

A one-store town struggles to keep sense of community

Some of Washington state's smallest towns are quickly becoming even smaller. Endicott is among five towns in Whitman County that are losing people the fastest.

By [Jack Broom](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

March 19, 2011

ENDICOTT, Whitman County — Take the two-minute drive from one end of this wheat-country town to the other with Mayor Verne Strader, and he'll show you where Endicott once had a drugstore, hotel, tavern, jail, hardware store — even a small clinic.

"We don't have a big draw now, not like a Walmart or anything," said Strader. "But we still have a caring community where people rely on one another."

Tucked along a railroad line between rolling hills of green and tan, Endicott has less than half the population it did nearly a century ago.



"We don't have a big draw now, not like a Walmart or anything; but we still have a caring community where people rely on one another," says Endicott Mayor Verne Strader, whose town has less than half the population it did nearly a century ago.

But residents say the town's story is not just about what it has lost, but what it has managed to retain; a list includes its school, post office, three churches, a county library branch open nine hours a week and a combination grocery-deli that holds two community buffet dinners a month.

Although the 2010 Census showed Washington state's population rose 14 percent in the past decade, the number of residents dropped in 71 of the state's 281 incorporated cities and towns. More than half of the shrinking cities are east of the Cascades, and more than three-quarters were small to begin with, with populations less than 5,000.

Their decline reflects a long-standing shift away from farmland and toward more densely populated urban and suburban areas.

"I think it may be just a matter of time until a lot of these small towns could just close down," said Dan Helt, 67, a wheat farmer and former teacher.

He remembers coming into town with his dad in the 1950s. "The restaurant was going. The barbershop was going. Other stores were going, too. The place was alive."



For residents of Endicott, the town's story is partly about what it has lost, but also about what it has retained, which includes a school, its post office (above), a bank, a hair salon, three churches, a county library branch, a wholesale grain operation and a combination grocery-deli.

Still, he has no desire to leave. "It's quiet. It's peaceful. And when things get rough, people pitch in and help one another out."

Settled largely by German immigrants and incorporated in 1905, Endicott hit its peak population of 634 in the 1920s, and in the past decade fell from 355 residents to 289.

In a town where the size of the high-school graduating class once dropped to a single student, dealing with a declining population has triggered creative solutions, such as partnering with a nearby school district to offer combined middle and high schools, while preserving separate elementary schools to keep the youngest students close to home.

Endicott's population plight is the rule, not the exception, in Whitman County, where 13 of the county's 16 incorporated cities lost residents in the past decade. Meanwhile, the overall county population went up, due largely to a 20 percent increase in Pullman, home of Washington State University.

A half-dozen towering gray grain bins in the middle of town show Endicott still hosts a crop wholesaler, Whitgro. It also has a new well and reservoir, financed with federal help. And it has what some residents describe as a relaxed pace of life.

"One nice thing about the town is, you don't need to worry about getting run over by a car crossing the street," smiled Phillip Simon, 79, as he finished a deli sandwich at Endicott Food Center and gestured toward the empty street outside.

Losing best, brightest

Not only does Endicott have no traffic congestion, it has nary a traffic light.

There's not even a tavern — a staple of small-town America. Customers can buy beer at Endicott Food Center, but anyone wanting a frosty one served across a counter needs to go about 15 miles north to St. John, or to LaCrosse, about the same distance southwest.

Several factors have contributed to a population decline that began generations ago.

As far back as the 1920s, increased auto ownership made it easier for folks to travel the 16 miles to shop at larger stores in Colfax or 35 miles to Pullman, eroding the market for Endicott merchants.

Modern farm equipment vastly increased the acreage a single farmer could cultivate, decreasing the number of individual farms — and farm jobs. And more recently, some believe federal subsidies for farmers to keep land out of production for wildlife habitat and erosion control have contributed to a loss of jobs.

As Endicott's population wanes, it also ages: residents younger than 18 accounted for 36 percent of the population in 2000, but 19 percent last year.

The town's situation has a familiar ring to University of Nevada history professor Richard Davies, author of the 1998 book "Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-town America."

Davies, who grew up in a small Ohio town, notes that many U.S. presidents are from small towns, which he believes instill a sense of responsibility, accountability and community not duplicated in suburban neighborhoods.

What's regrettable, Davies said, is not just how many people leave, but which ones.

"Invariably, towns end up losing some of their best and their brightest," he said, adding that promising young people often need to look to larger cities for successful careers.

Aileen Johnson, 86, concurs. She grew up on a farm outside Endicott and has lived in town since the late 1940s. "Young people graduate from high school or college, and whatever it is they want to do, they don't stay here."

Case in point: Endicott High School (alma mater of former Gov. Mike Lowry) had six students in its final graduating class, 1987, and not a single one still lives in town.

The previous year, the high school had one graduate, Dan Starrett, whose photo hangs in the hall as the Class of 1986.

A schooling compromise

The fact Endicott still has a school at all stems from an arrangement crafted in the late 1980s that made it a "cooperative school district" with St. John, which also is losing population.

Under this system, each town technically has its own school district, and students can attend elementary schools where they live. Once they reach middle school, they all go to Endicott, where they're the Endicott-St. John Wildcats. Then in high school, they go to St. John, becoming the St. John-Endicott Eagles.

"A school is at the center of a town's identity, part of its lifeblood" said Rick Winters, superintendent of both districts, who arrived after the system was put in place.

One of the more unusual aspects of the school pairing sounds like the start of an algebra problem: At 7:50 a.m. each school day, one bus leaves Endicott with high school students bound for St. John, while another bus leaves St. John with middle-schoolers headed for Endicott.

They meet at a gravel pit halfway between the two towns, where the two buses swap passengers, then head back to where they started. At the end of the day, the process is repeated.

Even with the joint operation, the area's shrinking population creates difficulties for the schools. Winters said the combined enrollment for Endicott and St. John, now about 260, is down some 40 students from five years ago, a drop that translated into the loss of three faculty and staff positions.

Another focus of Endicott activity is the library, housed in a 1906 brick building that at various times had been a saloon, a jail and city hall.

Endicott provides the building and the Whitman County Rural Library District provides the resources and the time of librarian Caroline Morasch, who keeps the library open 1 to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Fridays.



Endicott High School had six students, right, in its final graduating class, 1987. The previous year, the school had one graduate, Dan Starrett, whose photo, left, hangs in the hall as the Class of 1986.

Some library patrons come for the high-speed Internet access, some to borrow books or DVDs, and some for story sessions for kids, arts-and-craft classes for adults or how-to sessions on topics such as writing a résumé and looking for work.

Barbara Strader, wife of the mayor, is heading a committee seeking to raise \$120,000 — through dinners, raffles and other activities — to fix up the old building inside and out.

A half-block away is Endicott Food Center, another gathering place for locals. Jenny Meyer, 55, has operated the store for 22 years and drives a school bus three hours a day "because it's a guaranteed paycheck."

She feels the effects of Endicott's slipping population at the cash register.

"Especially in the last few years, it's been a real challenge," she said. "I just keep plugging away and hope that tomorrow I make enough to pay yesterday's bills. That's the way it is in a small town."

Seattle Times reporter Justin Mayo contributed to this report. Jack Broom: 206-464-2222 or jbroom@seattletimes.com.

Endicott's Population Over the Years

<i>Census</i>	<i>Town Population</i>
1910	474
1920	634
1930	512
1940	495
1950	397
1960	369
1970	333
1980	290
1990	320
2000	355
2010	289

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Washington State Office of Financial Management



Headstones at the cemetery in Endicott date back to the 1800s. The town, settled largely by German immigrants, was incorporated in 1905.