



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY: HEART OF THE "SAN-SAN GAP"

*Calvin Wilvert\**

Urban sprawl in the United States has given rise to the coining of several place names for developing conurbations, including Bos-Wash, Chi-Pitts, and San-San. While there are still numerous open spaces within each of these areas, by far the largest gap is in the projected California megalopolis, San-San, between San Francisco and San Diego (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, between Monterey and Santa Barbara, a highway distance of 229 miles, there is no city along or near the coast with as many as 40,000 residents.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of the "San-San Gap" is San Luis Obispo County, three times the size of Rhode Island. In 1950, the county was the home of a mere 52,000. By 1979, however, the population had reached 140,000; the annual rate of increase during the 1970's averaging more than four percent, triple the state rate.<sup>3</sup>

*National and State Population Trends*

This population surge is in part a reflection of two

---

\*Dr. Wilvert is Associate Professor of Geography, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

national trends. The first, described as the "sunning of America," involves the migration of northerners to fifteen southern states stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This phenomenon, long evident (though of fluctuating intensity) in California, has only recently become apparent in some other parts of the "sunbelt," especially the south central states.<sup>4</sup>

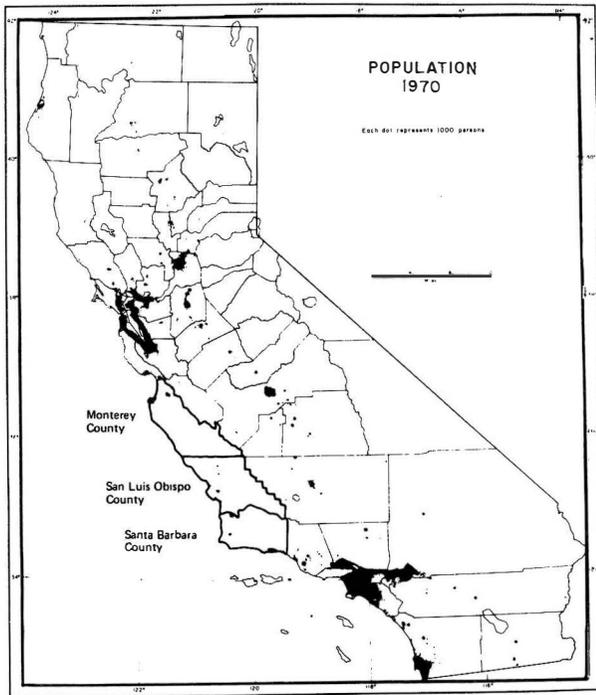


Figure 1

The "San-San Gap"--1970 Population Distribution.

The second trend--and the one probably more relevant to the San-San Gap--is the recent national migration to rural areas. Between 1970 and 1977, nonmetropolitan areas grew by 10.7 percent, as opposed to a total United States population increase of 6.4 percent.<sup>5</sup> Calling this reversal of the historic rural to urban migration a "rural renaissance," the Population Reference Bureau notes the "Even remote nonmetropolitan areas...far distant from urban...influences...have been registering net migration gains instead of their once perennial losses...Population growth in distinctly remote rural areas...cannot be explained away semantically as simply urban sprawl sprawling further."<sup>6</sup>

Decentralization of manufacturing was a major factor in nonmetropolitan population growth during the 1960's. Since then, tertiary employment has surpassed manufacturing as a source of nonmetropolitan growth. There are three basic causes of this nonmanufacturing employment expansion today in rural areas. First are the services required by retirees, who have lately been moving into nonmetropolitan areas in unprecedented numbers. The trends toward earlier retirement and larger retirement benefits make this group a "floating population of consumers whose presence in an increasingly service-oriented society creates jobs wherever they go." Second is the rising economic importance of recreation, a growth industry especially common in "amenity-rich" areas. Third, is the accelerated exploitation of coal and petroleum, revitalizing many old coal-

mining districts in the East and creating new communities, primarily in the western states.<sup>7</sup>

