institutional form analyzed. Another limitation, that it does not sufficiently bring into relief the myriad relationships existing between the institutions. Because the complexity of inter-relationships between the institutions makes it very necessary to secure orderly procedure in presentation of the data, it is difficult to give as much attention to the subject of institutional inter-dependency, and functional correlation, as should be given.

The study also fails to measure attitudes of the people of the community except in an incidental way. The existence of very few pathological conditions in the community seemed to make a detailed analysis unnecessary. Emphasis was placed instead on the gradually developing community inertia, grow-

1

Cf. p. 60.

ing out of the loss of identity of the community.

The problem of presenting the community as a normal or average community, merely because of the absence of acute pathological conditions presents itself. Just as there is no such thing as a "normal" or "average" individual from the psychologist's viewpoint, neither can there be a "normal" or "average" group. Yet the psychologist has given us the "normal curve" in its various manifestations, and the sociologist is following his technique is studying not only pathologically abnormal groups in society, but all social groupings.

If a social group, or community, is arbitrarily taken from the social milieu to be analyzed the choice of the community for such a study is a problem confronting the investigator. The individual community is "representative of nothing but itself" only when the social investigator presents societal facts about the community which are not in accord with extant sociological data.

Historical Aspects Prior to 1897

In 1857, the same year in which the city of Omaha was incorporated, Military Road was laid out by the federal government. This road ran north-west, starting at 45th and Grant Streets and ending at what is now the city limits, 72nd and Boyd Streets. It was this road which determined the location of the future village of Benson, Nebraska.

Military Road, later renamed Military Avenue, was purposely laid out to run over the high ground, so that the emigrants and freighters going west could have a good view of the surrounding country as a protection against Indian surprise. A part of the original Overland Trail, the Road linked Omaha and Fort Calhoun. It was a common sight in those early days to see soldiers from the government posts marching along the highway.

The fertile, well-drained land near the Road and about nine miles from the little trading post of Omaha was quickly sought for homestead land by the Scandinavians, Scotch, Irish and English who came westward in the eighties. The "buffalo pasture" was soon plowed under by these thrifty folk. Dairying and raising large grains and corn were the main agricultural pursuits. Neither the cloud of grasshoppers in '67

nor the blizzards and prairie fires discouraged these hardy homesteaders. In the seventies they formed a small school known as the Sheeley school.

To accomodate farmers and emigrants, a small trading post was started. It was also the social center of the community, where news of the day was brought to the farmers by emigrants passing through, and where opinions were exchanged about Civil Service Reform, the Boer Wars, Grover Cleveland's policies, and the practibility of the Brooklyn Bridge. By 1887 eight families, comprising 25 or 30 people, had settled along Military Road and to the West.

During the year an early Omaha settler, John D. Creighton, sold his 900 acre farm to Erastus A. Benson, who had recently moved from Iowa. The north-east and north-west quarters of section twelve were purchased January 15, 1887, and later the same year the rest of the section was transferred to Mr. Benson as trustee.

The land for the first school house, built in 1890, was given by Mr. Benson. The one-room building had two teachers and twenty pupils. Mr. Benson also built the town hall where church services and community gatherings were held. The town hall used to stand at 62nd Street and Military Avenue, then Wayne Street and Military Road.

The same year, 1890, the founder of Benson donated the

land for the St. James Orphanage, a Catholic institution, which started with an enrollment of 75 boys.

In 1887, the same year that the section of land owned by Mr. Benson was plotted, the founder of the village was granted a franchise for the Benson Motor Railway Company. The steam car, which operated between 48th and Grant, then the city limits of Omaha, and Mayne and Military Road, looked much like the trains of an earlier period. Later during the same year a horse-car was used in place of the steam car.

During 1890 and 1891 a Chicago syndicate, with W. H. Crary as local agent, got control of Halcyon Heights addition. In conjunction with Mr. Benson, the syndicate formed the Benson and Halcyon Heights Street Railway Company. On October 11, 1891 the street car tram made its first run, extending the earlier run to 66th Street. The company bought its electric power from the Omaha Street Railway Company.

By 1892 sixty houses had been built. A four-room school house was erected to replace the old school which had burned in 1891. At this time there were 143 children of school age in the community.

During 1892 the Benson Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. Twenty people comprised the first congregation, which was inter-denominational.

During the year Mr. Benson arranged with Buffalo Jones to bring a herd of 30 or 40 buffalo to the town. The herd was stockaded in the village for about a year and a half. Admis-
1

sion was charged, and people from Omaha and surrounding towns flocked to see the "vanishing herd".

On December 4, 1897, the Douglas County board of commissioners took up the matter of incorporating the village. At this time there were approximately 200 residents. The petition of incorporation was granted, and the boundaries of the village were established.

Population Analysis:
Growth

By using the boundaries set at the incorporation of Benson¹ as a village in 1897 it is possible to determine the density of² population of the area. The total population of the area is 11,266, and the square mileage is 1.53, or there are 7,363.3 people per square mile. There is a relatively even distribution of population over the area, with sparser settlement beyond the city limits.

The table below shows a discrepancy between the population growth in the decade 1910-1920, since Benson became annexed to Omaha in 1917, and at that time Benson Precinct was reduced to approximately one-fourth its original size.

2
Table I
Comparison of Population
Increase in Omaha and Benson

	1900	1910	Per cent Increase	1920	Per cent Increase	1930	Per cent Increase
Omaha	102,550	124,096	21.0	191,601	54.4	214,006	11.7
Benson Precinct		4,361		1,145		1,731	.6
Benson City	510	3,170*	16.0	5,175 3,387**	6.1 .9	11,266	45.4

1 Boundaries: east, 52nd Street; north, south, and west, city limits. Cf. Map, P. 60.

2

Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth United States Census figures, 1900-1930.

*

**

Benson Times (estimates)

The Americana "Benson", p. 524.

Two ten year periods show a substantial increase over the preceding decades. The 1900-1910 population increase was 5 per cent less than the population increase in Omaha. The 1920-1930 increase in Benson was 18.3 per cent more than in Omaha; the suburban trend was becoming more pronounced. Omaha had almost doubled its population between 1910 and 1920, largely because of the inclusion of three suburbs by annexation. During this period Benson had experienced a population increase of approximately 6 per cent.

According to estimates in the Benson Times, the community newspaper, there was a population increase of 8 per cent between 1922 and 1924; 8.1 per cent, between 1924 and 1926; 5.7 per cent, between 1926 and 1928; 8.0 per cent between 1928 and 1930.

From 1900 to 1930 Benson has had an increase of 452.6 per cent and Omaha, an increase of 47.9 per cent. "For the 85 metropolitan districts listed in the United States census of 1930 the suburbs showed an increase in population of 39.2 per cent during the preceding decade, more than twice that of both non-suburban cities and central cities of similar size. This was¹ an acceleration of the tendency of the decade 1910-1920."

