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A Historical Geography of Six and Eight-Man Football in Nebraska

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A HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF SIX AND EIGHT-MAN FOOTBALL IN NEBRASKA

by

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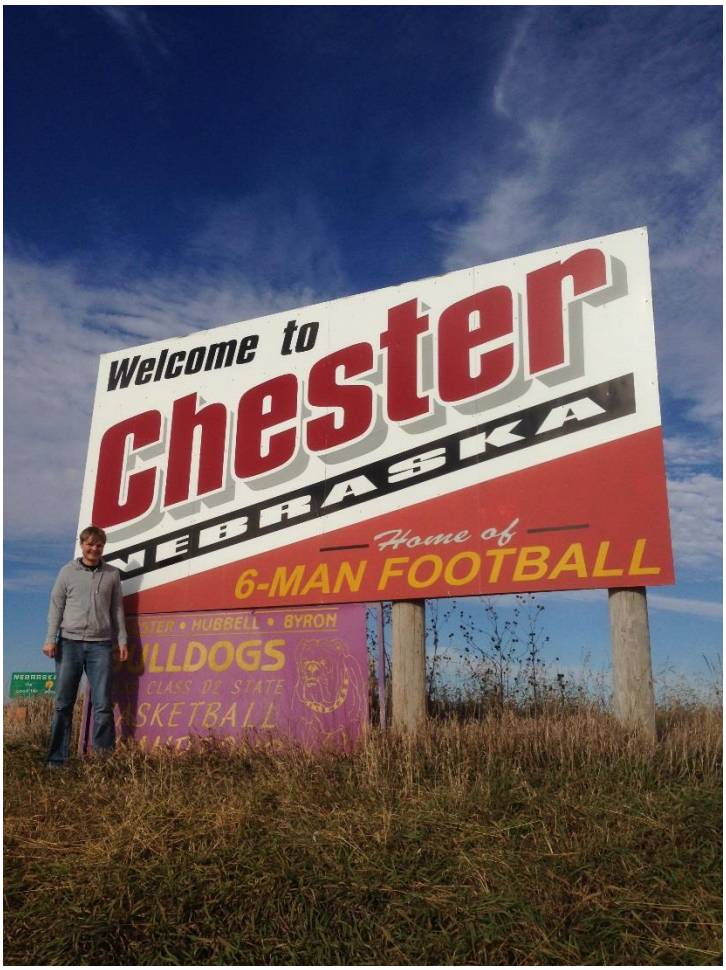
This thesis serves as both a historical geography of six and eight-man football in Nebraska and a discussion of their relationship to rural depopulation. After beginning with an introduction to six and eight-man football, I present an overview of the entire state, including the historical geography of six and eight-man football teams, backgrounds of schools closing and consolidating, and the new trend of cooperative sports teams. This overview is accompanied by maps at five-year intervals depicting the high schools playing six and eight-man football. Rural depopulation, which has plagued the state since the Great Depression, can be seen expressed in the large number of high schools that do not have enough young men to field an eleven-man team. The third chapter of my project uses Custer County as a case study. Custer County has a rich history, with many high schools and their respective football teams. After my case study of Custer County, I dedicate a chapter to my personal experiences as a player and fan of an eight-man football team at Lewiston High School. My project concludes with a look at the future of six and eight-man football in Nebraska.



I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my parents, who I miss more than words can say, and to my little sister, who continues to be my rock.

I would not be writing this without the help of my family and friends, whose constant support and encouragement have gotten me to where I am today.

A special thank you to two of my dear friends, Gabby and Jones.

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of my advisor, Dr. David J. Wishart, who provided constant support and advice throughout the research and writing processes, my good friend, Meghan Robeson, who I drove crazy with requests to correct my poor grammar, and my Grandma Janssen, who loaned me gas money so that I could travel to many of the small towns I wrote about.

I would like to thank the Nebraska Schools Activities Association, especially Nate Neuhaus and Alicia McCoy, who provided me with the annual bulletins and the space and resources to research the schools that had played six and eight-man football. In addition; the Library and Archives department of the Nebraska State Historical Society, where I was able to search newspaper reels for over a hundred years of articles related to six and eight-man football.

I must give a big thanks to Tammy Hendrickson, the curator of the Custer County Historical Society. She not only provided me with stacks of annuals, scrapbooks, and newspaper articles, but with a hospitality that included homemade lunches, making me feel like one of the county's own. Tammy was also kind enough to put me in touch with retired Custer County head football coaches, Darrel Sybrant and Dan Moore, whose experience and wisdom practically wrote the Custer County chapter itself.

The same goes for my former head football coach, Neil Woofter. Along with teaching me how to play eight-man football in my youth, he contributed a great deal of information to this thesis. My personal geography could not have been written without the help of my friends made from my school days at Lewiston, as so many people helped me recall memories that I had forgotten.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the entire University of Nebraska geography department for helping me create my maps, sharing their knowledge of six and eight-man football teams and small town life, providing constructive criticism, and their continued support in both my education and personal life.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

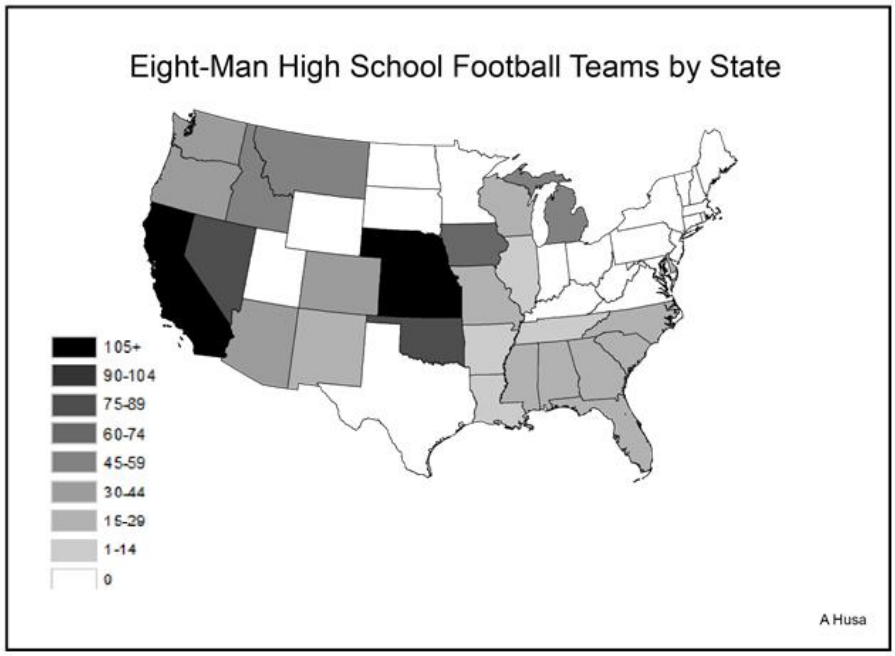
List of Maps

List of Tables

CHAPTER ONE
AN INTRODUCTION TO SIX AND EIGHT-MAN FOOTBALL

Across the country, eighty-yard football fields can be found near high schools in small, rural communities. On Friday nights in Autumn, six and eight-man football teams take to these fields, which are twenty yards shorter than the traditional football field. It is a reduced player version of the game of football, but that does not make it any less exciting. In fact, eight-man players have a reputation for playing both offense and defense, while six-man football is known for its unique scoring system and having all offensive players deemed eligible receivers. While six and eight-man football aren't played by professional or collegiate teams in the United States, they have flourished on the interscholastic scene. Many small town high schools in rural areas rely on reduced player variations of the game in order to have their own program because they have a low student enrollment and have trouble finding enough young men to field a proper football team. This creates an interesting geography that appears in areas of low population.

According to the 2015 MaxPreps national rankings database, there are more than 1500 reduced man high school football programs in the United States. These numbers include nine-man football high schools in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, as well more than 1000 eight-man high school football teams in thirty states and more than 200 six-man teams that are state-sanctioned to compete in Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, and Wyoming. Kansas can also be included in the six-man states as the Kansas State High School Association acknowledges that a handful of high schools have returned to six-man football after



(Map 1.1)

(Map 1.2)

*Maps made with data from the 2015 MaxPreps national rankings database

having it discontinued in 2003, although as of 2015, they have not sanctioned these high schools or given them their own classification. As the nationwide maps will show, Nebraska is one of only three states with more than one hundred eight-man programs and one of only ten states that has high schools playing six-man football (MaxPreps website 2015).

As shown in the eight-man football map (Map 1.1), the majority of eight-man football games are played in states that have many schools with low enrollment due to widespread sparse rural population and greater distances to cities. What Figure 1.1 also shows, however, is that some eight-man schools exist in densely populated areas, most notably in the state of California. Most of these are private schools which have a select enrollment. The six-man map (Map 1.2) may be a stronger indicator of states with many small, rural towns. Most of the six-man states are located in the Great Plains, which has historically been an area of predominantly rural population, and subsequent rural depopulation, and many small-town high schools with low enrollment numbers.

All of these high schools are managed by state school activity associations, like the previously mentioned Kansas State High School Activities Association, that set the guidelines for which teams are allowed to compete in a reduced version of football. These associations are governed by the National Federation of State High School Associations, which puts out a uniform set of rules for all sports, including a rulebook for each variety of reduced football that is played. The Nebraska State Activities Association, which oversees all high school sports in Nebraska, uses these rules for the schools that play six and eight-man football. The Nebraska State Activities Association is also the

group that determines which schools are permitted to play six, eight, or eleven-man football. High schools in Nebraska are divided into classes based on student enrollment numbers. These classes are split between schools which participate in six, eight, and eleven-man football.

The Nebraska School Activities Association divides member schools into six classes for participation in the state football playoffs. A seventh class is reserved for six-man football competition. The classes are listed as A, B, C1, C2, D1, D2, and D6. Classes A, B, C1, and C2 consist of eleven-man teams, while eight-man teams play in classes D1 and D2. In the Nebraska School Activities Association 2015 Football Manual, the 2014 and 2015 classifications were determined using the following rules:

1. Class A: 28 largest schools registered for football
2. Class B: 32 next largest schools registered for football
3. Classes C1 and C2: the remaining schools playing eleven-man football are divided into two classes with approximately equal numbers of schools in each class
4. Classes D1 and D2: schools playing eight-man football are divided into two classes with approximately equal numbers of schools in each class

* Nebraska School Activities Association 2015 Football Manual

The Nebraska School Activities Association based the 2014 and 2015 classifications on the three-grade enrollment submitted to the Nebraska Department of Education on the fourth Friday of September 2013. The three-grade enrollment number is a combination of students in grades 9, 10, and 11. School enrollment figures are submitted to the Nebraska Department of Education on the fourth Friday in September of every odd numbered year. These enrollment figures are used to determine the two-year football classifications for the eleven-man classes. Eight-man classes use Nebraska

Department of Education student counts every year. The two-year classification system results in a geography of reduced-player football that changes every two years. Before 1996, classifications changed on a yearly basis, resulting in a geography that did the same (Nebraska Schools Activities Association).

The 2016-2017 football classifications list, which can be found on the Nebraska State Activities Association website, includes the state's current 279 high school football programs, with a breakdown of 147 eleven-man teams, 107 eight-man, and 25 six-man. The twenty-eight largest high schools in the state, competing in Class A, show that Nebraska's population is skewed to its major cities of Omaha and Lincoln. Of the twenty-eight teams in Class A, sixteen can be found in Omaha or its immediate suburbs, while seven can be found in Lincoln. The other five are the main high schools in Fremont, Grand Island, Kearney, Norfolk, and North Platte, all urban centers. The thirty-two schools in Class B are also each found in the large towns of Nebraska, predominantly along the interstate or near the Lincoln or Omaha area. There is a wide difference between the enrollment numbers of the thirty-two schools in Class B, with the top schools having around 800 students and the bottom schools having around 200 students. Looking at the two divisions of Class C and Class D, many names formed from consolidations and cooperative agreements between schools appear on the list, showing that many high schools in Nebraska were created by combining smaller high schools that closed due to low enrollments.

The majority of high schools that are struggling with low enrollment numbers are currently playing either six or eight-man football. Many of these high schools are found

in the rural areas of Nebraska, where depopulation has been a large problem. Rural depopulation, which has been happening across the state since the Great Depression, can be seen expressed in the large number of high schools that don't have enough boys to field their own eleven-man football team. As population continues to fall in small towns, high schools will go to great lengths in order to keep a football program. High school football is an important aspect of Nebraska culture, and this project contributes a previously untold story to the geography of a state that is rich in small town traditions and specific histories that can be told with pride.