While rural areas in general are experiencing immigration, the trend has been longer and more fully developed in places perceived as rating high in "amenities." The concept of amenities, as used currently, seems to apply to rural areas having a low population and a physical environment widely regarded as attractive.<sup>8</sup>

In California, with rural areas often possessing such amenities, this trend toward nonmetropolitan growth has been especially pronounced. Explaining the unprecedented and accelerating movement to remote coastal and Sierran foothill areas--the "cow counties"--of the state Sokolow<sup>9</sup> has noted:

The answer involved some affluence, some poverty, some inflation and considerable lifestyle change--a combination that has developed only since the late '60s. Actually there are at least three kinds of people joining in the urban-to-rural exodus. Some are newly retired couples and singles, some are younger urban dropouts, and others are conventional middle-class families with school-age children.

Amenity areas, then, entice not only retirees and visitors but many others, especially younger people who provide the services for these groups and who are themselves seeking the "good life."

#### *County Characteristics and Trends*

Western San Luis Obispo County (Figs. 2 and 3), with

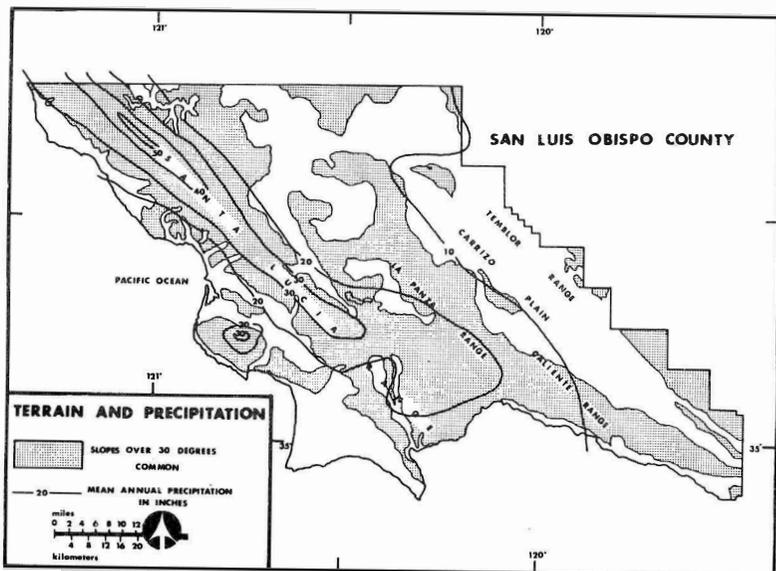


Figure 2

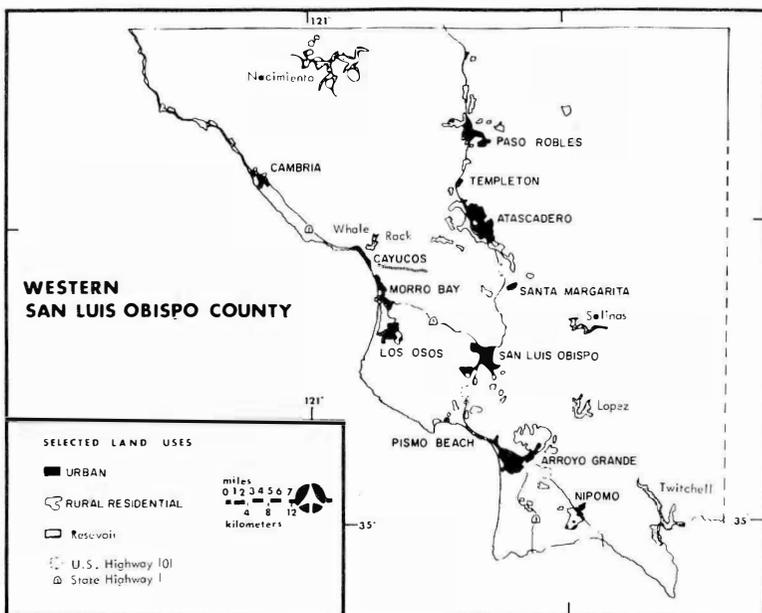


Figure 3

its hills and valleys, predominantly rural land uses, scenic coast, and sunny, ocean-moderated climate, would surely be considered an amenity area by any definition.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these appeals are the county's low crime rate and absence of visible pollution. The largest city, San Luis Obispo (population 36,000 in 1979), conveys a rare blend of old-fashioned charm, sophistication, and economic vitality. Sometimes likened, especially during the green winter months, to a Swiss or Austrian community because of the surrounding peaks, the picturesque city has a thriving tree-lined central business district, a two-century-old mission, and active fine arts associations.