School enrollment is a good index of a residential suburb's population increase. From 1922 to 1934 there has been a 37 per cent increase in school enrollment. Although Graph I indicates

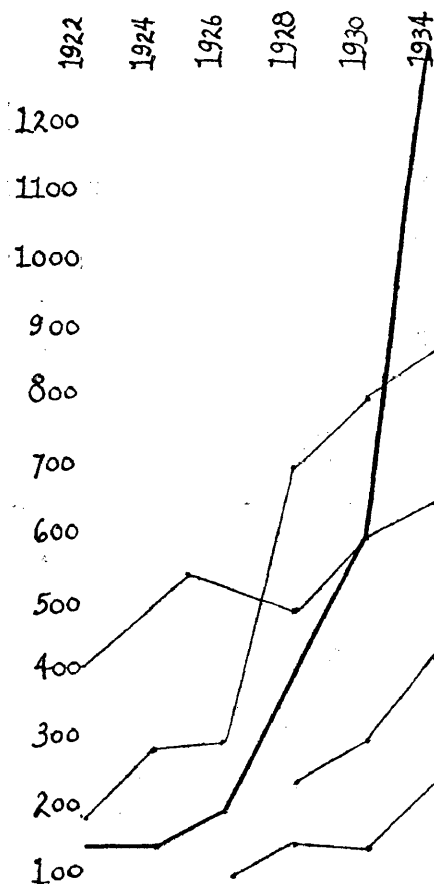
1

H. P. Douglass, "Suburbs", Op. Cit., p. 433.

a slight decrease in enrollment as compared with the past six years, the group of elementary school and high school age makes up the largest age group in the community, thus indicating a distinct general population increase.

There has been approximately an identical increase in population and in public school enrollment from 1920 to 1930. This aspect of population growth identifies the community as residential as to type.

The disproportionate increase in high school enrollment over elementary school enrollment is accounted for by the fact that the high school has drawn more students from outside the community of Benson since about four years ago.



Graph I
Enrollment in Five
Benson Public Schools
1922 to 1934

Benson Junior and Senior High _____
Benson West } _____
Rose Hill }
Monroe }
Adams }

Population Analysis
Composition and Character

Benson may be classified as a "district of low segregation, one nationality predominant".¹ The distribution of foreign born, as shown by Table II, is a good index to the foreign character of the community.

Table II (a)
Distribution of the Foreign Born in Benson, An Analysis of
Four Public School Districts (1930-31)

Name of School	Total Enrollment	Of Foreign Parentage Number	Per cent
All schools	1,770	270	15.8 (average)
Benson West	763	126	16.5
Adams	177	28	15.8
Monroe	294	35	11.9
Rosehill	536	81	15.1

Table II (b)

Name of School	Name of Country	Predominating Number	Nationality Per cent	Per cent Total
All schools		78		
Benson West	Denmark	25	19.8	3.3
Adams	Denmark	14	50.0	7.9
Monroe	Sweden	12	34.3	4.1
Rosehill	Denmark	17	21.0	3.2

¹

T.E.Sullenger, Studies in Urban Sociology, pp. 80, 81.

Of the 1,770 children enrolled in the four public elementary schools of the community, 270, or 15.3 per cent, have¹ foreign born parents. Of this number 28.7 per cent are Scandinavians, the predominant national group. In this group 56 of the parents (or one parent) were born in Denmark, and 12, in Sweden.

According to the 1930 United States census, 10.3 per cent² of the population of the community is foreign born. Therefore there are more foreign born parents in proportion to native born parents as compared with the total number of foreign born in the community in proportion to the native whites.

Of the total population of the community, 11,266, there are 3,137, or 27 per cent of foreign or mixed parentage. The predominant group, with 6,931, or 61.5 per cent of the population, is of native stock. Negroes comprise 1.15 per cent of the² population.

Distribution of age groups and sexes is a basis for the study of the domestic life of a community. Benson may be³ termed a "young community", since the age group over 35 comprises only 36.9 per cent of the population.

1

T. E. Sullenger, op. cit., footnote, p. 81, "The arithmetical average, 26.05 per cent, is taken as the point of division in the study of foreign born as shown by an analysis of the public school districts".

2Cf. Table III

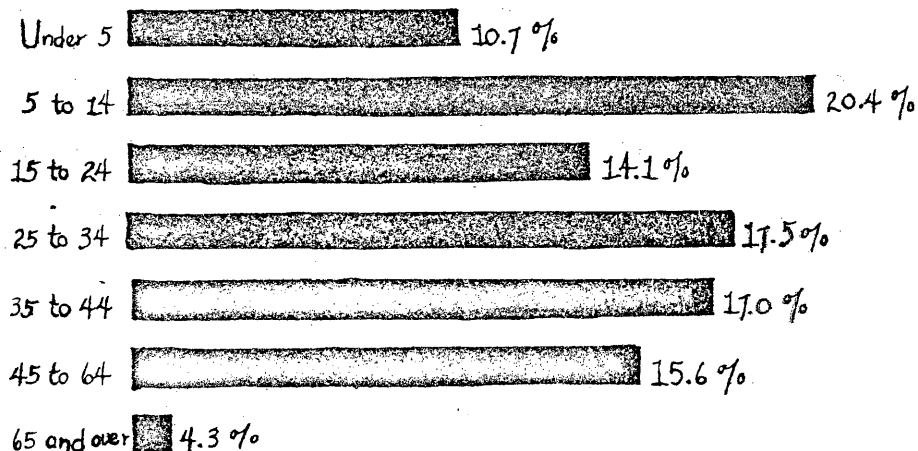
3

Cf. P. A. Sorokin and C. C. Zimmerman, Principles of Rural and Urban Sociology, pp. 546-548.

The age group between 5 and 20 comprises 29 per cent of the total population. The population of school age in three school districts (Rosehill, Adams, and Benson West) is 2,790; the total number of homes represented is 1,303, an average of ¹ 2.14 children per family having children.

The largest age group in the community is from 5 to 14 years of age and comprises 20.4 per cent of the total population. The smallest age groups are between 15 and 24 and 65 and over. ²

³
Graph II
Distribution of the Age Periods



¹ Omaha Public School Census, 1934.

² Cf. Table III.

³ United States Census, 1930.

The ratio of males and females distinguishes the community as typically residential.¹ Of the total population, 48.6 per cent are males and 51.3 per cent are females.

¹

Sorokin and Zimmerman, op. cit.

Table III

Classification of the Total Population
in Benson According to Sex, Race, and Age

	Number	Per cent
Total Population	11,266	
Total Voting Population	6,779	60.2
Population Under 21	4,487	39.7
Sex:		
Males	5,486	48.6
Females	5,780	51.3
Race:		
Colored	13	1.1
Native Parentage	6,931	61.5
Foreign or Mixed Parentage	3,137	27.8
Foreign born whites	1,169	10.3
Age:		
Under 5	1,218	10.7
5 to 14	2,299	20.4
15 to 20	970	8.6
21 to 24	626	5.5
25 to 34	1,973	17.5
35 to 44	1,921	17.0
45 to 64	1,761	15.6
65 and over	495	4.3

Community Organization: Recreational

In 1926, through the efforts of the Benson Improvement Club, a gymnasium was added to the Benson Community Hall. Previous to this time community recreational activities had been held in the auditoriums of various fraternal organizations and in the churches.

From 1926 to 1930 a schedule was drawn up by the city recreational board for the meeting of the various organizations in Benson. Three representatives were sent to the meetings of the Omaha Community Center Council, and directors of community activities at the community gymnasium were selected by the Council, usually from the community itself.

Because a local organization could more efficiently schedule the activities of the various organizations, according to the viewpoint of the city commissioners, a Community Hall Board was organized, with one of the community ministers as chairman. In 1930 the Board was organized; it was composed of fifteen representatives of educational, religious, fraternal, social, and business groups in Benson.

The Benson Community Building Association was organized as a part of the city-wide federal plan of recreational centers in 1933. Under the present plan, more activities are offered, the

number participating is considerably larger, and the area from which the participants are drawn is larger than in the local arrangement. However, a statistical comparison is not possible since no record was kept of the number of participants in the local recreational project.