Beginning with an overview of the entire state, I map the high schools playing six and eight-man football at five year intervals from 1955 through 2015. I had hoped to map every six-man team since the game was introduced (in 1934), but there is no comprehensive list of high schools playing six-man football before 1955. While mapping these schools, I provide a background on rural depopulation in Nebraska, school consolidation trends, and I add a narrative to the schools that are being mapped. To find a list of the schools playing six and eight-man football, I used the annual bulletins published by the Nebraska Sports Activities Association and *Nebraska High School Sports*, written by Jerry Mathers, which summarizes every season up to 1979. For the narrative, I used *Pages of History – Nebraska High Schools: Present and Past – Public and Private. 1854-1994*, which chronicles each high school's history up to 1994. After 1994, I was able to use articles from various newspapers around the state to document recent school closings, consolidations and cooperative agreements.

After giving a historical geography of six and eight-man football throughout the entire state, I use Custer County as a case study. I was able to build a narrative around the history of high school football in Custer County as well as its different population patterns over time. My main sources of information are the *Custer County Chief* newspaper, stored on microfilm in the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the school annuals, scrapbooks, journals, and county history records stored at the Custer County Historical Society/Museum and Research Center in Broken Bow. For this chapter, I also interviewed Darrel Sybrant and Dan Moore, two former Custer County high school football coaches.

For the fourth chapter of my thesis, I shift to a personal geography of my experiences as a member of an eight-man football team at Lewiston High School. This personal geography involves many different aspects of attending a small high school, including the advantages and disadvantages. Along with my experiences, I explore Lewiston's recent football cooperative agreement with Southern High School in Wymore, using newspaper articles and interviews with those close to the program. After this section, in a postscript, I will look toward the future of six and eight-man football in Nebraska.

My background research sought to find existing literature in the field of sports geography and relating the material to what I seek to accomplish throughout this thesis. By studying works that cover sports geography, I was able to see a wide variety of geographical components that can be applied to my subject. Two components that I focus on, space and place, are central to both sports and geography. It should be mentioned,

however, that the majority of these works discuss geography in terms of multiple sports, whereas my focus is on American football, and specifically on reduced player versions of the traditional American football game. While it was beneficial for me to get a broad overview of many areas of sports geography, I only focused on the topics that deal directly with my own goals in this literary review.

Barney Warf's "Geography of Sports" section in his *Encyclopedia of Geography* gives a brief overview of the topic. Sports geography began with John Rooney in the 1960s and more recently has been a focus for John Bale. While only a small group of geographers studies sports, there is a potential for more academic research, as topics in the geography of sports cover a wide range of human, as well as physical, geography themes. For example, Warf discusses the importance of spatial distribution of players and teams as a topic related to both sports and geography, along with the idea that sports can identify place and place attachment, two important geographic components. Space and place are central to both sports and geography. At the end of his article, Warf states that "it is clear that the two [sports and geography] are complementary" (Warf 2010, 2682).

In their *Journal of Geography* article, "Using Sports to Teach Geography: Examples from Kansas City" (2004), Lisa DeChano and Fred Shelley look at the role of sports geography in academia. They discuss how the literature on sports geography is focused primarily on researching and interpreting the distribution of sporting activities while stressing the potential for more advanced studies that can be done using examples from sports. In their article, they see using sport as an excellent way of teaching geography and geographical concepts, and they provide examples of sports topics such as

the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, the possible construction and location of a new stadium, and the use of sports information in conveying a shared sense of place among a population. They apply their ideas to a singular geographical region, Kansas City. They believe that teachers can draw from examples in their own regions and use derived concepts to teach geography to students. This is a good example of how sports geography can be beneficial to academia.

The particular example of sports geography I can apply to my research from DeChano and Shelley is their analysis of how the distribution of Negro League teams represented the changing distribution of a rapidly urbanizing African-American population in the early 20th century. They discuss how the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum can teach about population demographics, and they state, "The history of the Negro Leagues provides an interesting mirror of the changing historical geography and demography of African-Americans in the United States" (Dechano and Shelley 2004, 189). Using sports geography to show demographic patterns is a very interesting concept that can be applied to many subjects. I will be using it to show how the changing distribution of six and eight-football programs in Nebraska reflects the changing population distribution of the state.

Another article that refers to sports geography in the classroom can be found in the 1988 edition of *The Illinois Geographical Society*, in an article written by Robert M. Ashley, entitled "Using Interest in High School Sports to Develop Geography's Five Themes". In his article, Ashley breaks down each of the five geographical themes (place, location, movement, region, and human-environmental interaction) and gives an example

of how sports can be related to each one. For *place*, he discusses how team nicknames are unique to some areas and how conferences are usually built by schools in close proximity of each other, while discussing how *location* is used to describe where these schools are found. The routes and distance to be covered when playing a sport at the opposing high school's location are a good example of how *movement* can be applied to sports. *Regions* are formed by generalizing areas occupied by high schools and who they most often compete with in sports. *Human-environmental interaction* can be seen as playing fields are usually built in the areas surrounding a high school. While my research will not explicitly be looking into all of the five themes of geography, it is important to know that sports and geography can work hand in hand with each other.

In examining the role of space in the geography of sports, my research led me to *Sports Geography* (2003) by John Bale. Bale draws on his own knowledge and previous works in sports geography to break the subject into different areas. One of these areas that was of interest to me was Bale's discussion of space as a geographical property of sport. Bale starts by writing that sport is characterized by spatial dimensions in many ways because there are definitive spatial boundaries written into the rules and regulations of a sport. American football relies on spatial boundaries to say where players line up, how they advance towards their goal of scoring, and the mark at which they obtain that goal. The differences in spatial boundaries are one of the biggest variations between six, eight, and eleven-man football, as six and eight-man teams play on a noticeably smaller field.

In my research, a spatial perspective is also applied while looking at the changing distribution of six and eight-man teams across the state of Nebraska. My focus is on the different concentrations of these teams, and Bale has an excellent section on the subject of the relocation of sports teams. However, his focus seems to be on larger scale sports teams moving due to financial reasons, usually towards greener pastures. This can be applied at the smallest level, although under different circumstances, such as the dissolving of a high school football team because of financial or enrollment issues. A lot of my research is based on schools consolidating for these reasons, which changes the Nebraska high school football landscape.

This leads me into the topic of place, which I found discussed in two works by John J. Rooney, Jr. In his book, *A Geography of American Sport: From Cabin Creek to Anaheim* (1974), Rooney discusses the "geography of sports" as the place-to-place variation in what sport a region prefers. Although my research is focused on one region and one sport, this book is helpful for my research. I am especially intrigued by his section on interscholastic athletics. His work focuses more on schools in big cities, but there is a lot of writing about how states divide high school classes based on enrollment numbers. He discusses how classes are always changing as "the system calls for regular evaluation of each school's status and constant changes of class assignments" (Rooney 1974, 67). This takes us back to the previously discussed Nebraska State Activities Association, which requires that certain classes play six or eight-man football depending on enrollment numbers. The constant changes of class assignments alter the high school football landscape as some schools either reduce their class with a six or eight-man

program or take a step up and join the eleven-man classes. The number of six, eight, and eleven-man football schools will continue changing in every new classification year.

While Rooney's book discusses the geography of sports in terms of large regions, I found a lot of useful information for my smaller-scale, Nebraska-based research. In particular, I liked his theories as to why football participation is so popular in the Great Plains. Rooney states that more male high school athletes participate in football than any other sport (with a rate of one in nine boys playing) and that the per capita-involvement is highest in the north Midwest and the Great Plains (Rooney 1974, 72). The low population density that has led to small towns overwhelmingly dominating the Great Plains has also resulted in many different high schools being built to serve those small towns. With small town populations, schools receive low enrollments, which means that any boy who wants to participate in football can do so without the fear of being cut. This is not something that is seen in big cities and areas of high population density, and therefore it has resulted in six and eight-man football teams being a common trait of high schools in rural and other low populated areas, like the Great Plains.

Another useful source I found was John J. Rooney, Jr.'s article, "Up From the Mines and Out From the Prairies", written in the October 1969 *Geographical Review*. I like this article because it gives a geographical analysis of football specifically. Although it is based on collegiate and professional teams and players, there are still topics that can be used at the high school level. While Rooney looks at the geographical variation in the production of high-level talent, he is also analyzing recruiting information that maps the areas in which high schools are producing collegiate and professional caliber players.

Although the maps in his article aren't specifically related to my research, they provide good examples of how I can map and interpret my research. Mapping high school football teams can help answer the question as to whether renowned Nebraska eleven-man high school programs are poaching players from nearby six and eight-man football schools. Aside from population movements, athletes looking for a bigger stage to play on is one of the biggest factors in schools losing their players and being forced to field a smaller team.

In his article, Rooney breaks the continental United States into nine regions in order to look at interregional migration. This regional breakdown discusses the Midwest, which includes Nebraska, but he looks more at the comparison between the Midwest and other regions. I am intrigued by the maps showing interregional migration of football players from the high schools they played for to the collegiate team that has succeeded in recruiting their talents. I believe this same migration relationship can be applied between high schools as players look to play for the school that gives them the best opportunity at reaching their goals. This leads to the question as to whether or not some six and eight-man high schools retain their talent or lose it as those players look for an opportunity to play on an eleven-man team for a better chance to be noticed by collegiate recruiters. While this isn't usually a serious issue in Nebraska, it is still another avenue that must be explored in areas where six and eight-man high schools are losing their players.

Along with the roles of space and place in sports giving a geographic component to the subject, there also needs to be a system put in place to analyze the data provided by sports. John Bale looks at five different approaches to studying sports geography in "The

Place of 'Place' in Cultural Studies in Sports*"*, which was published in a 1988 *Progress in Geography* article. The first approach to studying sports geography focuses on the identification of temporal and/or regional variations in sports such as the diffusion of sports out of their hearth area. The second is a regional approach which analyzes patterns in sports, such as the previously stated work of John J. Rooney, Jr. in researching where college football recruits were coming from and what university they would be attending. The third is an economic approach, looking at the how sport clubs have a fiscal impact on a locality, while the fourth approach looks at other potential impacts a sport club can make at a local level, such as inspiring more youth sport clubs. Sport and regional identity is Bale's fifth approach to sports geography as he looks at the size of the radius of fans who support the same sports club.

John Bale concludes *Sports Geography* by discussing alternate frameworks in which to study sports geography. He writes that the topical or regional framework of his book is similar to that purposed by John J. Rooney, Jr. in the early days of sports geography, but that it might not be the best way to study sports geography. Bale writes that "[a] way forward towards a firmer conceptual base may be to first recognize the significance of sport in the contemporary analysis of modern society and then ask what a geography of sport can tell us about this relationship" (Bale 2004, 236).

The systematic framework reflected in Bale's quote is best for my research as I look at the relationship between the evolving sports landscape and population distribution changes in Nebraska. It is important to realize the impact that changes in populations have on a school's enrollment numbers. As populations shift, so do enrollment numbers,

which impacts the size of a football program of any given high school. One must also keep in mind, however, that there are many factors besides population movement and student enrollment numbers that can affect high school football programs. Cultural appreciation of football and athletic budget cuts are just two more factors that affect a high school football program.

In *Introduction to Sports Studies: From the Classroom to the Ball Park* (1978), Harold J. VanderZwaag and Thomas J. Sheehan look at the different characteristics of sports that can be studied, including its social processes, philosophies, experiences, psychologies, and biomechanics, while also looking at careers in sports studies and teaching sport in school. My particular interest in their book is a section that talks about issues in sports. This section includes some of the things that schools consider when adding or discontinuing a program such as their football team. These factors go beyond the number of students enrolled and focus more on the current opinions of students and whether or not they want to participate in a school program. Staff qualification and facility management should also be considered in whether or not a high school can have its own football program. While most high school football coaches in Nebraska are also teachers, it can be hard to lure these coaches to rural communities. Facilities can also be problematic as they require great sums of money to be kept and periodically upgraded. Along with facilities, the athletic budget also includes team travel expenses and equipment prices. If the football budget is too great, the school may cut the football program in the interest of saving its scholastic programs. During times of financial crisis, it is hard to defend athletics over education.

