

One of the unhappy results of Iowa's changing economy is the fate of the small town. Here is one

Case of the Vanishing Village

by ELEANOR RAGSDALE & CURT HARNACK

Grinnell College prof.

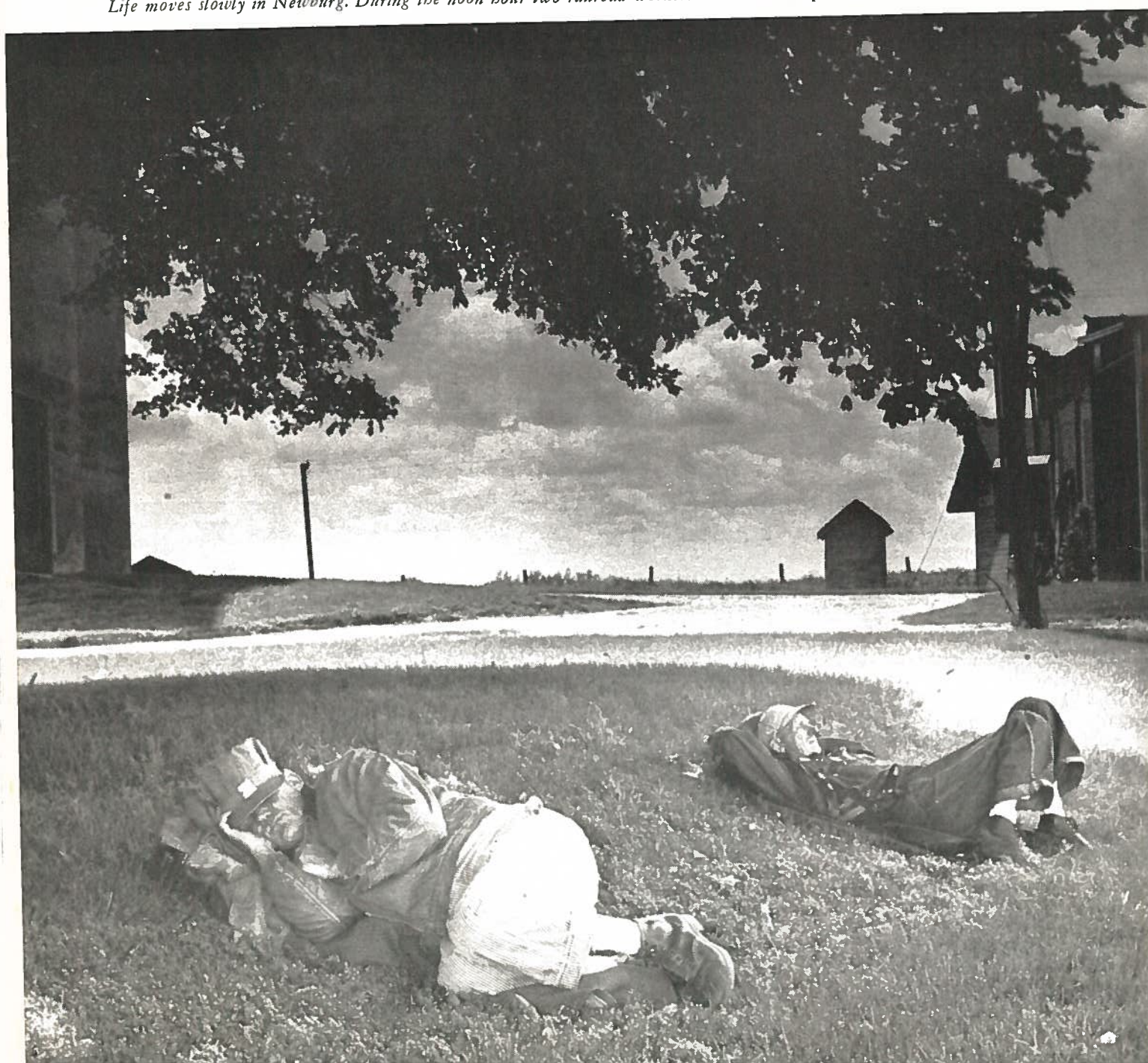
class of '56?

hunted on our land

friend of Maynard

Photos by JOAN LIFFRING

Life moves slowly in Newburg. During the noon hour two railroad workers take a short nap in the shade of the town's large trees.





From her apartment balcony, above the store operated by her husband and herself, Mrs. Jonas Henrikson shakes out a rug.



The Henricksens' Newburg Mercantile and Coffee Barn is the town's hub. They sell a wide variety of goods and serve meals, as to these telephone linemen.