As in the other centers throughout the city, there are five divisions in the program of activities in the Benson Community Center. They are drama, handicraft, physical education, music, and social recreation. Those participating come from a larger area than do those of any other center: as far west as Irvinton, and as far east as the Walnut Hill district (40th and Hamilton Streets.)

Attendance at the Center comprises between one-sixth and one-seventh of the members attending at all eight centers. The comparatively larger enrollment, according to the director and others connected with the activities of the Center, is due to three factors. The Benson Center draws from a larger area than any other Center in the city; the community, having previously organized a Center, was educated to the program, this situation being aided by the distinct community "spirit"; the fact that the leadership was not only drawn from the community but from the group which had been connected with the Benson Community Hall board.

An attempt is made by the leaders of the Building Associa-

tion to interpret and to anticipate the need and interests of the community. Therefore an analysis of the attendance by groups at the Benson Center in comparison with the activity groups of all eight centers throughout the city should reveal the interests peculiar to the community of Benson.

The first week of the federal plan during 1935 there was an enrollment of 1,246 adults and 2,703 children, with an increase in enrollment after thirteen weeks of 6 per cent and 7.2 per cent respectively. The table below indicates that attendance in the drama, physical education, and social recreation groups was lower than for the eight centers, while attendance in the handicraft groups and music groups was higher. The unusually large enrollment in the music group is due to the fact that the Center carries on musical activities in a parochial school.

Table IV

Comparison of Attendance by Groups
at the Benson Community Center and
Other Centers for Thirteen Weeks

Group	Attendance at the Benson Center		Attendance at Other Centers (round numbers)	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Total	47,904		299,000	
Drama	3,855	8.0	33,000	11.0
Handicraft	9,877	20.5	57,000	19.0
Physical Education	16,419	32.9	104,000	34.7
Music	11,457	23.9	28,000	9.3
Social Recreation	6,296	13.1	77,000	25.4

Benson has had a branch library since 1923. Previous to this time a library was housed in a store building. Within a few weeks of the establishment of a branch library in the Community Hall, there were 358 regular borrowers, and approximately 1,000 books. In 1934 there were 61,669 books checked out of the library, an average of 5,139 per month. The library is at present open three days a week, and a total of 21 hours a week. Since the table below does not include renewal of library cards, the figures indicate that new registrations have increased in proportion to population increase in the community. Of course it is impossible to determine the area from which borrowers come. There has been approximately the same rate of increase in registrations throughout the eleven year period with an 8 per cent increase of juvenile registrations over adult registrations at the present time.

1
Table V

Library Card Registrations at the Benson
Branch Library, by Three Year Periods

	1923-1925	1926-1928	1929-1931	1932-1934
Total	1,708	2,587	2,636	2,669
Juvenile	1,083	1,411	1,352	1,416
Adult	625	1,176	1,284	1,253

1
Records, Benson Branch Library, 1923-1934.

Since the age group from 5 to 14 comprises 20.4 per cent of the population of the community, it is to be expected that there will be many educational and recreational activities for children. Participation in activities for children provided by the Community Association has been discussed. It is of course impossible to determine the number of children from the immediate community who attend these classes.

It has only been in the past decade that "character-building" organizations have been available to children of the community. In 1906 a Boys' Gym Club was active for a short time. In 1926, when the gymnasium was added to the Community Hall, a boys' basketball league comprising four or five church teams was organized. A Benson Boys' Band, sponsored by the Benson Commercial Club, also continued for a short time.

In 1927 the Benson Woman's Club sponsored playground activities for children of the community. In the summer of 1934 the Community Association conducted a playground at the new Benson Park. The next summer a golf club was organized for adults.

There are approximately 400 members in children's organizations which have paying memberships. Since these organizations draw members almost entirely from the community, it is possible to estimate that about one in five children between

the ages of 5 and 14 are members of organizations which have paying memberships.

There are six Girl Scout Troops in Benson, with 142 members. They have all been organized since 1928. The Brownies, an organization for younger girls, has four Packs, all of which have been organized since 1930, and a total of 93 members.

There are four Boy Scout Troops in Benson, with 138 members. The oldest one, organized in 1918, was disbanded in 1933 and its members absorbed by the other four troops. Three troops are sponsored by Benson churches; a fourth is sponsored by the Benson American Legion Post.

In 1930 there were 45 members from Benson in the boy's department of the Y. M. C. A.

1

In 1931 a study was made of the employment of leisure time in 835 families which had children enrolled in Benson High school. These families represented about 1,000 high school students, approximately all of whom came from the community of Benson.

The study showed that "the average time spent in recreation each day was about three hours, which was utilized in

1

Eva Jones, "Abstract of a Study of Family Recreation", News Letter, Febr., 1935.

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driving, listening to the radio, fishing, gardening, reading, golf, and baseball, arranged in order of frequency. . .Of these 835 families 593, or 73.2 per cent spent their vacation together on auto trips. . .The amount of money spent each month for recreation varied from 25 cents to \$4.00 per individual, the average amount being 80 cents, or \$3.00 to \$10.00 per family, depending on the size of the family".

Commercialized recreation has existed in Benson since its incorporation as a village. In 1885 Teitz Park, a beer garden, was started, and in 1888 Military Park, an amusement park of the same type was begun. The former park was located on the outskirts of the village and attracted many Omahans, although it was under village ordinance. Military Park, located in the village, was closed in 1902, after a brawl had occurred in which a man was murdered.

In 1908 a ball park was built at 52nd and Maple Streets by a fraternal organization. In 1911 a bowling alley was started and was maintained a short while.

The first moving picture theater came to Benson in 1913. Since that time four different theaters have existed in the community. In the early 1900's stock companies played to village audiences. The newly organized Commercial Club brought a chautauqua company to the village in 1908.

At no particular time during the community's existence has there been a marked increase in the number of social organizations for adults. Fraternal organizations existed, on the whole, previous to the educational or hobby type of club; men's organizations existed before women's; social clubs have been the shortest-lived.

Benson Lodge, International Order of Odd Fellows, was the first fraternal order organized in Benson. It was instituted in 1894 and in 1905 a lodge hall was completed. Affiliated organizations include: Belle Rebekah Lodge (1912); Excelsior Encampment (1927); and Ladies' Auxiliary Encampment (1927).

Benson Camp, Modern Woodman of America, the only Camp from Nebraska, was organized in 1899. In 1915 it dedicated the Community Hall. Royal Neighbors Kensington was organized in 1912.

The Omaha-Benson Woman's Club was organized and federated in 1910. This was originally an afternoon Kensington, with twelve members. Departments of the club include: music, literature and drama, American home, speech education. Among its activities in behalf of the community are: the baby clinic, a branch library, and public playground.

John J. Mercer Lodge, Order of Masons, was instituted in 1914. In 1926 the Benson Masonic Lodge was dedicated. Affil-

iated organizations are: the Delta Chapter, Royal Arch Masons; Narcissus Chapter (1917); Order of the Eastern Star; Girls' Order of Muses.

Although the Benson members of the American Legion had held separate meetings for a year, they did not obtain their charter until the present year. The Post has sponsored a Boy Scout Troop since 1927.

Danish Brotherhood and Sisterhood was organized in 1914 in Benson and at present includes people outside the community. The Assembly of Danish Women is active in Benson also.

The other local clubs in existence at the present time are: the Floral Arts Study Club, the Benson Garden Club, the Benson branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Spanish War Veterans and Auxiliary. The Merchant's Bowling League plays in competition with other bowling teams of the city.