While this is an extensive list of reasons against having a football program, VanderZwaag and Sheehan also explore the reasons why many people support them. Many school administrators believe that students should have the opportunity for involvement in any school-sponsored activity that they wish to participate in, including the ability to play on a football team. Athletics have always been a large part of the school structure, with their association with physical education, and the sports experience being a teacher of life skills. In sports, students learn to set winning goals, how to overcome adversity, and how to build character through competition. While football-related injuries, especially concussions, have become such a serious concern that some programs have been disbanded for that reason alone, many parents still wish for their boys to play because they believe so strongly in obtaining these life skills from the game. Boards of education, superintendents, and principals all promote interscholastic sports teams, as well as the community that shows up in the stands on Friday nights. The athletic scene not only brings the people of a school together, but also unites them with their fans, including parents, alumni, and other supporters in the community. The public attachment and support can be found expressed in many small-town newspapers around Nebraska, where there are a great deal of articles dedicated to their school's football team.

Football is a cultural cornerstone in Nebraska as well as in many states across the Great Plains. In the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (2011), edited by David J. Wishart, G. Allen Finchum writes a section dedicated to American football where he discusses the importance of the game to the region, opening by calling football a mainstay and saying,

"Since early settlers opened schools and towns began to organize community sporting activities, football has played a prominent role in the culture and identity of the region" (Finchum 2011, 772). While the discussion focuses on collegiate programs across the states of the Great Plains, high schools are also included as serving as community identifiers. There is also a section in the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* written by Peter Maslowski and John R. Wunder about the history and importance of six-man football in the Great Plains. The passion for the game of football and the creation of reduced-player versions shows that small town high schools in Nebraska will push for their own football program despite low enrollments or constrained athletic budgets. Unfortunately, even the best attempts by a high school to field a football team often aren't enough and they are forced to disband their program or play with a neighboring school. High school consolidation can be about more than sports, however, as it can also be a decision that is made on an educational or funding basis. In areas of widespread rural population like Nebraska, school consolidation often occurs due to declining rural population, among other factors.

The *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* also has a section written by Miles T. Bryant called "School Consolidation and Reorganization". In order to introduce the topic of school consolidation in the Great Plains, Bryant writes that "Geographic distance, the platting of agricultural land in large sections, and a widely-dispersed population all combined to make the rural school the only viable way to deliver education to the children of an expanding agricultural region" (Bryant 2011, 212). While Bryant focuses on the one-room school houses that served rural communities across Nebraska and the

Great Plains region, it is this same rural-based population that lead to these communities establishing their own high schools, despite having few students. However, as rural population has declined as Nebraska has become more urbanized, many of these schools are forced to consolidate because this sparse population can't support a property tax base that is enough to keep the school functioning. Small schools are often under pressure to consolidate by state agencies because it is a cost-saving alternative rather than the state providing the funding a struggling school needs to remain open. Bryant writes that reorganization periods throughout the history of Nebraska have targeted a reduction in the number of rural high schools in order to save money.

Despite resistance from small town representatives, who argue that a school district is important for their community both economically and culturally, it is difficult to overcome financial problems, and the state orders that a school must either cut programs to meet their budget or consolidate with another school. In economic crises, it is often the sports programs that are cut from a school's budget first in order to save the educational components. This is the case in many areas of the state where high schools are still operating, but their students are forced to join a neighboring high school's program if they wish to play a given sport. Football is often one of the first sports to go because it requires more players to field a team and equipment and insurance costs are higher than any other sport. While it is possible for a school to reduce its football program to six-man, it may still be difficult for a school to justify this move as so few schools play six-man that the closest competition may raise transportation costs higher

than the budget has room for. Cutting an athletic program, therefore, is not always enough to save a school's budget.

Some schools across the Great Plains, no matter how small, will still fight for their football program. High school and community pride can be seen in these struggles. In his book, *Where Dreams Die Hard* (2005), Carlton Stowers spends time in small-town Penelope, Texas during the 2004 football season. Penelope High School, which had only recently gotten their six-man team back in 1999 after a thirty-six-year absence, is a good example of a school and its community doing everything they can to keep their football program running. The book documents the comeback of six-man football to Penelope in 1999 and how the high school struggled with trying to keep enough players to field a team, buy the equipment, maintain their facilities, and try to find someone qualified to coach the team. From the debut season to the one that is documented in this book, the high school football team went through many high and lows, both on and off the field. Sowers also looks at neighboring high schools which, like Penelope, have gone through decades of rumors of closing or consolidation. This is a pressure that many small high schools face as enrollment numbers just aren't enough to keep their sports team or even their school functioning.

The pressure that is faced in Penelope is also found throughout Nebraska. In "The Last Season: Crisis Time in Modern Plains Agricultural Communities and the End of Six-Man Football", an article in the *The Charles T. Wood Agricultural History Lecture Series* (2003), author John Wunder looks at the declining number of six-man teams in Nebraska. After opening with a brief overview of the invention of the game in Chester, Wunder

looks at old railroad boom towns with high schools that are now declining due to rural depopulation. He uses McCool Junction and its high school as an example. His article discusses the end of the six-man football sanctioned state tournament by the Nebraska Schools Activities Association that took place after the 1998 season. Although high schools planned to continue playing six-man football without a playoff system in place, it is seen as the end of the game as it signals that so few teams play that there is no need for postseason competition. Wunder contributes fewer six-man high schools to the state passing laws to close small schools, and wealthy businessmen from Omaha who want to limit local taxation and state spending. As small schools get less money due to a smaller student body, they have a hard time supporting themselves and are forced to consider closing or consolidating their school.

In the *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy* (2011), Jean M. Blauwkamp, Peter J. Longo, and John Anderson look at the factors driving statewide rural school consolidation in their article, "School Consolidation in Nebraska: Economic Efficiency vs. Rural Community Life". Along with the decline in rural population, they add limited funding, poor facilities, relatively low teacher salaries, and few special programs and central office staff to the list of reasons schools are forced to consolidate. While these appear to be educational reasons, they are more economically linked because state school funding typically goes to the high schools that have the best educational package. The authors describe this economic situation as a huge blow to social conditions within the rural school and its community. Students and teachers are forced to abandon their old relationships and place attachments while getting acclimated to their new school. The

same can be said about the families of these students who have come together to support the high school and its sports programs. Communities are also at a loss as they forfeit the economic benefits that come from having a high school in their town. Residents of the community will still pay taxes to the district that has been absorbed and to a high school that is based in another town. For every consolidation, there is a community that has lost its pride.

Jeanne L. Surface gives an analysis of a rural community's response to school consolidation in her article, "Losing a Way of Life: The Closing of a Country School in Rural Nebraska". In her article, written in the *County School Journal* (2016), Surface looks at the loss of a school that she has named County School A and studies the effects it had on the community around it. She has observed communities that have lost schools before and seen patterns of decreased property value, less local economic vitality, and a lost sense of identity. In her research, she looks at many articles from the local newspaper and interviews people of the community, finding that even though it has been years since the school in question has been closed, there is still a lot of residual anger and resentment. She argues that state agencies need to examine what's best for the students and families rather than relying only on economic factors in making the decision for a school to consolidate. In the conclusion of her article, Surface finds that "forced consolidation can leave a small community empty and its citizens angry with a loss of connection to the newly formed district and to their own community" (Surface 2016, 62).

The consolidation of schools in Nebraska can be seen as a sign of declining rural population. In a 2013 *Forbes Sports & Leisure* article, "In Rural America, School Sports

Dying with the Population", writer Bob Cook discusses the rising trend of two (or more) high schools combining their sports teams and school consolidation in rural areas. Cook looks at the end of high school football in these small towns as symbolic of the decline of rural America. Rural depopulation is evident as more and more small town high schools are having trouble finding enough students to field even a reduced-player football team. Cook specifically mentions central and western Nebraska as being areas where an increasing number of high school football teams are falling off the map.

A lot of Cook's article is based on that of Dirk Chatelain's 2013 *Omaha World-Herald* article, "The Disappearance of Small-Town Football". In his article, Chatelain chronicles the last season of football at Lindsay Holy Family High School in Lindsay, Nebraska. He begins by taking the reader on the 368-mile bus ride that the football team must make to play Banner County High School in Harrisburg. While mapping the long travel route between the two small towns, Chatelain highlights all the towns they pass through that used to have their own high school football teams. There is also a bar graph that shows how much the average miles driven to away games has gone up. In the thirty years that have passed since 1983, the total number of high school football programs in Nebraska has dropped by more than twenty percent. Chatelain attributes the disappearance of high school football in rural areas to advanced farming machinery lessening the demand for farmhand jobs, the lure of cities, families not having as many children, changes in rural economics leading to generation gaps as populations move in or out, and fewer kids wanting to play football. Besides the last factor, likely due to the fear of football-related injuries, the rest can be seen as different forms of depopulation in

rural Nebraska. Communities are not only losing their population, but also the high schools that represent and unite them.

Using the town of Lindsay makes for a great narrative showing the challenges a community faces as it prepares to lose its high school football team. Lindsay Holy Family High School, however, is far from being the only school in Nebraska to consider a sports cooperative or school consolidation. Some of these mergers are positive, like the one found in Ron Powell's article in the *Lincoln Journal Star* (2007), "Consolidation Forces Athletes to Mesh into New Teams". This article looks at the consolidation of Nemaha Valley (in Cook) and Tecumseh to form Johnson County Central. Interviews with parents and students show an optimistic outlook as they feel it's better for both academics and athletics. The newly-formed Johnson County Central football coach even talks about how it's great for Nemaha Valley as they went from having trouble finding enough players to field an eight-man team to their biggest challenge now being learning how to play the eleven-man game.

Some stories don't have the same feelings as Johnson County Central, however. One example comes from a 2009 Associated Press report in the *New York Times*, "To Survive, Rival Teams Have to Combine". This article looks at the consolidation between Sandhills High School in Dunning, Nebraska and the nearby high school in Thedford. Bitter rivals on the gridiron, these schools were forced to come together due to extremely low enrollment numbers. According to the article, Thomas County, where Thedford is located, had seen a twenty percent population decrease since 2000, while Dunning and Blaine County had a population decrease of twenty-seven percent in the same time frame.

In fact, the consolidated football team still has trouble finding enough players to field an eight-man football team. To put this into perspective, the combined school districts of both high schools cover more land area than the entire state of Rhode Island.

Similar articles about combining sports teams, consolidating schools, and disbanded football programs have filled the state's newspapers throughout the history of high school football in Nebraska. The next chapter aims at tracking the history and geography of reduced-player high school football programs across the state while discussing the patterns of rural depopulation that have occurred over the last century. The third chapter will look specifically at the history of high school football in Custer County and its relationship to population patterns over time. The fourth chapter will be my personal geography from my time spent with an eight-man football team at Lewiston High School and the recent loss of the team to a cooperative agreement with Southern High School. After the fourth chapter, a postscript will discuss the future of six and eight-man football in Nebraska.

CHAPTER TWO

SIX AND EIGHT-MAN FOOTBALL IN NEBRASKA SCHOOLS

(Figure 2.1) Shaded Counties Have 1930 or Earlier as Year of Highest Census Population

While the Homestead Act of 1862 enticed people to move to Nebraska by providing them with 160 acres to farm, it was the railroad industry that created settlement opportunities across the state. Thanks to new rail routes sprawling from the Platte River valley where, along with the Missouri River, the population was concentrated, farmers in rural areas could transport their crops to market. T-towns, towns built with their main street perpendicular to the railroad, were built seemingly overnight, providing goods and services to the surrounding area. Populations increased in remote areas of the state as farmers experienced success in the crop market. Soon, there were schools built to educate the children in these new communities. Almost every town had its own school district before the turn of the century.

The early 20th century was not kind to the Great Plains. Railroad companies went bankrupt, the Great Depression drove market prices into the ground, and the infamous Dust Bowl of the 1930s made it nearly impossible to farm the land. Many farmers gave

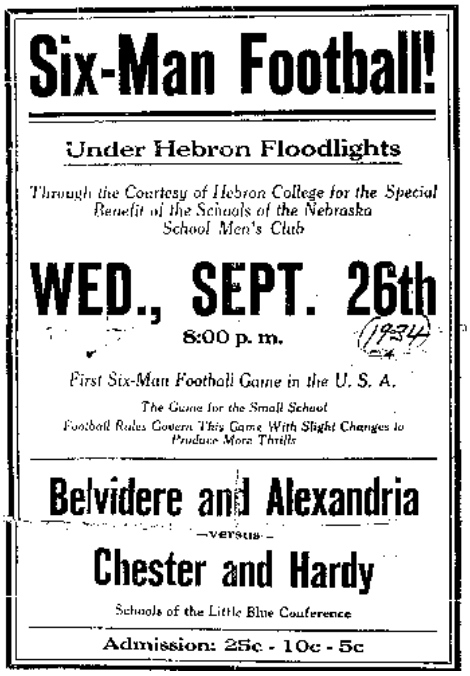
up and left for better opportunities, either in Lincoln or Omaha or elsewhere in the country. Farms across the state began a trend of consolidation, leading to further rural depopulation. Seventy-two of Nebraska's 93 counties had year of highest census population in 1930 or earlier (Figure 2.1).