From the site of the original Newburg Congregational Church, a mile from town, the elevator looms as the dominant structure.

In her garden, Mrs. Hester Reel, 77, hoes cabbages. She has lived in the Newburg area all her life. "I certainly enjoy having my little home here," she says.





While a disrupting family influence, television is a great boon to the town's older residents, such as Mrs. Minnie D. Adams.

In another era, a horse and sleigh navigate the main street.



Congregational minister, Mrs. George M. Turner, chats with kids.



THE NEWBURG STORY

WE TOLD Mrs. Jonas Hendrickson of the Newburg general store that we had come to look over the town. "You'd better take a good look," she replied, "because ten years from now there won't be much here. I know I won't be here. Oh, I imagine I'll be some place, but not here in this store doing what I'm doing." Trade is gradually falling off, although the Hendrickson store is the only one for miles around. "People can get in their cars and go so easy—even for a loaf of bread."

The Hendricksons took over the Newburg Mercantile Store three years ago when Cliff Davis left town. Davis had put up a big fight to keep the fourth class post office in Newburg (population 100), but nothing came of his efforts.

When the post office closed, some of Newburg's identity went with it. Said Davis at the time: "It's like cutting off a little piece of coat—perhaps it isn't very important, but what's left isn't a complete coat anymore. And if you keep cutting off a piece here and a piece there, pretty soon you haven't got anything left."

And that is what is worrying Newburg right now. "The small town is the backbone of the world," said Mrs. Wendell Paul, prominent community leader. "Most people have come to think it's inevitable that the school will have to go before long, but I don't. I'm still fighting. If the school goes and there're no more basketball games and other functions for everybody to go to, you don't have a town anymore."

Al Pinder of the Grinnell *Herald-Register* looks upon Newburg as one of the best rural communities he has ever known. "You couldn't say they're typical—they're absolutely first rate." Statistics seem to back up that impression, for Newburg has provided state leadership in Congregational Church work, women's clubs, and the Iowa Legislature. For the years 1921-1925, fifty per cent of the high school graduating class went to college. Out of the thirteen graduates, two became college professors, six were teachers, two were executives—at John Deere and Westinghouse.

Wherever we went interviewing, New-

burg people seemed proud of their community. One woman, in town from the hay fields and appropriately dressed, refused to be photographed, saying, "There's the wrong way and the right way of showing Newburg. How're you going to do it?"

Behind the counter, Mrs. Hendrickson said laconically, "They're doing it as is."

THE GROWTH YEARS

The Newburg settlement is less than one hundred years old. Although all the land in Hickory Grove township was purchased between 1854 and 1856, it was not settled generally until about the time of the Civil War. The Fort Des Moines Land Office listed the acreage price of the fertile northeast corner of Jasper county at \$1.25. The first families began to arrive: the Burroughs, Palmers, Newcomers, McCullochs, Browns, and Breedens, and their descendants are still plentiful in Newburg.

In the 1870's the Central railroad (now the Minneapolis and St. Louis) built a line from Oskaloosa to Marshalltown, and the first station point north of Grinnell was Newburg. Land for the town was sold by Anson Palmer.

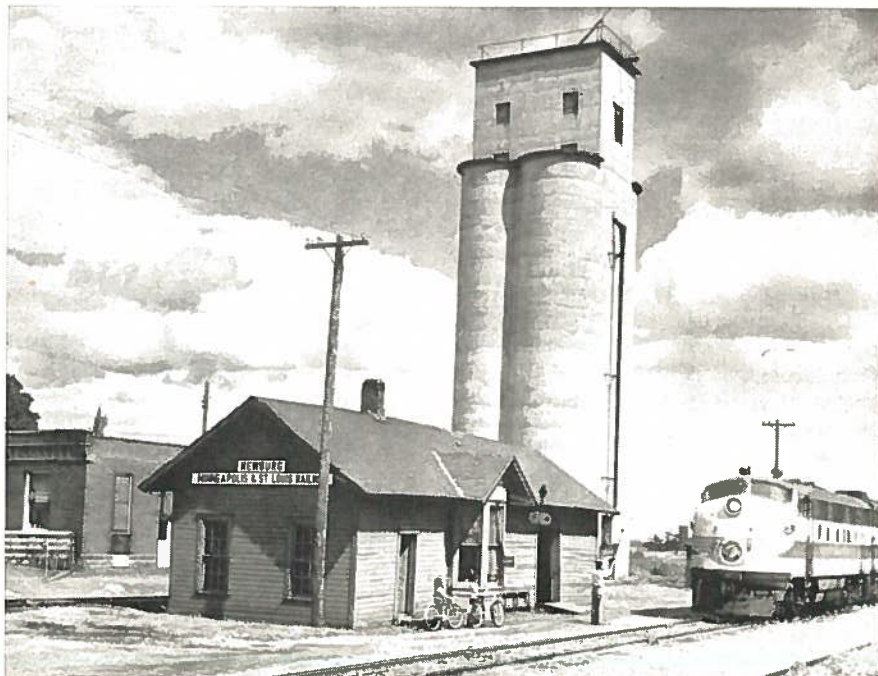
The early days are still so recent that verbal tales of that period can be heard from old residents. Charlie Bell, 83, who