The majority of clubs in Benson which have become defunct have been replaced by city-wide clubs of Omaha, as well as more recently organized clubs in the community.

Benson Eagles, a fraternal organization, was started in 1905. In 1908 the organization built an auditorium, which burned in 1911, when the members disbanded. The club conducted many social affairs, was active in welfare work, and sponsored a ball park. In 1909 it had a membership of 300.

It is not always possible to trace the existence of the many clubs which have sprung up in the community from their initiation to their dissolution. The following clubs include only the date or dates at which they were most active: Boys' Gym Club (1906), Dancing Club (1907), Benson Dramatic Company (1908), Piano Students' Club (1909), Benson Brass Band (1909-1928), Benson Gym Club (1910), Benson Gun Club (1910), Benson Ladies Bowling League (1927-1930), Benson Boys' band (1928). Between 1900 and 1921 five social clubs were also in existence. Notices of their activities were always in the community newspaper, and consisted in dancing and whist.

Particularly since 1928, when the local newspaper came under new management, less attention has been given to news of a purely social nature. Personals are as brief as possible. Impersonality of an urban flavor seems to have invaded the community newspaper, which was formerly replete with local gossip and detailed accounts of social events which are now recorded by the city papers and often copied by the community paper, even as some news stories of more general nature.

Community Organization: Educational

Organized effort to obtain school improvements first developed through the Improvement Club, organized in 1914. In 1924 the Benson School Association was organized to "maintain and develop better conditions in Benson's schools". Representatives from the Benson Elementary Parent-Teacher Organization, started in 1914, the Benson Woman's Club, and the Commercial Club, together with others interested in the community problem, met primarily to discuss means of retaining the high school, which was in danger of being closed. In 1926 a new high school was built, largely through the efforts of the association.

When the high school was built, the Parent-Teacher Organization comprising all the schools was dissolved, and separate organizations in each school took its place. In 1934 the high school Parent-Teacher Association was dissolved, and a Booster's Club took its place. This organization is comprised of leading merchants and professional men of the community, and its first act was to raise money for an athletic field and stadium.

St. Bernard's Parochial school was built in 1913, and has an attendance of about 200 students. It is conducted by the Sisters of Mercy.

Community Organization: Political

In 1898, the year after Benson was incorporated as a village, the first election was held. For two decades Benson had a separate political existence.

Because of Benson's closeness to the metropolis of Omaha it gradually availed itself of the cheaper and less antiquated utilities which the city offered. This seems to have been the important factor in the final annexation of Benson to Omaha in 1917.

In 1907 the first city election was held. The following year the city became a second class city of more than 1,000 and less than 25,000 population. It had a full set of city officers, mayor, council, and police magistrate. At this time prevailing sentiment was against annexation.

The struggle to obtain civic improvements began in 1902 when a Committee of Public Improvements was formed. Electric lights took the place of gas lamps during the year, with the power bought from Omaha. In 1905 the first water mains were laid, and in 1913 the village had its own water-works and sewage system. The volunteer fire department was also organized in 1902. After two years of agitation for better equipment and a fire hall in which to house the equipment, the Community Hall was built in 1915. Above the fire hall was the "Library

Hall", where official meetings were held and the city records kept. Friendly relations existed between the Omaha and Benson fire departments, the Benson department being invited to the city department's social affair annually.

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The Benson and Halcyon Heights Street Railway Company was turned over to the Omaha Street Railway Company in 1904 provided it would make ten-minute runs. However, the promise was poorly kept, and the irregular street car service has been the despair of the community until recent years when heavier traffic on Benson cars has made good service imperative.

Although a need for a playground was voiced in 1911, it was not until 1918 that one was established. A woman was put in charge of the activities for children. In 1927 the Benson Woman's Club sponsored a playground again. In 1931 the city of Omaha purchased 145 acres of land north-west of Benson for park grounds.² Benson Park, as it was named, has a lagoon and a golf course, and is extensively landscaped. The Park was first utilized for community recreational activities by federal funds in 1934.³ During the summer of 1935 a golf association was organized, and the Benson Garden Club held its first garden show on the park grounds.

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Cf. Chapter II.

2

Cf. Map, p. 60.

3.

Cf. Chapter IV.

In 1911 there was a little opposition to annexation of Benson to Omaha, especially by residents in West Benson who feared that annexation would bring high taxes. In 1913 public opinion was for annexation. A Benson Times editorial of this year stated: "Annexation is inevitable. We shall eventually be drawn into Omaha with or without our consent. Is it, then, not plain to every citizen that we must make haste¹ to obtain our municipal improvements while we may?"

Annexation of Benson took place May 25, 1917. Because of the World War activities, the annexation was carried through very quietly. The Benson Times makes no comment on the event, and a column called "News from the City" continues to run in the paper as usual!

Participation in the civic affairs of the community may be analyzed from a number of standpoints. The growth of the Improvement Club and the Commercial Club is one important aspect.² Another is participation in voting. Political activities³ in the community reveal few pathological aspects.

No record was kept of the returns in the first formal village election in 1898. In 1910 one of the Omaha newspapers carried this comment, which was copied by the Benson Times:

¹

October 24, 1913.

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Cf. Chapters V and IX.

³

Cf. Chapter X.

"Will a fat man or a lean man be elected mayor of Benson? That is the question that is racking the brains of those who are interested in the political situation of the thriving suburb. A republican slate has been made and a democratic slate has been made, and the candidates for office on both tickets are so popular that it is almost impossible for voters, who will elect a ticket, to decide who they would rather see in office." But not many voters "elected a ticket" that year, for the total vote was only 700 and the voting population was estimated at 20,000 to 30,000 in Benson Precinct. In 1918 there were only 500 registrants and 411 ballots cast.

Candidates who filed for the office of mayor usually represented three factions in the town: the fraternal organizations, the churches, and the saloons. However, other individuals filed who represented no particular group, and often won in the election.

Interest in extra-community representation was a little stronger than in local politics. There has been either a Democratic or a Republican Club in the community prior to annexation, according to the party in power in the state legislature. The party organization takes in the whole ward at present, which includes the area within the city which is as large again as the original village boundaries.

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Cf. Map of Benson, p. 60.

Previous to the 1924 presidential election a Coolidge Club was formed, the only organization of its kind which has existed in the community.

Since annexation a great deal of feeling has been aroused over the high taxes, which were of course higher than the taxes levied by the village to the extent of about 400 per cent. A dependence upon city officials for administration of local problems was seen when the city commissioners suggested a Benson Building Association board in 1930.¹

An analysis of participation in the last election was made which shows a continued disinterest in public affairs. The total voting population in the area which was the original village of Benson is 6,779.²

³
Table VI

Community Participation in the 1934 City Election		
	Number	Per cent
Total Voting Population	6,779	
Number of Voters Registered	4,654	68.0
Primary Election (August)	2,297	33.8
General Election (November)	3,743	55.6

¹
Cf. p. 20.

²
Cf. p. 19.

³
Election Records, 1934, Douglas County Court House.

The number of voters registered indicates a distinct consciousness of civic responsibility which would probably compare favorably with other sections of the city. As is to be expected, there was considerably less interest in the primary election, but participation in the general election was fairly good. The year 1934 was a "normal" year so far as the city election was concerned, there being no pronounced conflicts over issues or between candidates.

Community Organization: Religious

The community church is an important indication of the character of the community life, since its function is broader in many ways than that of almost any other type of community activity. This is particularly true of a community such as Benson, which is homogeneous as to nationality and income.