The first high school football game played in Nebraska was between Lincoln High and the University of Nebraska in 1891. Omaha and Ashland joined Lincoln in 1892 to create the Nebraska Interscholastic Football League. The football craze continued to spread across the eastern half of the state as Plattsmouth and Nebraska City were the next to join in 1893. Football was slowly picked up by schools in the western half of the state, where there were areas that weren't fully settled yet. In fact, most of western Nebraska was still without electricity. In 1905, North Platte was the first western team to win the state championship. Football was able to survive despite the many high schools that dropped the game due to its dangerous nature, before restarting their programs after uniformed rules had been put in place and safety requirements, such as helmets and pads, had been issued (in 1920). By 1924, most of the high schools in large towns and cities were playing football (Mathers 1980).

In the 1920s and early 1930s, there were many high schools in small towns who wished to field a football team, but were unable to because of low enrollment numbers, long distances from opponents, and insufficient funding. For example, Stockham (Hamilton County) made a few attempts to start a program, but they only had around twelve boys each year, and eventually closed in 1949. There were also high schools that were as small as Tamora (Seward County) and Marion (Red Willow County) that didn't

have the numbers to play any sport, although both schools did manage to have a basketball team for a year, before closing in 1940 and 1948, respectively. Some high schools had a football team, but only played a few games each season due to long travel distances. One such team, Atkinson (Holt County), had to travel 200 miles west to Chadron and 100 miles east to Norfolk for games. Financial constraints played a large role in high school sports then just as they do now. This was the case with Liberty Rural (Sioux County), which fielded a football team in the late 1920s, only to drop the program after a few years to cut costs (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994). Low enrollment numbers, however, were (and still are) the biggest factor determining if a high school had a football team. Because of this, many small high schools were excluded from the sport until the early 1930s, when one Nebraskan created a variation of the game that could be played with less people.

Six-man football was created in 1934 by Stephen Epler of Chester, Nebraska as an alternative for schools that did not have eleven boys to field the minimum number of players. Chester, the high school where Epler was a teacher, teamed up with nearby Hardy high school and played against a combination of players from Alexandria and Belvidere high schools in Hebron, Nebraska in the first ever six-man football game on September 26, 1934 (Maslowski & Wunder 2004, 773). Many coaches read articles and posts, similar to the one shown in Figure 2.2, and traveled to the game. Walking away impressed, they took Epler's six-man rulebook back to their own high schools. While it was the only organized six-man game that season, a large number of coaches in Nebraska



(Figure 2.2) Advertisement for First Six-Man Football Game (Nebraska High School Sports)

took notice of this new variation of the game that was being played by small towns in Thayer County, and it was quickly adopted by many small town high schools across the state over the late 1930s.

The advent of six-man football in Nebraska was certainly a success; forty high schools had started playing it three years after its creation. One of those six-man games took place in the University of Nebraska's Memorial Stadium, where Nehawka (Cass County) and Chester (Thayer County) played an exhibition that displayed the new game. The next year, 1938, saw a jump to 70 six-man schools. The numbers quickly climbed to 95 teams in 1939 and 111 in 1940. The Hardy (Nuckolls County) Dragons were one of the earliest dynasties in six-man football, winning the inaugural championship in 1936, followed by three more championships in 1937, 1938, and 1941 (Mathers 1980).

The number of six-man football teams continued to increase in the early 1940s, although the total number of high school football teams in Nebraska decreased during World War II. Many larger high schools across the state were forced to consider reduced player football, cooperative teams, or even cancelling their football seasons due to war-time travel restrictions, a shortage of coaches, and the departure of boys over the age of eighteen to the armed services. While larger high schools could remain open, the loss of students and teachers to the war effort was enough to shut down many smaller schools.

(Table 2.1)

Year	11-man Schools	6-man Schools
1940	206	111
1941	198	119
1942	178	115
1943	159	124
1944	160	134
1945	162	138
1946	170	127
1947	171	135
1948	175	148
1949	176	157

*Data from annual Nebraska School Activities Association bulletins

Inavale (Webster County) was one such school which fell on hard times during the war. While the school managed to stay open until 1955, football was discontinued in 1942 after only three years due to low enrollment numbers and travel constraints. Wellfleet (Lincoln County) wasn't as fortunate, as they closed their doors in 1945. Union (Cass County) continued to struggle after the war, even to the point of graduating just two students in 1949, but managed stay open until 1956. Both Naponee (Franklin County) and their rival Republican City (Harlan County), which had been eleven-man teams,

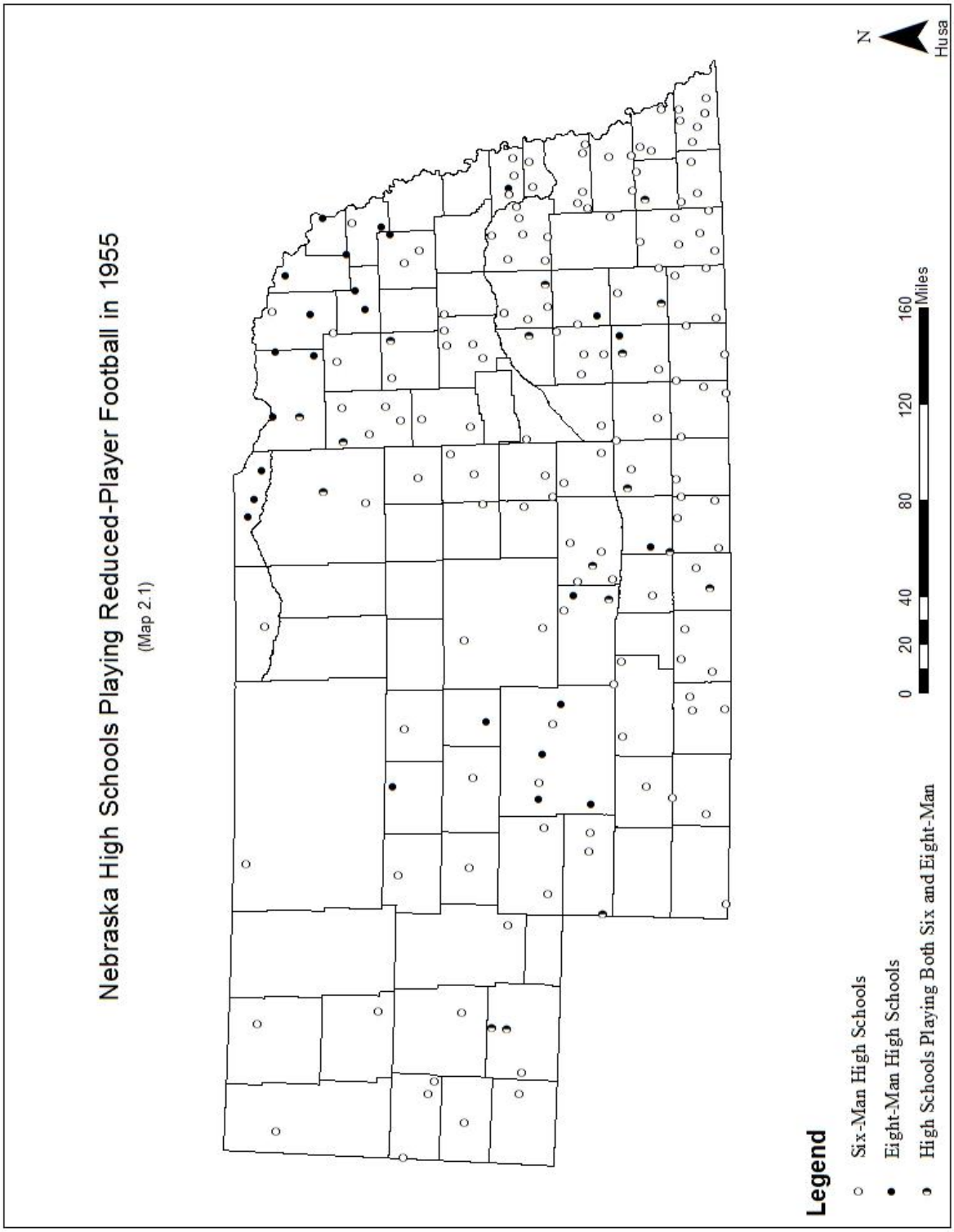
played six-man football during and after the war (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

(Table 2.2)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools	6-man Schools
1950	176	-	167
1951	176	7	172
1952	175	12	177
1953	180	13	183
1954	194	15	169
1955	182	25	147
1956	189	88	105
1957	181	124	78
1958	185	145	56
1959	185	163	41

*Data from annual Nebraska School Activities Association bulletins

The number of six-man football teams in the first half of the 1950s gained ground on eleven-man teams, drawing within four in 1951, with 176 eleven-man and 172 six-man teams. Six-man football would go on to surpass eleven-man football in team numbers in 1952 by a tally of 177 to 175, before reaching an all-time high in 1953 with a total of 183 teams. In 1951, however, a new reduced version of football, featuring eight players, was introduced to Nebraska high schools. Eight-man football was played by 7 teams in 1951, on an experimental basis. The game was adopted by an increasing number of high schools across the state and officially played on a non-experimental basis for the first time in 1954 by 15 high schools. This same year, the number of six-man teams dropped to 169, fourteen less than the number of teams that played the previous year. Nineteen fifty-six was the last year that six-man outnumbered eight-man teams (Annual Nebraska High School Activities Association Bulletins).


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1955
(Map 2.1)
Legend
Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools
High Schools Playing Both Six and Eight-Man
0 20 40 80 120 160 Miles
N
Husa

While the decrease of six-man can be contributed to schools upgrading to eight-man, seen in the maps of 1955 (Map 2.1) and 1960 (Map 2.2), there were also many high schools that closed throughout the decade due to depopulation. There's the city of Rulo (Richardson County), which played an important role in the early history of Nebraska as an area of commerce and transportation along the Missouri River, whose population dropped over the 1940s, resulting in low enrollment numbers in the high school and its subsequent closing in 1951. Emerson (Dixon County) was known for having some of the best six-man football teams, including receiving a number one ranking in 1949 and 1950. Just a few years later, in 1952, Emerson High School was closed. The Gophers of Grafton (Fillmore County) also experienced success as a six-man team before the high school closed in 1956 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

Declining population also led to the forming of Beaver Valley (Red Willow County) High School in Lebanon, from the districts of Danbury, Hamburg, Lebanon, Marion, and Wilsonville, each of which had a six-man team. As the decade reached its latter years, six-man football continued to lose numbers, with high schools closing in Blue Springs (Gage County) in 1957, Burr (Otoe County) in 1958, and North Loup (Valley County) in 1959, just to name a few. Like many of these high schools, North Loup had once had an eleven-man team - their Challengers were rated number one in 1923 and 1924 - but the school moved down to six-man when enrollment numbers dwindled. After closing, the district consolidated with nearby Scotia, an eleven-man team (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