lives in a Grinnell rest home, said: "I remember the Indians. Why, I was pretty near raised with them. They used to come and camp on the prairie where Dale Campbell lives now. One bunch would come and stay a few days and then as soon as they would leave another bunch would come. No, we weren't scared of them. I'd go right into their tents! Some of them could talk pretty good. They'd come and beg for food, but I don't think they was bad about stealin'. No, we never made friends with any certain kid. They was just all Indians to us."

The "Newburg group," a term used frequently to describe the well-knit community, apparently from the earliest days had a strong sense of group loyalty. Eighty-five-year-old Mrs. Minnie Adams speaks of the active social life, the spelling bees, taffy pulls, the lyceum programs, and debates. Mrs. Hendrickson, in referring to "Aunt Minnie," said: "She hasn't worn her life out on the end of a dust rag. She reads and keeps up on things."

A high point of the community social life, Mrs. Adams recalls, was the July 4th dance in 1918 on the Adams farm west of Newburg. The lumber company loaned them boards free of charge for a dance floor. An outdoor pavilion was set up and decorated, the ice cream was ready. "Then, you know Iowa—one of those downpours started around five o'clock, and it didn't let up until nine. Of course, nobody came. But the next day was sunny and folks began arriving early in the evening. There were about 200 people altogether, and we had so much fun—square dancing, polkas, and waltzes—that we decided to have a dance every week. We kept it up right into the fall, until it was so cold we had

Station Master Hovey Sumner greets a train passing the depot in little Newburg.





The road to Grinnell runs past the grade and high school of the Jasper County town.

to have a bonfire to keep the fiddlers warm." The money taken in during this season amounted to \$425, which was given to the Red Cross. "Of course, the Red Cross wouldn't approve of raising money this way, but they were happy to take it."

Newburg has been built and burned through the years. Three historic fires started by sparks from the trains catching on dry shingle roofs, and one began in a dry goods store when a curtain blew into a lamp. Perhaps the most famous was the burning of the big Knights of Pythias lodge in 1918. "That was the date, all right," said Mrs. Hendrickson. "I remember because it was the year before consolidation in 1919, and all the nearby one-room schools were closed to let the kids come in to Newburg to watch the fire. It burned all day."

By 1925 Newburg had an estimated population of 150 and was the chief social and service center for surrounding Hickory Grove township. Its radius of influence stretched approximately three to four miles in all directions.

Shortly before the Depression the Elevator was handling 300,000 bushels of grain a year and one year did a \$417,000 gross business; it claimed to serve a territory extending six miles into Poweshiek county.

The Elevator is still Newburg's biggest business, but today sixty per cent of its operation involves handling only: weighing in grain for storage in government bins; weighing it out for shipment. Two 10,000 bushel compartments are rented to the government at the present

time. With less variety in the business (selling of coal is off seventy-five per cent from thirty years ago) the present manager makes less private profit, and he runs into stiff competition from Gilman and Grinnell elevators.

In 1908 the Newburg Savings Bank was organized with a capitalization of \$10,000. The Burroughs, Newcomers, and Murphys were chief stockholders, and the bank was used by most people in Newburg, although some went to Grinnell. The bank did not weather the Depression, but its closing in 1931 seems to have left little bitterness, since the stockholders, by going heavily into debt themselves, managed to make good on their shares. The bank paid off ninety-eight cents on the dollar. The Burroughs were saved from loss of their farm only by the moratorium on foreclosures that came just a month before threatened foreclosure.

A third important part of the Newburg scene in 1925 was the railroad station. For a time it was a two-man operation, since Newburg was a junction point for a spur line running to State Center. But that was abandoned, and for over twenty-five years one man has handled the depot.

In 1957 the future of the Newburg depot was brought up by the Iowa State Commerce Commission, and there may be a ruling to cut operation to a four hour day. Newburg people fear that in the near future, the station may be closed entirely. Hovey Sumner, station agent, said that over a five-year period the station has averaged \$20,000 a year, which Sumner feels is quite good for a

small town. Citizens of Newburg hired a lawyer and testified at the hearings; they want to keep the station. "And I've got several kids—everybody wants the school kept open," says agent Sumner, "when the town's this small, every head counts."