Church services in Benson were first held in the Town Hall in 1890. In 1892 the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized; in 1902 it obtained its first resident pastor.¹ In 1905 St. Bernard's Catholic Church was erected, and the following year it was moved to its present location.

Two churches were organized in 1906, the First Presbyterian Church of Benson, and the First Baptist Church, which became the Benson Baptist Church in 1922. The Presbyterian Church was built in 1908. During this year the Presbyterians put on a campaign for conversions. The Benson Presbyterian Church reported seventy conversions, as compared with between 35 and 40 conversions in the whole city of Omaha.

The First English Lutheran Church was organized in 1907. The Augustana Lutheran Church was organized in 1911, and later became the Benson Immanuel Evangelical Church. Three years after organization, a small chapel was built. In 1926 the Benson Christian Church was organized. A neighborhood Sunday school was started in

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Cf. p. 10.

1934 which is composed of children of all denominations. In the summer of 1935 it obtained a pastor and began holding church services.

St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church, built in 1932, resulted from the merging of three Methodist congregations in the north-west part of the city. Benson Immanuel Lutheran Church built a new auditorium in 1921, and the Presbyterian Church built a new edifice in 1932.

For a short time early in the 1900's the Church of the Advent held services in Benson. At the present time 16 churches or religious bodies are listed in the Benson Times "Church Notes". These are all located within the radius of circulation of the paper.

A United Brotherhood of Protestant Churches in Benson existed for a short while in 1926. Ministers of the churches hold occasional meetings and send representatives to the Benson Recreational Association Board. A boys' church basketball league of the Protestant churches in Benson was formed in 1926 and still functions. One of the churches has a dramatic society whose members are drawn from all churches in the community. These activities are the evidences of cooperation between the churches of the community. Prior to annexation, the churches of the community had an ex officio member at elections.

Seemingly working against inter-denominational organization is the spirit of brotherhood found in the individual community church, which has existed since the churches' formation, and

which has been fostered by the increasing church membership.

Growth in church membership in Benson seems to have kept pace with population growth. In 1909 the Omaha Church Federation sponsored a church census, which of course included Benson. The census here included 566 families. The church affiliations are given in order of the number of adherents: Lutherans, 139; Methodists, 102; Catholics, 86; Presbyterians, 82; Baptists, 47; Christians, 15; Congregational, 14; Episcopalians, 14; Advent, 7; Christian Scientists, 7; Swedish Mission, 7; Latter Day Saints, 3; Church of God, 1; Salvation Army, 1; United Brethren, 1; Universalist, 1. Of the 566 families, 34 indicated no church preference. Seven of the denominations represented in the survey had churches in Benson at the time the survey was made. This is indicated by the asterisk (*) after the name of the church. Adherents of these churches constituted 377 families, or 76.6 per cent of the total number of families included in the census.

Table VII (a)
Change in Denominational Membership of Six Churches, 1909-1935
Affiliation by Families Church Membership
(1909) (1935)

Denomination (Church in Benson)	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Baptist	47	10.3	271	6.2
Catholic	86	18.8	1,600	36.8
Christian (1921)			185	4.2
Lutheran (2)	139	30.4	762	17.0
Methodist Episcopal	102	22.3	1,000	23.2
Presbyterian	82	17.9	525	12.0

Although the criterion of denominational affiliation by families is not altogether comparable to the criterion of church membership, the homogeneous character of the community's religious affiliations over the period of twenty-six years makes such a comparison at least indicative of trends. According to Table VII (a), all but two of the churches have apparently decreased in membership with respect to per cent representation among the churches of the community. The Methodist Episcopal Church has increased 0.9 per cent, probably due to the merging of three congregations, two of which had churches outside the community. The Catholic Church has doubled its membership, due to the fact that its members arbitrarily are drawn from the community adjacent to the church.

This decrease in church membership in the Protestant Churches may be partially explained by the fact that many people who have moved to the community have retained their membership in the city church. This decrease would seem to bear out the fact of a low degree of mobility in the community. As estimated by six pastors of Benson churches, between 55 and 100 per cent of the church members come from the community of Benson, so it would seem that church members as a group have lived in the community for a long period of time.

In a survey of 2,000 churches in 16 cities, Ross W. Sand-

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Cf. Table VII (b), p.41.

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erson states: "The ratio between Sunday-school enrollment and church membership varies directly as the distance of the church from the heart of the city and inversely as the age of the church." He found that the city (this would seem to apply to Benson, since most of the churches were organized when Benson was an incorporated city) is compact if the Sunday-school enrollment is 75 to 89 per cent of the church enrollment. The Sunday-school enrollment for six Benson Sunday-schools is an average of 87.3 per cent of church enrollment for 1935. The churches in Benson are further from the heart of Omaha than most suburban churches, and are relatively young in comparison with many Omaha churches.

Table VII (b)

Sunday-school Enrollment and Church Membership of Six Churches				
Denomination	S.S.Enroll.	Church Mem.	% Ratio*	% Members**
Total	2,349	4,343	87.3	86.5
Baptist	350	271	20.0	99.0
Catholic	125	1,600	7.0	100.0
Christian	185	185	100 .0	100.0
Lutheran (2)	393	762	122.0	75.0
Methodist Episcopal	750	1,000	75.0	55.0
Presbyterian	546	525	100.0	90.0

*

Per cent ratio of Sunday-school enrollment to church membership.

**

Per cent of church members living in Benson (estimate by pastor).

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Chapin, F. S., "Some Results of Quantitative Analysis of the Institutional Patterns of Churches", Social Forces,

Community Organization: Ameliorative

The three ameliorative institutions located in the community are controlled by private, local and national agencies, but bear a direct relationship to the various local, civic, religious and social organizations.

Various fraternal organizations in the community annually contribute to the St. James Orphanage. The Benson Woman's Club, the Commercial Club, and Benson Presbyterian Church, as well as other organizations outside the community contribute to Minerva Cottage, which is sponsored by the National Christian Welfare Union. The Hattie B. Monroe Home for Convalescent Children receives aid from various community organizations also.

The Benson Woman's Club has maintained a baby clinic in cooperation with the Visiting Nurses Association of Omaha since 1926. The number of babies registered has grown from 22 to 1,165 this year. Clinics are held once a week.

A Benson branch of the Community Chest functions in Benson during the drive for contributions. A branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union is also organized.

Community Organization: Economic

The development of a large retail district in Benson has been the result of the large population influx during the past two decades. The character of the population has determined the types of retail service which should be offered. The new settlers in the community have been throughout the period almost exclusively a moderate income group.

The "Main Street" type of trading center was a nucleus for the suburban sub-center. In 1905, 25 retail centers and individual persons offering personal services were located in Benson. At present there are 110. Greater specialization both in the type of merchandise offered and in personal services available has been the trend.

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According to the classification of R. D. McKenzie, the community under investigation is a class A sub-center, since all the essential retail needs are supplied. Omaha has two other class A sub-centers in the extreme north and extreme south parts of the city.

Certain forces set the retail pattern of an area with a retail sub-center, notably population, income, and transportation. A class A sub-center must have at least 15,000 people

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The Metropolitan Community, pp. 264-266.

per square mile. Although Benson has only 7,363.3 people per square mile, the comparatively large size of the consumer's area puts the figure higher, since the population is denser in that part of the city outside Benson and nearer the heart of the city which is in the circulation area of the Benson Times. Chapter III has dealt with the analysis of population growth in the community. The building boom which began after the World War encouraged the opening of real estate developments. Since 1923 three large plots of land have been opened to sub-division, and an attempt was made to develop a retail center close to the last addition opened, in 1926; however, this plan of building a group of retail stores failed.