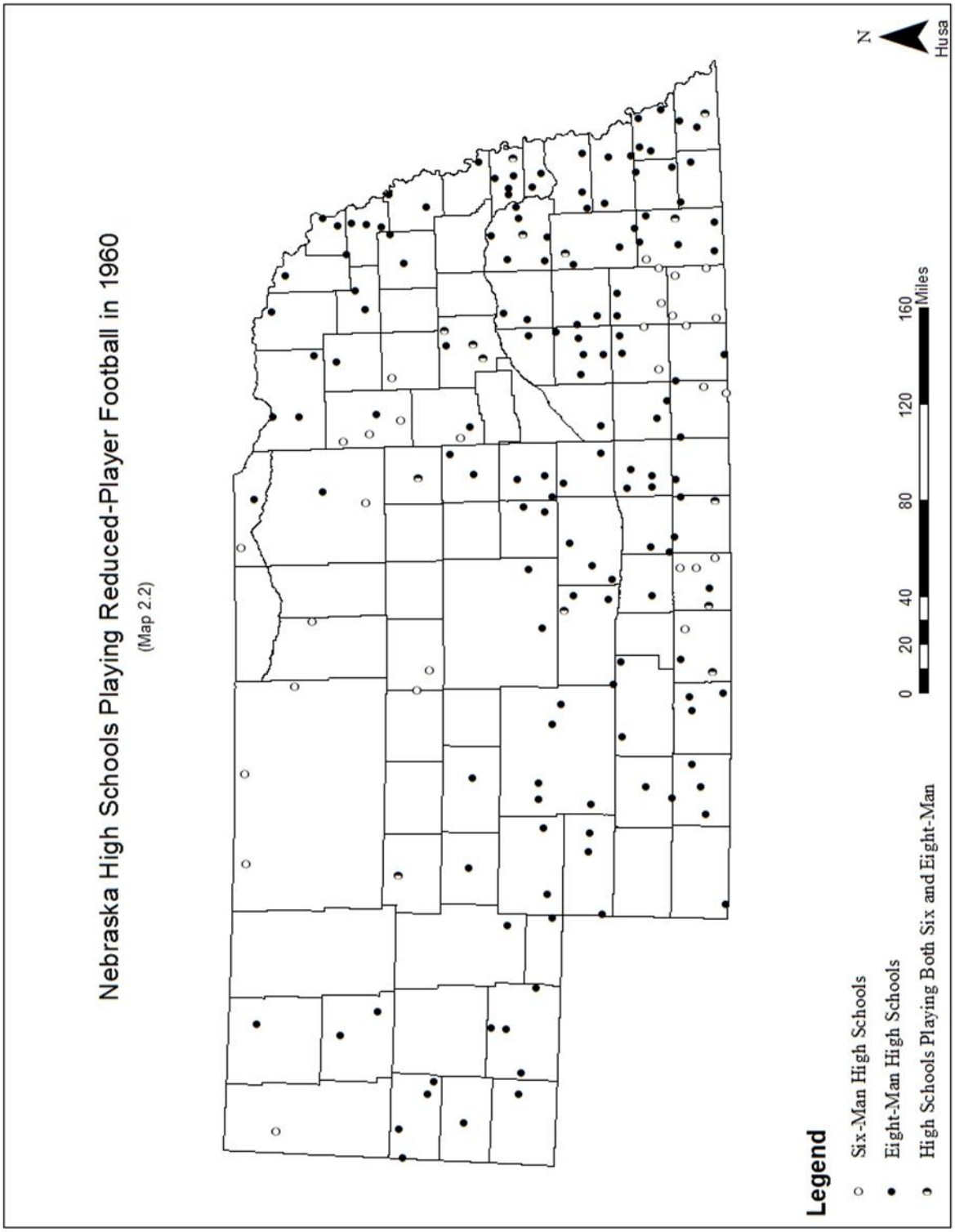
The 1960s, especially the latter half, was a decade of statewide school closings and district consolidations in predominantly rural regions. While low enrollment numbers were a factor in consolidation, insufficient funding was perhaps the main culprit. Struggling high schools were often forced to consolidate with their neighbors, which were usually also in a state of financial crisis. With fewer schools, the money used to fund schools in Nebraska could be distributed in greater shares. As the consolidation effort targeted small schools, it inadvertently changed the geography of high school football in Nebraska, especially in the eastern half of the state. When these small schools, most of which played six or eight-man football, were consolidated, the new high school usually had enough boys to play eleven-man football. This, along with the popularity of eight-man football in the small high schools that remained, resulted in the end of six-man football in 1966.

(Table 2.3)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools	6-man Schools
1960	191	167	33
1961	207	154	25
1962	217	164	11
1963	230	158	8
1964	239	152	5
1965	257	136	4
1966	252	140	4
1967	265	102	-
1968	265	99	-
1969	270	93	-

*Data from annual Nebraska School Activities Association bulletins

In 1960, Alvo (Cass County) Consolidated High School, which was built in 1916 as one of the state's earliest consolidated schools, closed their doors as they merged high


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1960
(Map 2.2)
Legend
Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools
High Schools Playing Both Six and Eight-Man
0 20 40 80 120 160
Miles
N
Husa

schools with nearby Eagle (Cass County). Alvo-Eagle, as they were called, closed just six years later as both school districts joined Waverly (Lancaster County). Both Alvo and Eagle had been six-man teams before playing eight-man as Alvo-Eagle. After 1966, boys from Alvo and Eagle played for Waverly's eleven-man team (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

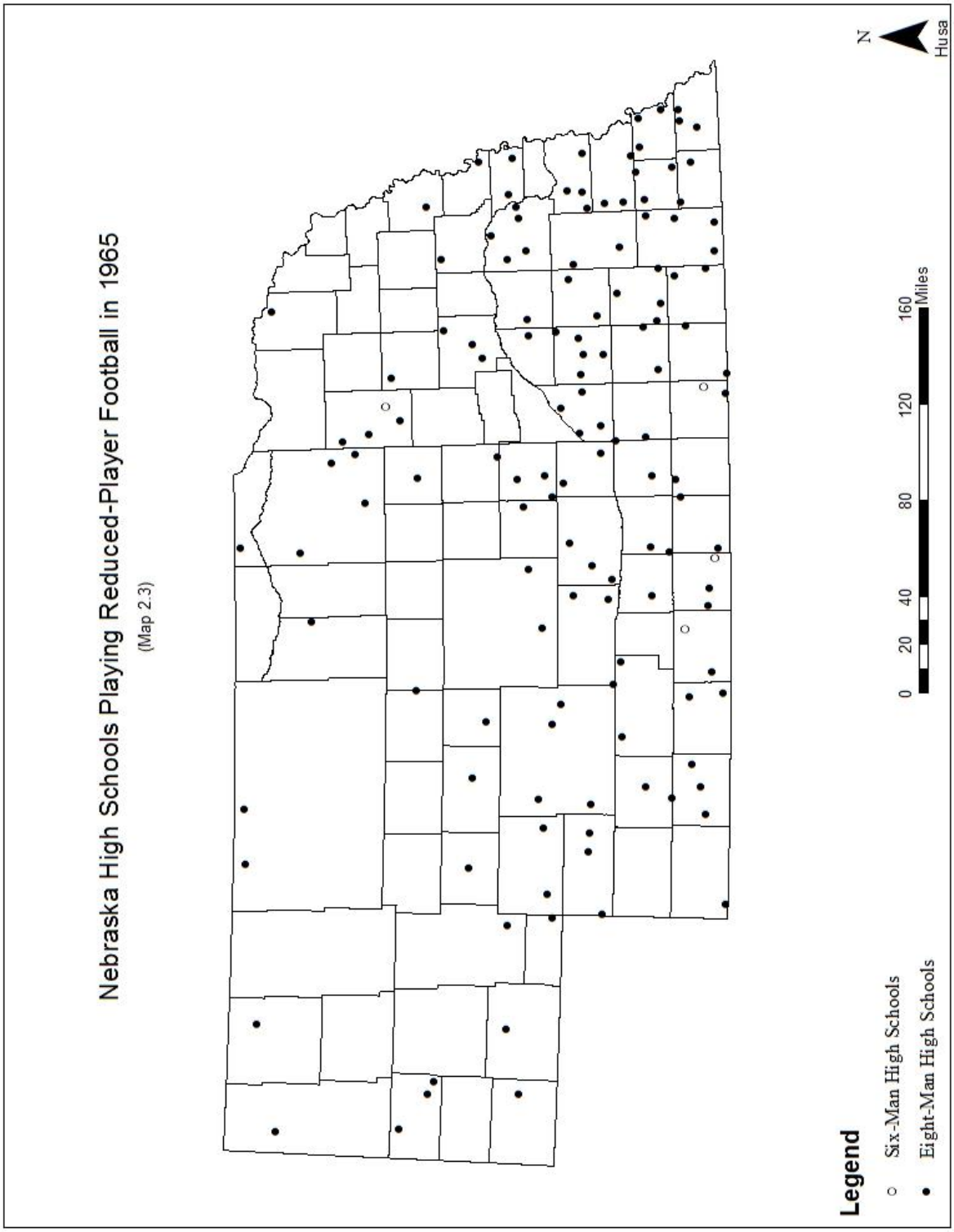
To the northwest, in 1961, Butler County experienced two major consolidations. Aquinas High School, located near David City, opened after a proposal for a central Catholic high school in the county was accepted. The eleven-man football team of Aquinas was made of the former six and eight-man teams of Marietta of Bellwood and Assumption at Dwight, as well as St. Mary's of David City, which, despite only being open since 1953, ranked among the top teams in the state, having participated in six, eight, and eleven-man football during their brief history. On the other side of the county, East Butler High School, located in Brainard, was formed from the districts of Brainard, Dwight, Loma, and other rural districts in the eastern portion of the county. After starting off as an eleven-man team, East Butler had moved down to eight-man by the end of the decade (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

South of Lincoln there was a push to consolidate the high schools in the small communities on the Lancaster and Gage County border. In 1964, Norris High School opened in a relatively central location between the towns of Firth, Cortland, and Pickrell, among others. Many of these high schools had played six-man football before becoming members of Norris's eleven-man Titans. A similar situation happened to the southwest of Norris, when Tri County High School opened in 1966. Tri County was formed from the

consolidations of DeWitt (Saline County), Plymouth (Jefferson County), and Swanton (Saline County). Both DeWitt and Plymouth had been six-man teams before moving up to eight-man by 1965. In fact, the DeWitt Panthers followed a 1960 number one ranking in six-man football with a number one ranking in eight-man in 1961 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994). Tri County has recently moved down to eight-man.

Elsewhere in southeast Nebraska, in Stella to be exact, Southeast Consolidated High School was opened in 1966. Southeast Consolidated was formed when the high schools of Stella and Shubert in Richardson County, as well as Nemaha in Nemaha County, consolidated their districts. The Mustangs, as the sports teams of Southeast Consolidated were named, were able to field an eleven-man team with members of the former six-man teams of Stella, Shubert, and Nemaha, before moving down to eight-man football in the 1980s as their enrollment numbers declined. Southeast Consolidated's enrollment continued to drop, leading to the closing of the school in 2009 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