The county's age distribution, compared with that for the state, clearly shows a prominence of younger and of older adults.<sup>11</sup> Adding to the young adult population are California Polytechnic State University students. Many former university students also remain in the county after finishing school.

There is little industrial employment in San Luis Obispo County, the tertiary sector dominating the job market. The especially large employment boost during the last decade in trade, services, and construction suggest the expanding role of the county as a destination of retirees, tourists, and students. Employment, then, seems to have been stimulated by population growth, rather than growth being stimulated by employment opportunities. (Table 1).

The explosive population growth rate of recent years

is assaulting traditional land uses, both in once sleepy communities and in the agricultural hinterlands. Wherever one looks, there are signs of change. New construction is ubiquitous; vacant lots within communities and nearby pastures and croplands are giving way to the relentless demand for housing. A proliferation of realty offices reflects this demand.

A far more aggressive force than urban sprawl in causing the conversion of rural lands from traditional agricultural uses in San Luis Obispo County has been the rapid rise in hobby ranches, or "ranchettes," typically 10 or 20 acres but ranging between two and one-half up to about 40 acres. These small farms are highly conspicuous in the valleys of the western part of the county. Thus it is the land close to urban areas--largely uncovered by agricultural preserve zoning--where this trend is most fully developed.<sup>12</sup> In many of these areas the annual population growth rate in recent years has exceeded ten percent, more than twice the county rate. Indeed the availability of these rural parcels has been an important factor behind the county's overall growth rate. It is believed that a significant number of the properties are owned by retirees who have migrated to the county.

One index to the extent of the rural construction boom is the number of single family housing permits issued for the unincorporated areas. Between 1970 and 1977, there was a six-fold increase, some being for hobby ranches and others for dwellings on city-sized lots in unincorporated communities.

Another index of the growing demand for hobby ranches is the rise in applications for subdivisions of land in unincorporated parts of the county. Between 1971 and 1977, such applications more than doubled. Approximately two-thirds of the applications for the rural parcel splits are generally approved.<sup>13</sup>

With the increasing demand for land, especially in valleys of the western county, farm values have risen steeply. Even on some of the agricultural preserve land, traditional usages--pastures or unirrigated crops--are proving uneconomic. There is, therefore, in certain environmentally favored areas having water for irrigation, a trend toward higher value agricultural land uses. These more intensive patterns consist primarily of crops limited to frost-free areas (largely along the southern coast), such as avocados, lemons, and increasing acreages of vegetables. Plantings of wine grapes, in both inland and coastal locations, have also increased dramatically. To the environmentalist, long-term plantings, such as orchards and vineyards are a welcome check on urban sprawl, at least for the time being. Yet, given the rapid population growth San Luis Obispo County, will the San-San mid-section someday be as solidly urbanized as the burgeoning conurbations at its northern and southern ends?

#### *Constraints on Growth*

Some of the factors associated with the long-standing growth of the San Francisco Bay area and greater Los Angeles-San Diego include: locations at the ends of transcontinental

routes; excellent harbors, whether natural or man-made; large areas of level or gently rolling terrain; abundant water (at least in the past) imported from other parts of the state; and a historic philosophy that "bigger is better" thus encouraging industrial growth and land development schemes.