Income is another factor which sets the retail pattern of the area. The community can be classified as a "moderate income area" having a "fair share of both buying habit and buying power."¹ This type of area makes a particular appeal to the chain-operated store, of which there are 16 in Benson. Of the 19 automotive centers (garages, filling stations, automobile accessory shops), 11 are chain-owned; of the 22 food centers (bakeries, meat markets, grocery stores), 5 are chain owned. Of all the retail centers, 14.5 per cent are chain-owned. Owners of chain-stores do not belong to the Benson Commercial club as a rule, and seldom advertise in the local newspaper.

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Ibid.

The retail center draws not only from the city, but from the surrounding country towns. Two grain elevators have been erected in Benson since 1918. This makes it possible for farmers to transact their business in the community which they would otherwise have to carry on in the central retail area. Eight retail centers in Benson directly serve the farmer, which is an indication that the center directly serves the farm trade. The Benson Commercial Club recognized the need to cater to this trade when they first put on the Farm and Trade Exhibits in 1921 and the Corn Show in 1927.

Transportation is a third factor important in determining the retail pattern. Until 1929 when a bus service was introduced which ran north on 52nd street, there was only one transit line connecting Benson with the metropolitan shopping district. Thus the comparative inaccessibility of the central retail area made a sub-center almost imperative. Although there has been a street car line from the suburb to the central district since 1891, the street cars have only been routed directly through the shopping district in the past few years, which has been a great inconvenience to the community, and has necessitated transferring from one line to another. Accessibility to the central retail area by auto has been bettered by the opening of two boulevards and the widening of Dodge Street.

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Table VIII
Retail Centers in Benson
1905, 1913, 1935

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Classification of Center	1905	1913	1935 Number	Per cent
Automotive	3		19	17.2
Apparel	1		8	7.2
Drug stores	2		5	4.5
Restaurant and eating			6	5.4
Entertainment		1	1	0.9
Food	2		25	22.7
Furniture and household	1		7	6.3
Personal service *	4	2	29	26.3
Farm supplies	5	2	8	7.2
General merchandise (also "general stores"): 3	4	16	2	1.8
				9.5
Total	25	21	110	

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Classification by R. D. McKenzie.
*
Classification by investigator

The high peak depression years of 1900 and 1929 have been successfully weathered by the business interests of the community. There has seldom been a vacant store building in Benson. At the turn of the century there was a gradual increase in the number of new businesses set up in the community. In 1901 there were four new businesses; in 1903, 3; in 1904, 5; in 1905, 7; in 1906, 7; in 1907, 9. In 1906 there were 47 new building permits to build dwellings issued; in 1925, 51; in 1930, 3. No permits for commercial buildings were issued during this period.

Development of the various types of retail centers and personal services from 1905 to the present time indicates that the number of general stores increased from 3 in 1905 to 16 in 1913, and gradually dwindled to 7 at the present time. More specialized types of retail centers have taken their place, such as drug, apparel, and furniture stores.

The banks of the community have served both the business man and the depositor adequately, due to their large area of business and to cooperation of the local merchants. Two months after the Bank of Benson had incorporated (1904) it had \$23,429 in cash on hand. In 1906 this had increased to \$137,680.17. The Farmers' and Merchants' Bank was incorporated in 1907, and came under local management in 1928.

The Commercial Club has been an important factor in unifying the business interests of the community, as well as in contributing to the civic welfare and unity.

The club was first organized in 1908. That year it brought a chautauqua to Benson and also the Douglas County Veteran's Reunion. At this time there were 48 members.

There was little need for this organization at the time. In 1910 the Benson Times comments that "once upon a time there was a Commercial Club". The following year the Benson Business Men's Association was organized.

In 1925 the Commercial Club was reorganized, whose purpose was to "promote the business and social welfare of Benson and vicinity". At this time there were 96 members. At the present time there are 59 members, 33 of whom are merchants; 9, dentists and physicians; 7, garage and filling station owners or operators; 10, miscellaneous.

The club has sponsored various community projects: paving throughout the community; obtaining the community gymnasium; the new high school and the Benson Park; a boys' band; initiation and sponsorship of various exhibits and of Benson Day.

Benson Day was first observed in 1928. The first of the celebration was a "booster parade", composed of cars gayly decorated, and visiting South Omaha and six nearby towns. Until recent years a baby parade and a free barbecue was held. The annual picnic and program of games and athletic events is held at Krug Park. It is estimated that between fifteen and twenty

thousand people attend the picnic, about five thousand coming from outside Benson.

The "Know Benson Better Week" was started in 1916 and was observed annually until about 1925. During this week large advertisements were run in the local newspaper, merchants decorated their windows and offered prizes, and a street dance climaxed the week's activities, which attracted many visitors from outside the community.

The Benson Trade Exhibit was held from 1921 to 1931. Thirty-two firms and individuals had booths at the exhibit one year. The exhibit was held at the Community Hall.

Since 1928 the club has held weekly noon-day luncheons, at which there are often guest speakers. In 1926 the club held its first annual dinner-dance. It has met at different times with the Omaha city council, both as guest and host.

The Benson Times has always been a significant factor in the life of the community. In 1903 it started as a four column, eight page paper. The following year it became a five column, eight page paper. In 1908 the paper started a history of Benson called "From Buffalo Pasture to City", which included a history of the churches, schools, and businesses of the community, the latter history being more in the nature of an advertisement. It was the first of many projects carried on by the Times to stimulate civic consciousness. In 1920, for example, there was a column called "What Benson Needs", with contributions from subscribers.

In 1913 the editorship was given to an Omaha man, who, since he did not participate in community affairs, did not write editorials on community problems, but bought syndicated editorials. In 1917 the paper was printed in Benson, and it was felt that the paper would again be more truly a Benson product.

In 1928 the paper was sold to the owner of the north Omaha newspaper, and the Benson paper was again printed outside the community to save expenses. At the same time the circulation area was doubled, and the circulation was increased from 1,100 to 6,500. Approximately 1,000 subscribers are included on the rural route, which has always been non-subscription.

Pathological Aspects

Benson reveals no outstanding pathological conditions. Its problems are revealed in psycho-social terms relating to prejudices and group loyalties.

Although Ward 11, which includes Benson, comprises almost again as much territory as Benson, it is possible to measure the mobility of the community in its broader aspects. For three years tabulated, 1927, 1928, and 1929, the mobility was 6.2 per cent, or 2,760 residence changes. The average intra-mobility of Omaha for the three year period was 20.9¹ per cent.

For the period 1921 to 1926 ten homes in Benson were recipients of mothers pensions under the Nebraska law. However in 1933 eleven families were receiving mothers pensions. In 1930 there were twelve Family Welfare Association cases² administered.

In 1933 there were 46 births in Benson. Ten deaths occurred under one year of age during the year. There were approximately 4 births per 1,000. In Omaha in 1930 there were¹ 22.8 births per 1,000.

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Sullenger, op. cit., p. 2, p.126.

2

Maps, care of Bureau of Social Research, Municipal University of Omaha.

In 1930 there were sixty juvenile delinquents in the area.

Control of liquor traffic has been a serious problem for the community. Between 1897 and 1917 licenses were issued; for only three years, until the Eighteenth Amendment was passed, did Omaha have control of issuance of licenses and control of traffic. As in many trading centers in the Middle West during this frontier period, saloons were felt to be a necessary adjunct to the community's business.