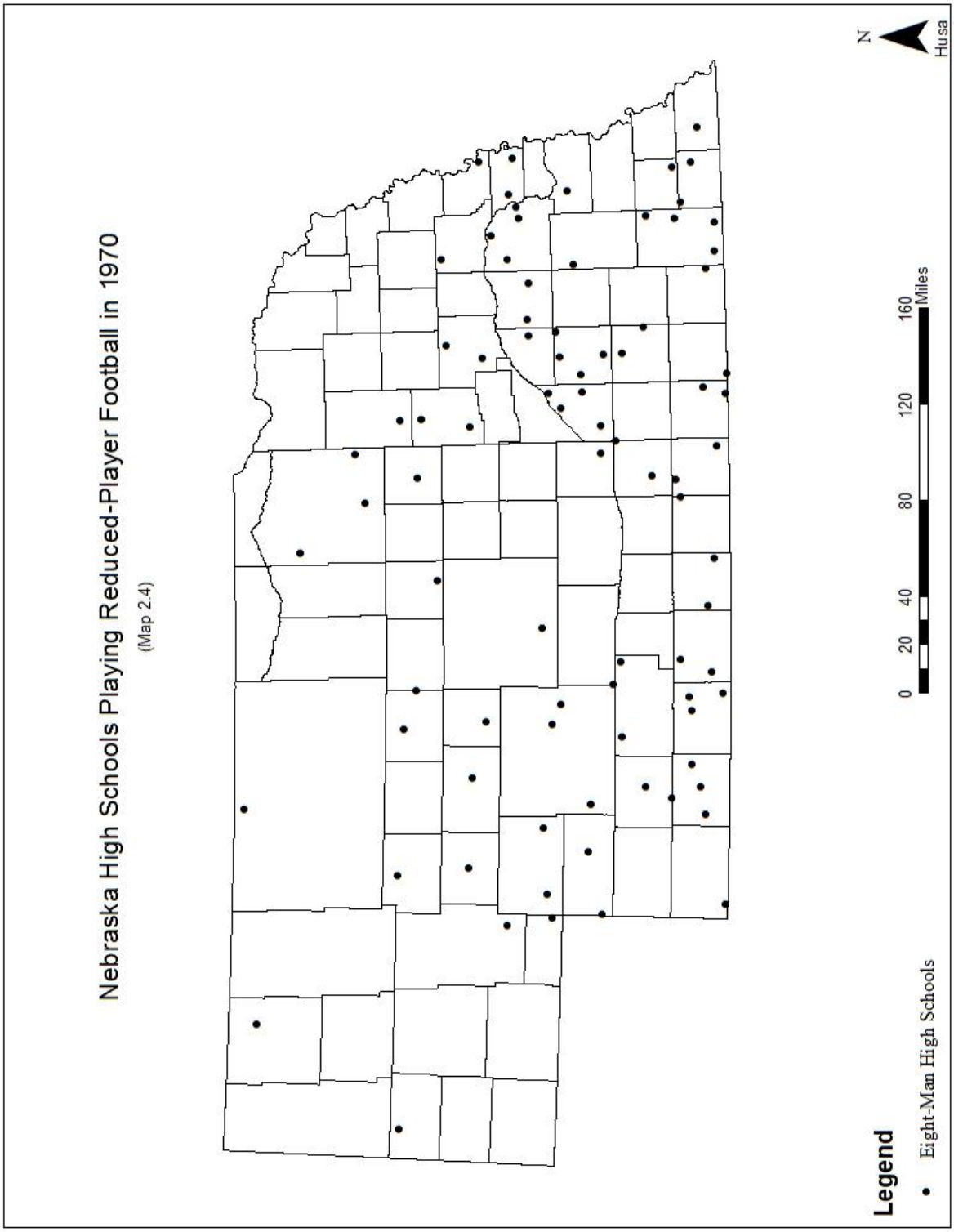
Many of the small town high schools in central eastern Nebraska were also consolidated during the late 1960s. Raymond Central was opened in 1967 in a central location between Raymond (Lancaster County), and Ceresco and Valparaiso in Saunders County. After playing their first six-man game in 1949, The Ceresco Eagles were able to top the rankings in 1955, before doing the same in 1958 as an eight-man team. To the west, also in 1967, Centennial High School was formed from the consolidation of Corova, Utica, and the 1963 and 1964 eight-man champion Beaver Crossing of western Seward County, and Thayer and Waco of eastern York County. All six of the high


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1965
(Map 2.3)
N
Husa
0 20 40 80 120 160 Miles
Legend
Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

schools that formed the eleven-man Centennial Broncos had previously been six or eight-man teams (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

Another 1967 consolidation closed three six and eight-man high schools in southern Howard and northern Hall counties. The boys of Dannebrog, Boelus, and Cairo, went on to play for the eleven-man Centura Centurions football team. A year later, Sandy Creek High School opened after four high schools in southern Clay County were consolidated. Fairfield, eight-man champions in 1959 and 1960, along with Edgar, Glenvil, and Deweese, had their reduced player football teams taken off the map when they joined the newly formed eleven-man Sandy Creek Cougars (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

These consolidations changed the landscape of high school football across southeast Nebraska, as new eleven-man teams appeared, and six and eight-man teams disappeared. Other 1960s consolidations that impacted the geography of six and eight-man football include Sumner-Eddyville-Miller (Dawson County), Chester, the birthplace of six-man football, and Hubbell (Thayer County) in 1967, Elkhorn Valley, a consolidation of Meadow Grove and Tilden in Madison County in 1967, Oakland-Craig (Burt County) in 1969, and Republican Valley (Red Willow County), a consolidation of Indianola and Red Willow, in 1969 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994). The consolidations can be seen as groups of dots on the 1965 map (Map 2.3) disappear, and one dot centrally located in the group, emerges on the 1970 map (Map 2.4). The 1970 map (Map 2.4) shows that even though there were a large number of consolidations in the 1960s, there were still many schools playing eight-man football at the end of the decade.


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1970
(Map 2.4)
N
Husa
0 20 40 80 120 160 Miles
Legend
Eight-Man High Schools

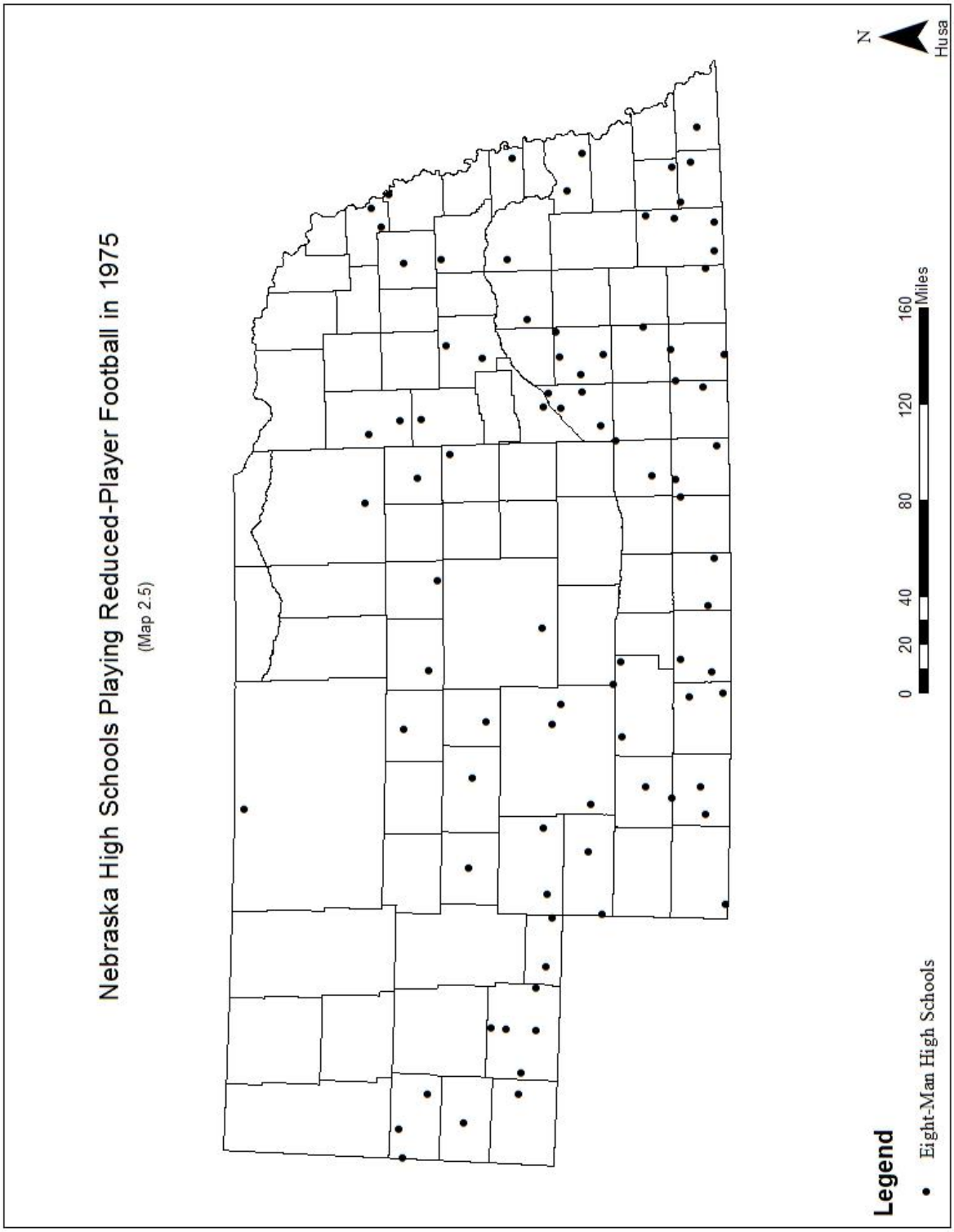
(Table 2.4)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools
1970	276	85
1971	278	85
1972	280	87
1973	278	84
1974	275	84
1975	270	90
1976	274	89
1977	274	89
1978	260	101
1979	250	111

*Data from annual Nebraska School Activities Association bulletins

In central Nebraska, Sandhills High School was established in 1972 to consolidate the school districts of Blaine County and parts of Custer, Logan, and Thomas Counties. The school, located in Dunning, brought together the high school in the county seat, Brewster, and Halsey-Dunning, which had opened in 1962 when Halsey, of Thomas County, consolidated with Dunning. The Panthers of Sandhills High School played eight-man football until declining enrollment numbers led to combining their sports teams with Thedford (Thomas County) in 2009 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

In 1977, the Meridian school district was formed south of Lincoln to consolidate schools at Daykin (Jefferson County), Tobias (Saline County), and Alexandria (Thayer County), which had been one of the first high schools to play six-man football. The newly formed Mustangs of Meridian spent many years as an eleven-man football team before recent low enrollment numbers have seen them drop to eight-man (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994). In the coming years, Meridian may even be making the move to six-man.


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1975
(Map 2.5)
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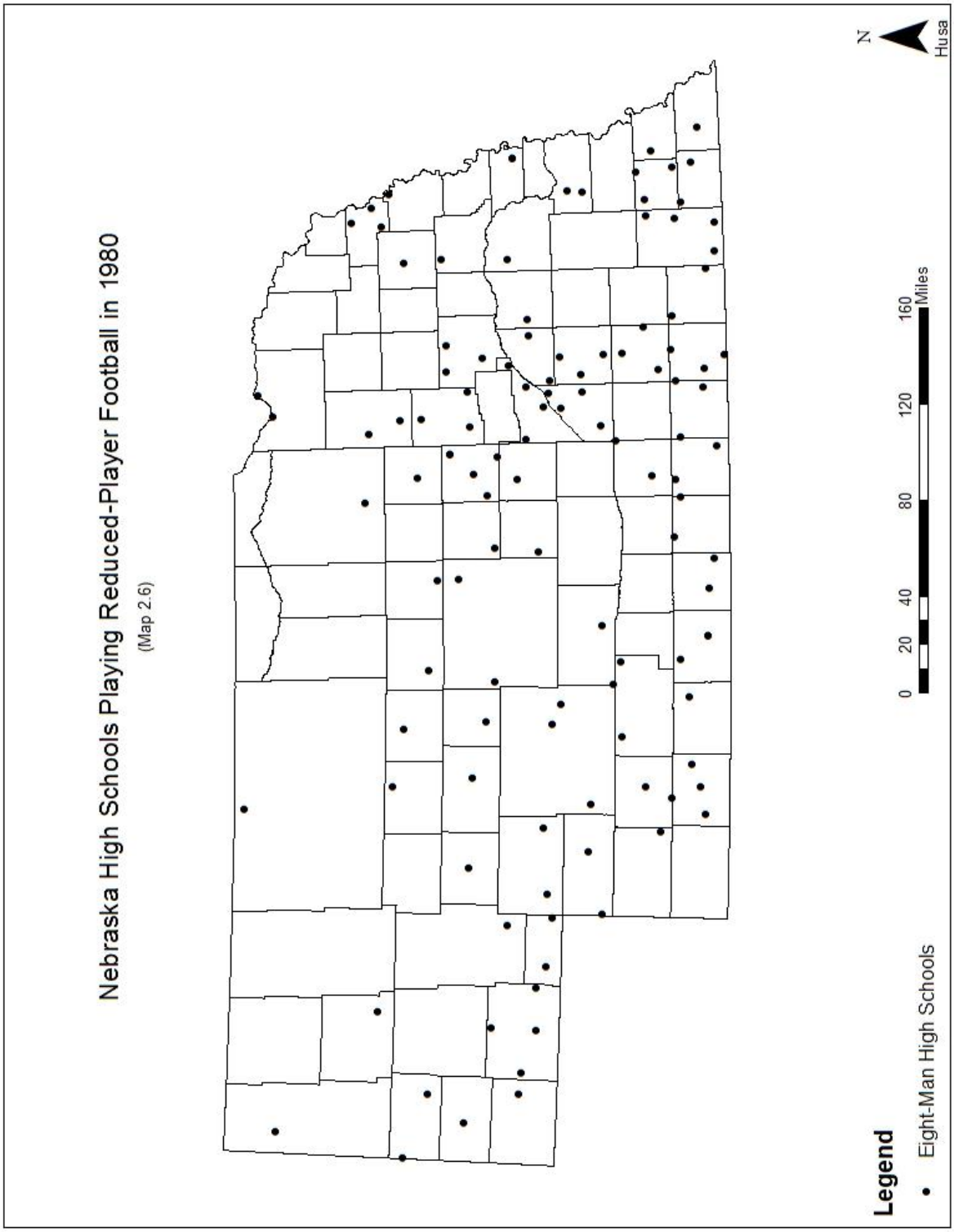
0 20 40 80 120 160 Miles
Legend
Eight-Man High Schools

Eight-man football became popular in the southern half of the panhandle over the course of the decade as rural populations declined. High schools in Cheyenne County, outside of Sidney, joined eight-man football as they struggled to find enough players due to decreasing enrollments. In 1978, Gurley and Dalton consolidated their high schools. The result was Leyton High School, named from combining the last three letters of each town name (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994). In addition to Cheyenne County, eight-man football was being played in the counties of Banner, Deuel, Kimball, and Scotts Bluff. Towards the end of the decade, eight-man football made its return to the northern half of the panhandle in two high schools, Alliance St. Agnes (Box Butte County) and Harrison (Sioux County). This trend would continue in the 1980s as Crawford (Dawes County), Hemingford (Box Butte County), and Hay Springs (Sheridan County) each dropped from eleven to eight-man.