San Luis Obispo County does not share these traits.<sup>14</sup> No transcontinental highway or rail line terminates in the San-San Gap. Nor does the county, with its shallow-water recreation and commercial fishing ports have, or have the ready capability of having, a large-scale multipurpose commercial port.<sup>15</sup>

Topographically, the county, except along the South Coast, lacks large level or near-level expanses in the climatically desired western portion. Indeed, rugged terrain characterizes an estimated 60 percent of the county (Fig. 2). Still another factor mitigating against solid urbanization is the large amount of government land, or, to use Steiner's term, "reserved land,"<sup>16</sup> primarily the Los Padres National Forest.

Unlike megalopolitan California, sparsely and variably watered San Luis Obispo County is not the recipient of imported water. Of physical factors, water scarcity is surely to become fairly soon a major constraint on growth. Current water sources are wells and several reservoirs.

If high growth rates persist, and, barring the decision to embark on further water projects, severe water problems are anticipated in several parts of the county not later than the mid-1980's. The problems are especially acute in some of the

coastal communities dependent upon wells. The fear that continued pumping of ground water in these areas could result in further encroachment of salt water into the aquifers caused Morro Bay to impose a building moratorium in 1977. The city of San Luis Obispo is dependent upon two reservoirs, Salinas and Whale Rock (Fig. 3). These sources supply a safe annual yield sufficient to support a population of 43,000 (about 7,000 higher than the 1979 population), a number anticipated by the early 1980's.

North County communities of Atascadero, Templeton, and Paso Robles, plus the agriculture of that area, obtain water from wells in the 630-square-mile Paso Robles Ground Water Basin. Usage by the late 1970's was approximately the same as the safe annual yield of 47,000 acre feet. By "mining" the basin, estimated to contain 26 million acre feet, the population could grow for years, but without alternate water sources these areas would, of course, face inevitable shortages.<sup>18</sup>

San Luis Obispo County could augment its water supply by two developments: the State Water Project and the Nacimiento Project. In 1960, the county contracted with the state for eventual rights to 25,000 acre feet of water per year from the California Aqueduct. The plan specified construction of an 84-mile pipeline, running from the aqueduct through San Luis Obispo County and terminating in Santa Barbara County. In March 1979, Santa Barbara County residents voted almost three to four against the project. That county's withdrawal would

raise the costs of construction of the pipeline for San Luis Obispo County by an estimated 22 to 76 percent.<sup>19</sup> It thus seemed improbable that the county would acquire state water in the foreseeable future.

With the Nacimiento Project, the county has rights to 15,000 acre feet annually from Lake Nacimiento, a reservoir owned by Monterey County (but located in San Luis Obispo County). If the project is built, some of the water would be pumped into the Paso Robles Basin to prevent over-drafting there. The remainder would be sent to Whale Rock Reservoir and then to nearby coastal communities, including Morro Bay and Los Osos. The city of San Luis Obispo would also receive increased water via Whale Rock. A bond to finance the project was narrowly defeated by the voters in 1974, the main reason being fear that additional water would simply stimulate growth. Should the voters eventually approve a bond, project construction would require about six years.

Factors other than lack of water which could cause additional communities to limit growth include the desire of many residents to retain community character and not to follow the Southern California example of urban sprawl. Also, suspicion of growth is often linked to the pocketbook, i.e., unwillingness of communities to expand schools or to invest in sewers.

The obvious changes wrought by rapid growth, and the expectation for continued growth, have stimulated vigorous debates between no-growth and pro-growth advocates throughout

the county. Organizations representing these opposing positions are often strident in their demands. Most governing bodies, including the County Board of Supervisors, are split philosophically on the growth issue.

One planning vehicle by which coastal growth is being regulated is the Coastal Commission, mandated by the California State Legislature and in effect as of 1977. This legislation empowers the Commission with sweeping authority over all development between the coast and a zone ranging from 1,000 feet to five miles inland. Throughout much of San Luis Obispo County, the zone extends to the legal limit of five miles in order to protect the watershed areas.<sup>20</sup> Empowered to protect wetlands and estuaries, to preserve coastal agriculture, and to cluster new construction in urbanized areas, the Coastal Commission could continue to be a significant constraint on growth (if the Commission's many opponents are unable to reduce its statewide authority).