There seemed to be a difference of opinion as to the degree of control over the management of saloons. However, the church interests in Benson seemed to influence the policies of the police magistrate to a large extent.

In 1908 a dissention arose as to whether or not to reissue a license to Krug Park, as it was believed by some to exert an "immoral influence". Four of the townspeople--called in derision the "Big Four" by some of the townspeople--therefore filed a remonstrance with the City Council requesting revocation of the license, claiming that it was a "disgrace to the community". Business interests desired the re-issuance of the license.

The Times, as a mouthpiece of the business men, estimated the yearly loss of \$5,525, which, it said, did not include the \$1,000 license fee and the incomes to various utilities. Some people in Benson thought that Omaha people coming to Krug Park as "Benson's Park" and that the more exclusive Country

Club , opposite Krug Park grounds, as Omaha's own club.

After bitter controversy, the park was closed and reopened after two years.

There seems to have been no antagonism of members of the community toward the Country Club because of its exclusive nature. In 1905 the Benson Times carried the following comment:¹ "This paper recognizes the importance of Omaha's Country Club as a great factor in the up-building of Benson. . . The Club members' attention is necessarily directed to the superior advantages that are offered in Benson, in the vicinity of the club grounds, for a country home, and a large investment has already been made by several members in that direction." In spite of the attempt to develop an addition in Benson having 60 foot lots and no intersections after the plan which St. Louis was inaugurating, the wealthier people did not settle in Benson. Not until after 1926 when the Country Club addition was opened, were large homes built in the general district near Benson.

"Many sociologists consider home ownership a significant index of social stability. A high degree of home own-

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May 6, 1905.

ership is usually accompanied by those factors of behavior¹ which are considered socially the most approved".

The United States Census for 1930 reports that 51.2 per cent of the homes throughout the country were owned by families living in them. Of the 53,665 homes of known tenure in Omaha, 42.1 per cent of the homes were owned.²

In the 1934 Omaha city directory there were 2,108 homes³ in Benson, of which 51.4 per cent were owned. The "fringe"⁴ of population beyond the city limits included 214 homes; of these 60 per cent were owned.

Since it may be assumed that one family dwellings make for a relatively high stability, it may be assumed that Benson shows relative stability in this respect, since there is only one apartment house in Benson, which was built in 1923. In the early 1900's there were two different hotels maintained, as well as a number of boarding houses.

The attitude of the Omaha papers toward the community of Benson undoubtedly helps to mould the readers' attitude toward its people and their peculiarities. In 1933 a "feature story"

¹ Kimball Young, The Madison Community, p. 99.

² Fifteenth United States Census, Vol. IV.

³ Territory from 52nd to 72nd Streets; Sprague to Blondo Streets.

⁴ Territory from 72nd to 84th Streets; Sprague to Blondo Streets.

appeared in one of the Omaha newspapers about which some Benson people were highly indignant, declaring it "made fun of them". It was one of a series of impressionistic stories about the suburbs of Omaha and is here reproduced for what it is worth.

. . . "What part of Omaha is Omaha and is not Omaha? The busy hamlet of Benson, of course.

"Trucks, antique Fords, cars with chicken crates on the running board, a one-time coupe piles high with milk cans, and many shining sedans.

"Along the sidewalk, people gather in groups of three or four. Men with men, never men and women together. Most of the men wear overalls and sheepskin coats. Some of them, canvas puttees. Their hands are huge.

"But there are city folks, too--men in blue shirts, wearing spectacles. They do not gather in groups. . .

During the 1932 city election campaign the other city paper carried a series of cartoon in which various people prominent in the various suburbs of Omaha were portrayed in humorous and characteristic roles. The cartoon of Benson carried no hint of ridicule.

Summary

Since the concept the community is usually considered as applying to a larger area which comprises the small, loosely knit units known as neighborhoods, the former term was fairly consistently used in referring to Benson. However, in order to distinguish between Benson's political status before and after annexation to Omaha in 1917, the term suburb was also used.

The community of Benson has distinct "spacial proximity to a focus of attention", that focus being its well organized recreational, religious, and economic, and formerly, its political activities. Prior to the suburban trend, it was a thriving village, or sociologically, a "natural gateway to urban expansion." Since Benson remains a distinct geographical projection beyond the corporate limits of the city, it is possible to determine a basis for physical differentiation from the adjacent city very easily. Thus the map referred to throughout the study clearly indicates certain political and economic boundaries.

Since growth in size is a vital factor in the history of any social grouping which depends for its existence upon its ability to adapt itself to changing social conditions, i. e., in the present case, to expand and grow, this phase received

considerable attention. For example, it would have been very possible for the old residents of the community to have felt that the people who moved to Benson, especially after the World War, in such numbers, lacked community spirit. But because the new group and the older residents were fairly homogeneous, and mostly because the group brought more business to the community, absorption was accomplished very easily.

In spite of a population increase, the community has remained relatively isolated on the north, south, and west, as seen by the map. "Intimacy of association" has been apparent since the community's beginning, and this "community of interests" has been sustained at least partially because there has not been an encroachment of adjacent communities.

However a process which for want of a better term may be called "loss of identity", has existed in the community. This very gradual process must be explained not from a political standpoint, although annexation of Benson to Omaha is the apparent turning-point. Whether or not Benson's economic structure has partially or in whole replaced the political structure in helping to maintain community identity must be determined at a future time. According to Elliott and Merrill, the process of loss of identity is quantitative rather than qualitative, since, when fewer matters exist which directly concern the welfare of the group, community deterioration occurs. The question

immediately asked is--what matters are the direct concern of the group?

An analysis of the historical growth seems to indicate that the obtainment of public improvements had been the direct concern of the community prior to annexation and to some degree afterwards. Thus first the political structure and then the economic structure and the educational organization, have been the vehicles by which the community has obtained its improvements and maintained its identity and solidarity.