In the same year that Leyton High School opened in western Nebraska, Conestoga High School opened in the east. In southeast Cass County, in an area that is served by both Lincoln and Omaha, the towns of Murray, Nehawka, and Beaver Lake consolidated their school districts to form Conestoga. Along with the previous consolidations in the 1960s, and with many of the eight-man high schools in Colfax, Dodge, and Saunders counties moving up to eleven-man, reduced-player football became a rarity in the Lincoln and Omaha area by the 1980s. This rarity still exists today, as the only schools playing six or eight-man football in the area are private schools, such as Lincoln Parkview Christian and Omaha Christian Academy, that have a selective enrollment (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1980
(Map 2.6)
N
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0 20 40 80 120 160 Miles
Legend
Eight-Man High Schools

While eight-man football became rare in the eastern part of the state, many high schools in central Nebraska dropped down from eleven-man football. This change can be seen on the map of 1980 (Map 2.6), where many dots near each other begin to appear in central Nebraska. This is a good example of the domino effect that often happens in high school football, where if one school makes the switch to another class of football, their neighboring schools will often follow for scheduling and travelling purposes.

(Table 2.5)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools	6-man Schools
1980	237	119	0
1981	234	125	1
1982	211	143	2
1983	203	145	11
1984	201	132	19
1985	197	132	23
1986	193	132	24
1987	186	129	31
1988	186	133	27
1989	180	131	31

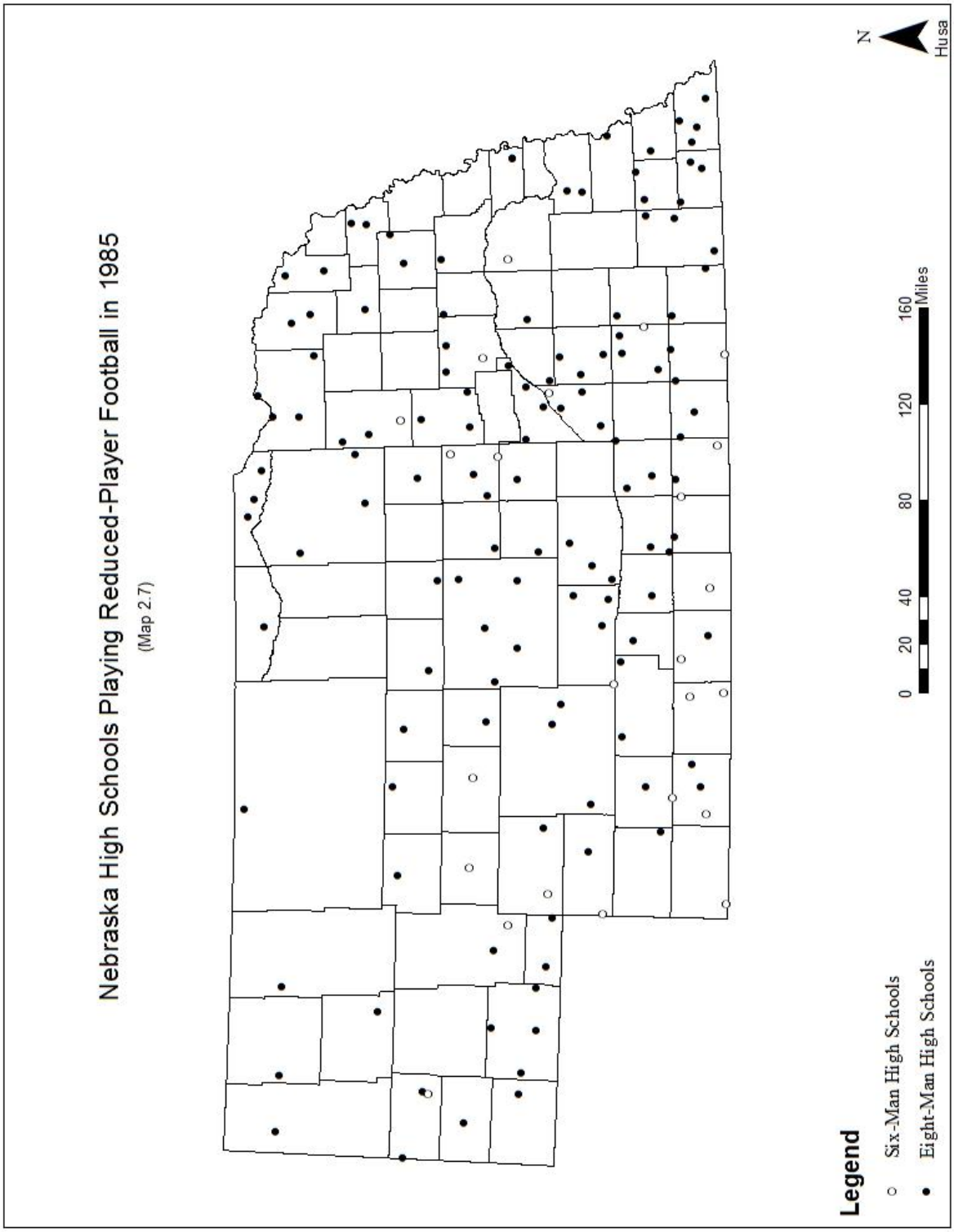
*Data from annual Nebraska High School Activities Association bulletins

Six-man football returned to Nebraska in Ruskin (Nuckolls County) in 1981. Although Ruskin High School would close the next year, six-man would continue its comeback with two high schools in Republican City (Harlan County) and Gresham (York County). In 1983, there were eleven high schools playing six-man football in Nebraska. This increased to nineteen in 1984. Six-man numbers would continue to rise all the way to thirty-one in 1987, before dropping down to twenty-nine at the end of the decade (Nebraska State Activities Association). The increasing number of six-man teams can be seen on the 1980 (Map 2.6), 1985 (Map 2.7), and 1990 (Map 2.8) maps, with a large

concentration in the central Nebraska counties of Wheeler, Greeley, and Howard, as well as in the counties along the Nebraska-Kansas border.

The 1980s began with eight-man football emerging in the high schools of the northeast counties of Boyd, Cedar, Dixon, Keya Paha, Knox, and Thurston. In 1982, Bancroft (Cuming County), the number one six-man team in 1951, consolidated with Rosalie (Thurston County). The Panthers of Bancroft-Rosalie would go on to win the Class D-1 eight-man state championship in 1985. In Boyd County, Spencer consolidated with Naper in 1988, merging two of the largest districts in the county. Spencer had been one of the first high schools opened in northeast Nebraska. Recently, Spencer-Naper consolidated with Butte, also of Boyd County, to form West Boyd. Another Boyd County high school, Lynch, is currently in a sports cooperative with West Boyd. The two high schools play eight-man football together under the name of Boyd County (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

In the opposite part of the state, in 1983, Wilsonville (Furnas County), which had achieved success as both a six and eight-man team throughout the years, consolidated with Beaver Valley (Red Willow County). To the west, Haigler (Dundy County), among the earliest high schools in southwest Nebraska, was closed after two lone seniors graduated in 1987. Haigler joined the western half of the county, which had consolidated the previous year, to create Dundy County High School, located in Benkleman. The Dundy County Tigers played eleven-man football before declining enrollments led to the switch to eight-man in recent years (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1985
(Map 2.7)
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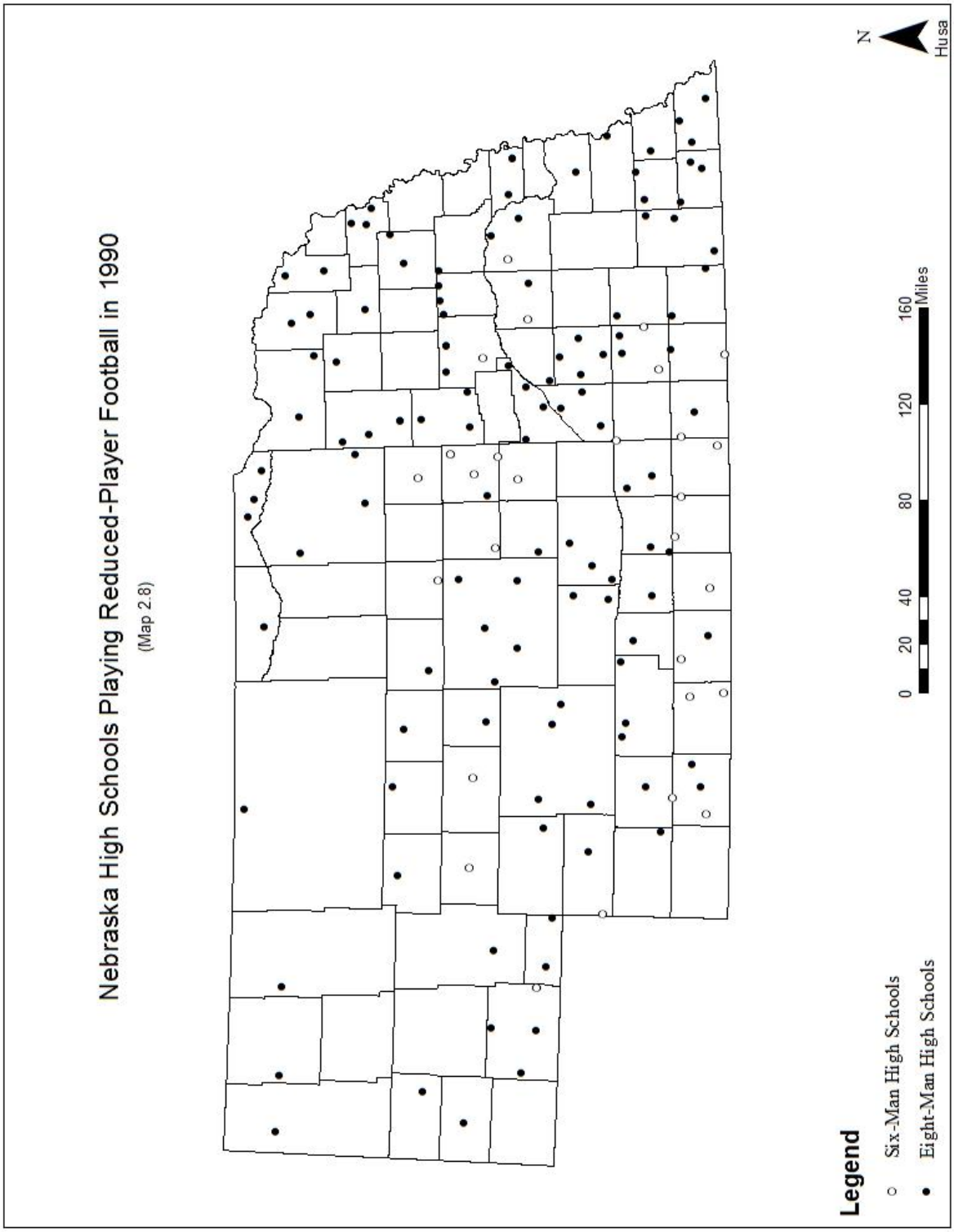
Legend
Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

To the east, Silver Lake (Adams County) had a similar experience. Formed from the consolidation of Roseland (Adams County) and Bladen (Webster County), the Mustangs of Silver Lake were able to switch from six-man football in their 1986 inaugural season, to eight, and then eleven-man football as the school grew. In recent years, however, the Mustangs have returned to eight-man football as low enrollment numbers have plagued the school (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