There are, then, in San Luis Obispo County present and potential constraints on growth not experienced during the earlier expansion at either end of San-San.

### *Prognosis*

It seems likely that the population pressure experienced in many nonmetropolitan areas will continue to be abundantly manifested in San Luis Obispo County. Yet continued growth will surely diminish the rural charms attracting so many of the new residents. Without an industrial base to draw people, one

can only wonder when, due to an increasingly urban character, "success may spoil" the county, so that potential immigrants may be attracted instead to more remote areas.

Making predictions is fraught with hazards because of the many variables. One of these is political. Should elections shift governing bodies within the county from their current split on the growth issue to decidedly no-growth, and should the voters continue to reject bonds to finance water projects, the growth rate would inevitably fall.

Even without such political developments, water is likely to become a constraint on growth in several parts of the county in less than a decade. Assuming the unlikely possibility that both the Nacimiento and State Water Projects should be approved and that all of the additional water is made available for urbanization and none for agriculture, the additional water would support about 200,000 more people.<sup>21</sup> Beyond these sources of water, several small reservoirs, mainly along the North Coast, might eventually be built. However, the number of additional residents these could support would apparently be only a few tens of thousands.

A far larger potential source of water would result from the gradual conversion of irrigated farmland to urban use. Irrigated agriculture in California actually consumes roughly twice as much water as urban uses, acre-per-acre. More significantly, irrigation consumes about 86 percent of the water in San Luis Obispo County, as opposed to only 14 percent for urban

usage.<sup>22</sup> Yet the urbanizing of irrigated areas, so widespread historically in California, will surely be impeded in the county by agricultural preserves, the Coastal Commission, and the political "clout" of agriculturalists.

While it seems inevitable that rapid growth will continue in the short run, constraints, both physical and cultural, will almost certainly eventually slow, or perhaps even halt, growth. It seems unlikely, then, that the San-San Gap will in the foreseeable future become solidly urbanized. Although there is controversy as to the rate at which the county might grow, and much more controversy as to the merits of growth, one fact is inescapable: San Luis Obispo County has been "discovered", and the bucolic landscape is changing in ways alien to many of the residents, themselves often recent emigrés from big cities.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>While "San-San" is most commonly defined as the area between San Francisco and San Diego, it has been described by Haggett as the far shorter zone between Santa Barbara and San Diego. The latter delimitation would, of course, exclude the entire central coast area, of which San Luis Obispo County is a part. Refer to Peter Haggett, *Geography: A Modern Synthesis*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979). p. 340.

<sup>2</sup>The five largest San-San Gap cities in 1978 were Santa Maria, 35,550; San Luis Obispo, 34,100; Lompoc, 25,350; Arroyo Grande, 10,200; and Morro Bay, 8,625. Source: California Department of Finance, *Population Estimates for California Cities and Counties, 1970 through 1978*, Report 78 E-4, pp. 44 and 46.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup>Jeanne C. Biggar, "The Sunning of America: Migration to the Sunbelt," *Population Bulletin*, Population Reference Bureau, Vol. 34 (1979).

<sup>5</sup>Population Reference Bureau, "Urban Dwellers Moving Out," Intercom: *The International Population Newsletter*, Vol. 7, (January, 1979) pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup>Peter A. Morrison and Judith P. Wheeler, "Rural Renaissance in America? The Revival of Population Growth in Remote Areas," *Population Bulletin*, Population Reference Bureau, Vol. 31 (1976), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>8</sup>Ullman's concept of this factor emphasized the drawing power of a year-round warm climate, especially in metropolitan areas of the Southwest and Florida. See Edward L. Ullman, "Amenities as a Factor in Regional Growth," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 44 (1954), pp. 119-132.

<sup>9</sup>Alvin D. Sokolow, "California's New Migration to the Towns of the 'Cow Country'," *California Journal*, (October, 1977), p. 349.