In 1925 the lumber yard was locally owned; it is now in the hands of a Grinnell resident, Howard Tinnes. He bought the business nine years ago "when old Mr. Watland died, and his sons didn't want to run it." The lumber company and the Suttan filling station (also a dealer in bulk fuel) are both thriving concerns at present.

The several stores and lunch room of former days have dwindled to the single Hendrickson establishment, which combines a little of them all. Commenting on the closing of shops in past years, Mrs. Hendrickson said: "When a business closes up in this town, the owners just walk out and let the pigeons take over."

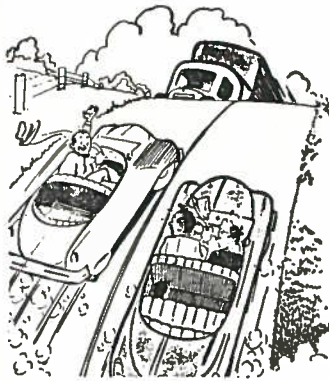
A unique feature of Newburg is the state's first, and still the largest, chinchilla ranch, owned by Lloyd Stoaks. In the modern, brick, temperature-controlled building, Stoaks cares for 225 chinchillas worth about \$30 apiece. (It takes 350 pelts to make a coat.) But he does not make a living from chinchillas and has been postmaster, a carpenter, and is now janitor at the school.

Other small businesses include seed corn dealers and truckers, and Vic Bennington sells a small amount of scrap iron to a Grinnell buyer. Many Newburg residents commute to work in other towns. Living in Newburg, an unincorporated town, is quite inexpensive, since there is no central water supply, no sewage system, no paved streets to be maintained, and not even any street lights. Mrs. George Turner, minister of the Congregational church, says that at night "dark isn't the word for it. The only light to be seen is a neon sign in Howard Tinnes' lumber company."

Newburg has always been a Protestant town, with the Congregational Church the leading religious group. Mrs. Turner, who was born in England, and still has a pronounced accent, has only been in town three years. "I think Newburg's wonderful," she said. "It's not much of a town, but you find a very friendly group here."

She has no worry that the Congregational Church in Newburg will slip into oblivion. "Not with a group of young people like we have." The two youth organizations have a membership of forty-two. Last year a Men's Club formed, and the women's organization meets in two sections. Membership in Sunday School stands at 192, with four-

(Continued on page 38)



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Vanishing Village

(Continued from page 18)

teen classes going every Sunday.

But Mrs. Wendell Paul thinks the church, too, eventually will be in danger, especially after the young people leave for the towns and cities. "Once the school goes, the church will be next. It's happening everywhere else, and it'll happen to us, strong as we think we are now."

In the early days Newburg was so strongly dominated by the Congregational Church that Mrs. Glenn McCarel said all teachers were expected to belong. Mrs. McCarel was a teacher from 1925 to 1949, and, after moving to Grinnell, was called back in 1954 to teach the children of those she had taught earlier. "Why, you had to be in church at least three Sundays out of four, if you were a teacher," said Mrs. McCarel, "and teach a Sunday School class besides, or they just didn't like it. If you were a Catholic, you'd better not apply."

In any community the school system is central, and in 1926, riding a wave of "immense community spirit," a drive started in Newburg for a brick consolidated school building. The same upsurge in community pride pressed for graveled roads, support of the local bank, and the building of the Legion Hall.

The school began to rival the church as a social center, principally drawing people together for sports events, plays, picnics, and school open houses.

In considering the factors holding Newburg together as a community, the party-line telephone system, owned by 126 shareholders, is important. Once a year the farmers and townspeople who own a telephone line meet and determine the assessment. Estimated switch dues run from \$14 to \$15 a year per phone, and each group makes its own necessary line repairs. An example of the personal service this kind of telephone system gives is the arrangement the local flower committee has with Helen Hendrickson, present telephone operator, to call when she hears of anyone sick.

When fire breaks out, the telephone operator rings a general ring on the party-line closest to the fire. Fire trucks must come from Gilman or Grinnell—this has always been true—and in the early days when roads were poor, fire-fighting equipment usually arrived too late. Bucket-brigade duty by neighbors was the only defense.

Since 1922 there has been no doctor in Newburg, and the drug department of the stores has been limited to patent medicines, since the town never had a pharmacist. Three township trustees and

a clerk run whatever local government affairs there are, such as election arrangements, and the Hickory Grove township constable handles the law enforcement, unless matters are important enough to call the county sheriff.