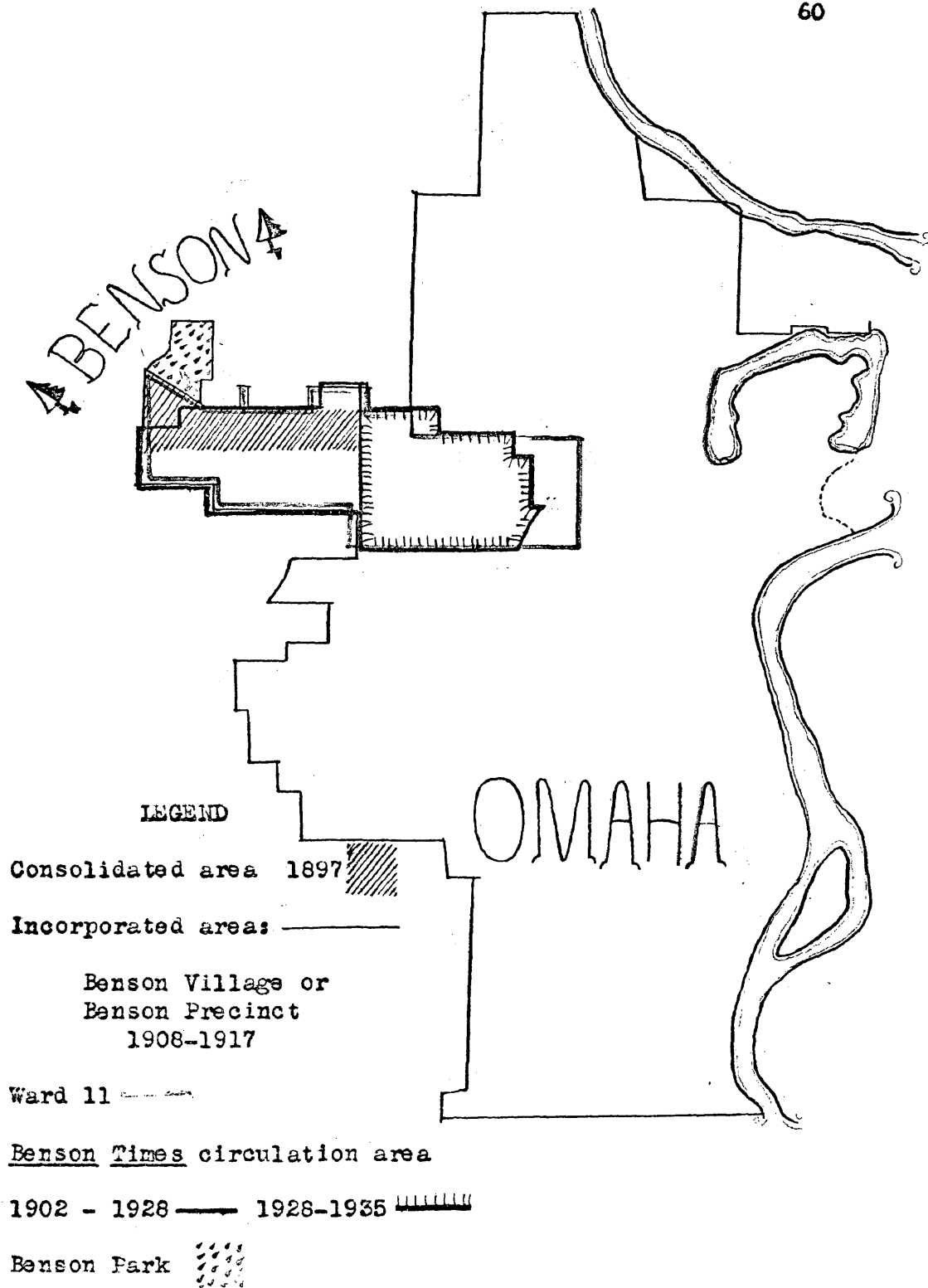
The loss of identity has been a short-lived process, and it is not possible to determine whether it will continue. Only three, and possibly four, generations have lived in the community. The community may be termed a "young" community, having only 36.9 per cent of its population over 35 years of age. However, unless there is an influx of younger people during the next two decades--and it must be remembered that the next decade will find a larger number of "elderly" people in the United States than ever before--the community cannot maintain its classification as a young community. The age group between 15 and 24 comprises only about 14 per cent of the community's population, as shown by the Table. It is also a question whether this small group is better fitted to maintain the distinct community spirit which now exists than a group which may or may not move in later. Since the trend seems to be for cities not

to annex more territory but to build up vacant lots within the city limits and to improve old residences, any influx as large as the one after the War cannot be anticipated.

Of what significance is it to Benson that the age group under fifteen comprises almost one-third of the population of the community? It would seem to indicate the need for more elementary schools, since four schools maintained at present, overcrowded as they are, provide for the age group comprising about one-fifth of the total population of the community. Ten per cent of the population is under five years of age, indicating a continued need for school building enlargement.

More character-building organizations for children are also indicated, although the community does not have the problem of juvenile delinquency, since it is a well known fact that the family is giving less and less time to formulation of leisure time activities. Continuation of the Community Center project is advisable, and should be broadened, particularly in its educational offerings for adults of the community.

If the suburban trend continues, Benson will remain distinct from the rest of the city. Since it is a residential suburb comprising home owners, and since it has a well organized retail trade which will maintain community identity if only for commercial reasons, which incidentally cannot very easily be separated from that ingredient called community spirit, Benson will for a long time to come have a commonality of purpose and spirit which is vital to the life of all groups.



Trends Observable in Benson

(Below^a is given a list of social trends observable in the suburb) of Benson during the past half century.

(According to the Winston Simplified Dictionary, 1930 edition, a trend is defined as an "inclination in a certain direction" or a "general tendency". The trends suggested below do not necessarily refer to conditions peculiar to the^a community; they are also reflections of recent trends found throughout similar suburbs as well as throughout metropolitan communities in general. They are not offered as a prediction of social conditions which will result in the^a community of Benson in the future; rather, they are given in an attempt to classify, condense, and summarize the data presented in the body of the^a study.

Population Trends:

1. An influx of population is pronounced between 1900 and 1930, accelerated between 1918 and 1928 and gradually tapering off.
2. Little change in the composition of the population throughout the period with regard to age distribution, sex distribution, or nationality.

Trends in Recreation:

1. Gradual assumption of recreational association activities by city and federal agencies with consequent broadening of activities, enlarged enrollment and area from which participants are drawn, improvement of leadership and facilities, and better cooperation among institutions of the community which promote recreational activities.
2. Unabated interest in reading as a leisure time activity as indicated by library card registrations of adults and children since 1923.

3. Better organized character-building activities for youth as indicated by the organization of church athletic leagues, playground activities, and organizations such as the Boy Scouts.

4. Family recreation tends to draw the family close together as indicated by the types of activity engaged in, viz., motor-ing, fishing, and vacationing together.

5. Educational or hobby type of club for adults supplements the older fraternal type of activity; purely social clubs of informal character short-lived in the community; less publicity given events of a social nature in the community newspaper, indicating a growing impersonality in the community.

Trends in Education:

More and more interest in educational affairs, more organized effort to obtain school improvements even after annexation of the community and consequent transference of this function to city officers.

Trends in Politics:

1. Intense community interest in the obtainance of civic improvements prior to annexation; gradual assumption of all problems relating specifically to the community welfare by city officers, with a little interest still shown in the problems by the Commercial Club and parent-teacher associations.

2. Fairly close political loyalties prior to annexation; little political activity in the community since annexation.

3. Fairly well sustained participation in recent elections as compared with village elections.

Trends in Religion:

1. Sporadic attempts at inter-denominational organization.

2. Sustained interest in church activities, as indicated by number and type of activities held in churches, and amount of publicity given them.)

3. Although ministers estimate from 55 to 100 per cent of the members of their churches are drawn from the community of Benson, the 4,343 memberships in seven Benson churches seem to indicate that numbers of the 11,000 or more population in the community retained their memberships in city churches after moving to the community. Approximately two-thirds of the families in Benson belonged to community churches; according to

a 1909 census; approximately one-fourth of the families now belong to community churches.

4. (Little change in denominational membership of churches, none of the Protestant churches showing an increase in membership except by consolidation, and the increase in membership in the Catholic church due to the type of organization.)

5. Sunday-school enrollment in seven Benson Sunday-schools is an average of 87.3 per cent of church enrollment at present.

(Economic Trends:

1. Greater specialization both in type of merchandise offered and in personal services available.

2. A moderate income group of home owners has lived in the community throughout the period.

3. Chain stores have invaded the retail center since the War.

4. More retail centers cater to rural needs.

5. Continuously good business in the retail area as evidenced by few vacant store buildings, invasion of chain stores, normal banking conditions, and an active Commercial Club. However, there has been a decrease in building activity, both of stores and homes, since the depression.)

6. Less of the "ballyhoo" type of advertising of the community business interests during the past decade; fewer enterprises calculated to advertise the community, as indicated by the disappearance of the "Know Benson Better Week", the Benson Trade Exhibit, the Farm and Trade Exhibit, and the Corn Show.

7. Less participation of community newspaper in commercial activities of the community.)

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