<sup>10</sup>Mountain barriers impose significant controls on the winter-rainfall Mediterranean climate. To the west of the Santa Lucia Range, an area bathed by ocean breezes and often blanketed at the coast by fogs, temperatures are moderate, the range between summer and winter means being only 12 to 14 degrees. The average annual precipitation at the coast, roughly 20 inches (51 cm), increases dramatically along the windward flanks of the Santa Lucias. In their rainshadow, precipitation decreases, reaching a low of six inches (15 cm) at the southeastern edge of the county.

<sup>11</sup>In 1975, 14 percent of county residents were between ages 20 and 24; 10 percent were between 60 and 69. The figures for the state were nine percent and seven percent, respectively. The county has lower percentages of children and middle-aged persons than the state. See California Department of Finance, *Population Projections for Calif. Counties, 1975-2020, with Age/Sex*

*Detail to 2000*, Report 77 P-3.

<sup>12</sup>The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly known as the Williamson Act, was designed to give tax reductions to landowners contracting with county governments to keep their land in agriculture--thus the term "agricultural preserves." By 1979, well over half of the farm land in the county was in preserves. Acceptance of the program, however, has generally been poorest near cities (both in the county and statewide), as most landowners are reluctant to foreclose the option of selling their properties for development. See John B. Dean, "A Panacea That Wasn't" The Williamson Conservation Act Needs Repair," *Cry California*, Vol. 10 (1975), 11.

<sup>13</sup>Unpublished Records, San Luis Obispo County Planning Department.

<sup>14</sup>The absence of traditional industrial location factors, however, would not necessarily be a major disadvantage to labor-intensive industries which produce high-value commodities using few raw materials. I.B.M., for instance, has long had a policy of locating plants in small, sometimes remote cities such as Burlington, Vermont; Boulder, Colorado; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The company was prompted to select each of these locations because they were considered desirable places to live and because each was also the home of a university. San Luis Obispo shares these traits.

<sup>15</sup>Plans tentatively call for the expansion of Port San Luis (about five miles northwest of Pismo Beach); by the early 1980's it would have a 900-boat capacity, by far the largest in the county. Most of these would be pleasure vessels, and the remainder, fishing craft. The longest boats which could be accommodated would be only about 60 feet in a slip and 100 feet at moor.

<sup>16</sup>Rodney Steiner, "Reserved Lands and the Supply of Space for Southern California Metropolis," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 56 (1966), 344-362.

<sup>17</sup>Kenneth Schwartz, Mayor of San Luis Obispo, in a speech delivered to Obispo Beautiful meeting, Dec. 9, 1976.

<sup>18</sup>Clinton Milne, Deputy County Engineer, San Luis Obispo County, interviews, January, 1977, and April, 1979.

<sup>19</sup>"Water Alternative: Nacimiento?" *San Luis Obispo County Telegram-Tribune*, March 15, 1979, p. A-1.

<sup>20</sup>"New Coastal Law Includes More County Territory," *ibid.*, October 9, 1976, p. A-1.

<sup>21</sup>The two projects would total 40,000 acre feet per year. Since the annual water consumption of an urban Southern California family of five is about one acre foot, the 200,000 figure is reached by multiplying five times 40,000.

<sup>22</sup>Milne, interviews.

TABLE 1

## EMPLOYMENT IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY, 1965 and 1977

	January 1965	January 1977	% Change 1965-1977
Nonagricultural Employment	20,550	37,450	+ 82
Government	7,950	11,900	+ 50
Trade	4,850	10,250	+111
Services	3,650	7,100	+ 95
Construction	1,050	2,650	+152
Transportation, Commu- nications, Utilities	1,450	2,350	+ 62
Manufacturing	800	1,950	+144
Finance, Insurance and Real Estate	650	1,150	+ 77
Agricultural Employment	2,550	1,900	- 25

Source: State of California, Employment Development Department, *San Luis Obispo County Labor Market Bulletin*, January, 1977; and State of California, Department of Human Resources Development, *Estimated Total Civilian Labor Force, San Luis Obispo County, 1965*, March 1973.