According to Mrs. Hendrickson, the Depression years may have been the best period as far as community spirit is concerned. In 1930 the Legion Hall had recently been built and no one had money to travel to Grinnell to dance or see movies, so Dime Dances were started on Saturday nights in the Legion Hall. Across the street behind the General Store the local businessmen set up a free outdoor movie theater every Monday. The town was jammed both nights, and several families remarked that they never had such a good time in Newburg before or since. World War II suspended these activities in 1942, and they never started again.

During the Depression there was an effort made by those with a cash income and enough farm-raised food for themselves to share some with those who lacked. This attitude was especially true apparently of pensioners who shared their steady dollars, and farm families who gave freely of their produce to those living in the village.

Mrs. Hendrickson recalled those days in glowing words. "Everyone was so friendly and helped out. People didn't keep to themselves like they usually do. Why, we'd go over to each other's houses and sit around and pop corn."

THE BREAKUP

The forces operating to bring about the disintegration of Newburg as a community began before 1925, but their full power has never been so clear as in 1957. The automobile has been a primary force, and John Newcomer started an inevitable trend when in 1912 he gave each of his four sons a Model T Ford at the same time. This event caused quite a stir in Newburg. The race to keep up was on in the whole community.

This inevitably resulted in pressure for better roads, and these roads led over the hills and away from Newburg. By 1927 the gravel road north to Gilman was finished, and in the following year, the road south to Highway 6 was improved.

When the paved route 146 was finished in 1953, it ran two and one-half miles east of Newburg. Thus more and more completely, Newburg was isolated. Over the new roads farmers truck-hauled products; grain and livestock were moved to larger centers for selling and shipping, and the farmers themselves drove off for shopping, banking, medical aid, and entertainment.

Farm mechanization was another fac-

tor bringing about the dissolution of Newburg. The Newcomers again are believed to have been the first people to have tractors—according to R. M. Burroughs, perhaps as early as 1906. A direct result of mechanization is shown in the Hickory Grove township population decline: in 1925 there were 722; in 1930, 696; in 1940, 646, and in 1950, 593. Newburg has lost one third of its population since 1925.

Instead of retiring to homes in Newburg or continuing to live with the younger generation, old people have been moving to larger urban centers often because of the conveniences, i. e. closer to doctors, hospitals, food and service centers. Consequently, ties to urban centers have been strengthened and loyalty to Newburg as a community is diminishing. In Hickory Grove, the retirement town is chiefly Grinnell, and today nearly every member of Newburg high school has at least one set of relatives living in Grinnell.

Certainly a third disintegrating force is mass communications, particularly television, which sets up a one-to-one relationship: viewer to TV screen. All but two families with children in the Newburg high school have television, and a survey made by a junior high pupil in the Newburg school revealed that an average of three hours daily TV watching is the pattern for children through the eighth grade. (It is higher on weekends.) The high school students watch television two and a half hours a day. Since TV, students report that they "seldom go to movies anymore," except the car-driving juniors and seniors.

Newburg recreation, to offset the influence of mass entertainment, is limited to school, church, and Grange functions. In summer Kenneth Suttan directs a Newburg softball team which plays surrounding towns and has considerable village support.

But big community projects are becoming fewer. High point of summers in the 1940's was the Newburg Fair. The day-long celebration included a parade, farm and homemaking exhibits, foot races, tug-of-war, baseball games, and horseshoe throwing. Lunch was served during the day, and the women's fellowship group sold chicken dinner at night. Climax of the day was the evening home-talent show, written and directed for several years by Mrs. Paul.

The Fair has not been held for three years, and although most Newburg people regret its passing, they are quick to add, "It was an awful lot of work." Rehearsals for the evening pageant often were held for nearly two months.

The Harvest Festival of the Congregational church has taken the place of the Fair; it is less a community project,

and much less work. However, the nostalgic note in the voices of people telling about the Fair, indicates that perhaps the amount of work was worth it.

The loss of Newburg as a community might bring about a subsequent loss of good moral standards, some leaders feel. There is among parents and children, often, an ignorance and distrust of urban ways—which is partly behind the protest of consolidation with city schools. One Newburg junior girl, when asked if she planned to go to college, replied in horrified tones, "Good heavens, no! I'd never dare walk across a

dark campus by myself!"

Newburg would like to continue to make itself felt in a community way because it has been such a successful leader in so many areas in the past. It feels that if Newburg children were swallowed up in larger schools and had only a limited part in city church activities, it would be a step down from the independence and success of former years.

Yet the fact remains, Newburg can never be a community center as it once was. And there are few who do not share its regrets.

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