Three six-man teams that had played in 1985 had combined football programs with existing eight-man teams through cooperative sports or consolidation just before the 1990 season. What is interesting about these three teams, is that each one crosses county lines, with the 1986 consolidation of Polk (Polk County) and Hordville (Hamilton County), as well as the cooperative sports agreements of Eustis (Frontier County) and Farnam (Dawson County), and Big Springs (Deuel County) and Brule (Keith County), which now play as the South Platte Knights. Potter (Cheyenne County) and Dixon (Kimball County), consolidated in 1987, merging both of their eight-man teams into one. There were also two school consolidations in the Omaha vicinity during this time, with Snyder and Scribner (1987), of Dodge County, and Elmwood and Murdock (1990), of Cass County. Elsewhere, Wauneta (Chase County) and Palisade (Hitchcock County) entered a cooperative agreement in athletics in 1990 before consolidating schools in 1992. The Falls City Sacred Heart (Richardson County) Fighting Irish won the first of their six consecutive eight-man Class D2 state championships in 1989 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1990
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Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

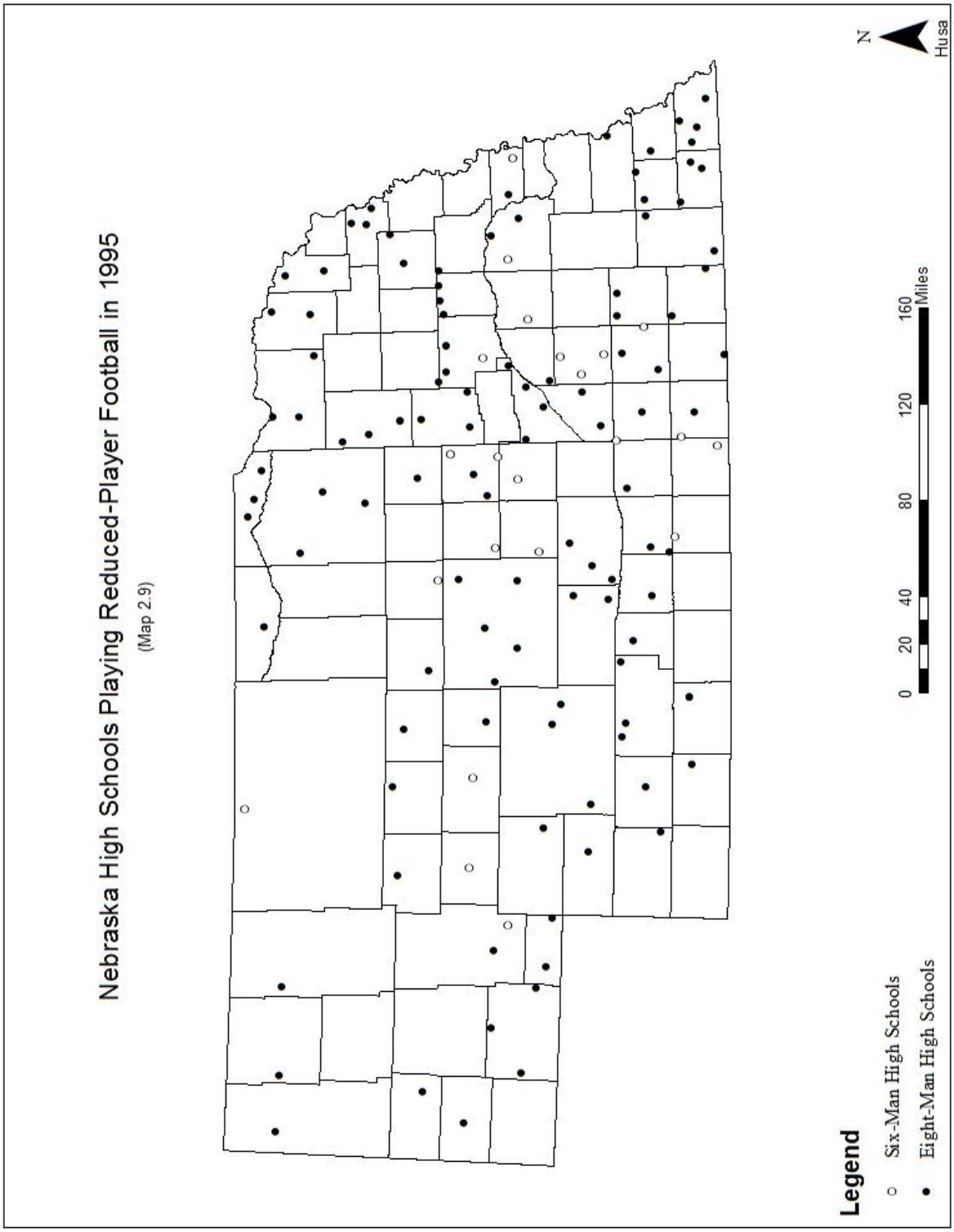
(Table 2.6)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools	6-man Schools
1990	179	125	29
1991	180	120	32
1992	181	121	28
1993	181	124	25
1994	185	121	23
1995	189	116	23
1996	188	118	23
1997	194	116	22
1998	189	117	14
1999	191	119	7

*Data from annual Nebraska High School Activities Association bulletins

In 1993, the high schools of Oxford and Beaver City, of Furnas County, and Orleans, of Harlan County, consolidated their districts to form Southern Valley High School. Along with these three districts, Southern Valley encompassed the former districts of Edison and Hendley of Furnas County, and Stamford of Harlan County. Edison, which closed its doors in 1967, was one of the last schools to play six-man football before its disappearance. Stamford also played six-man football, and was one the best teams in the state in the early 1960s. Orleans had a lot of early success in eleven-man football, including number one rankings in 1928 and 1932. After World War II, however, Orleans had competed in either six or eight-man football. Beaver City had been playing eight-man football (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

Eustis (Frontier County) and Farnam (Dawson County) consolidated their school districts in 1996. The two schools had been playing sports as a co-operative team a few years before consolidating, which helped make a smooth transition to the new Eustis-Farnam High School. Eustis had found success as an eight-man football school, with a


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 1995
(Map 2.9)
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Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

number one ranking in 1962 being a part of their history. Farnam's football program started in 1921, and they played eleven-man football before making the switch to six-man in 1938. In the 1950s, Farnam switched to eight-man football. In recent years, the Eustis-Farnam Knights have played eight-man football (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

In Red Willow County, the high schools of Bartley and Beaver Valley consolidated in 1997, creating the Twin Valley school district. Like Eustis-Farnam, Bartley and Beaver Valley were cooperating in athletics before consolidating their school districts. Twin Valley added the Marion school district the following year. Marion had been a K-8 district after their high school had closed in 1948. Twin Valley would go on to consolidate with Republican Valley in 2003, becoming Southwest High School. Southwest High School is the product of many consolidations, with the districts of Danbury and Lebanon forming Beaver Valley in 1958, Indianola and Red Willow forming Republican Valley in 1969, the 1997 Twin Valley consolidation, and of course, the final consolidation in 2003 (Nebraska High School Historical Society 1994).

Heartland Community School opened in 1998 after the consolidation of Bradshaw and Henderson. Bradshaw and Henderson, both of York County, had been successful eight-man teams. In the same year, in northeast Gage County, Adams and Filley consolidated their schools, eventually choosing the name Freeman, after the state's first homesteader. In the southwest part of Gage County, Odell began cooperating their

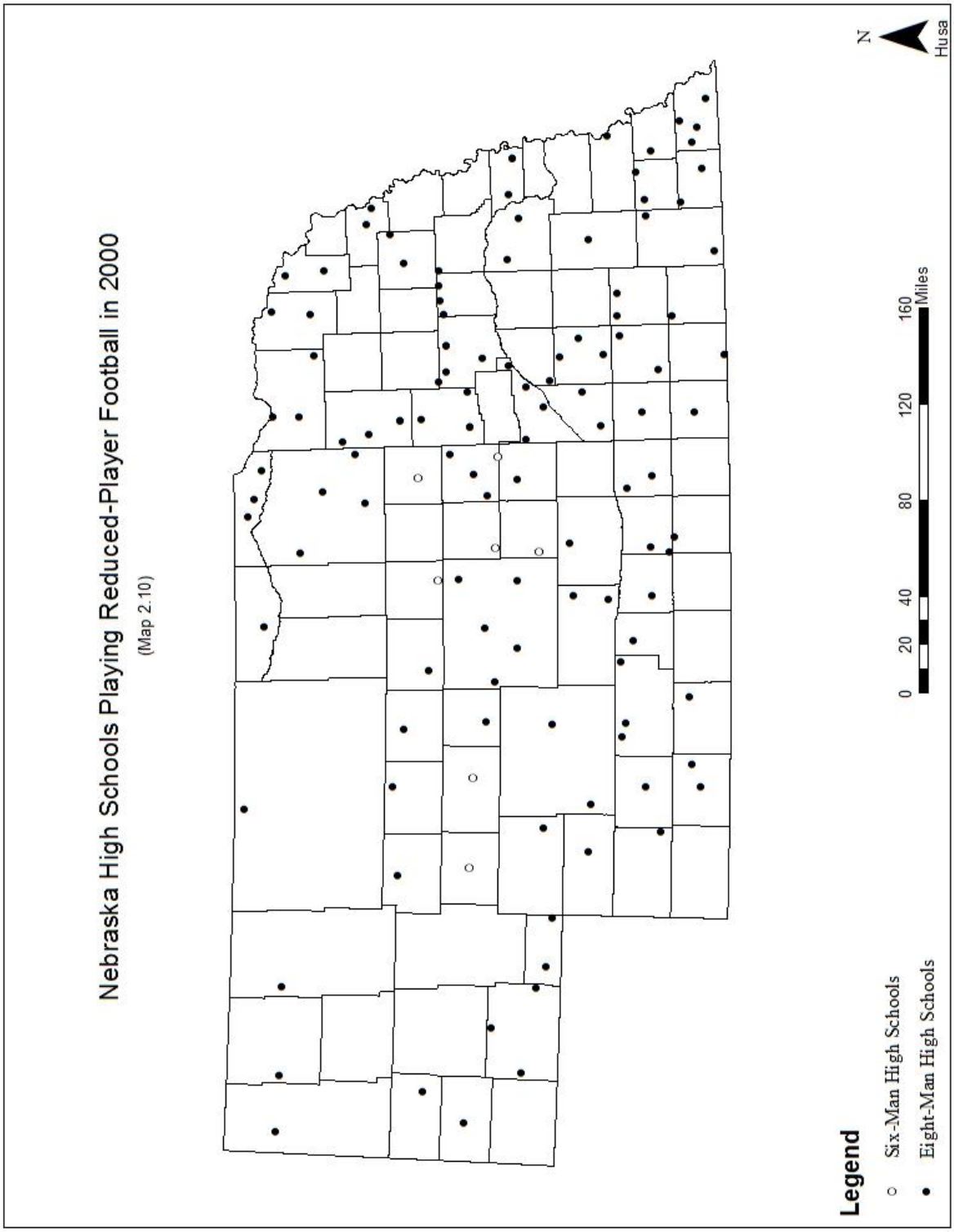
athletics with nearby Diller (Jefferson County). Diller and Odell would go on to consolidate their high schools in 2000. The Heartland Huskies, Freeman Falcons, and Diller-Odell Griffins have all had stints in eight-man football (Beatrice Daily Sun 2010). Along with these three teams, one can see how high schools in northeast Nebraska moved down to eight-man football in 1990 (Map 2.8), 1995 (Map 2.9), and 2000 (Map 2.10).

(Table 2.7)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools	6-man Schools
2000	191	119	7
2001	175	130	7
2002	176	129	7
2003	176	129	7
2004	179	117	8
2005	179	117	8
2006	176	121	11
2007	176	121	11
2008	170	118	15
2009	170	118	15

*Data from annual Nebraska High School Activities Association bulletins

In 2000, Polk-Hordville (Polk County) and Clarks (Merrick County) consolidated their schools, becoming High Plains Community. They followed the same blueprint as some high schools in neighboring Fillmore County, where a consolidation between Fairmont and Geneva resulted in Fillmore Central, as well as a consolidation of the high schools in Exeter and Milligan. Elsewhere in Merrick County, in the same year, Silver Creek consolidated with Genoa (Nance County) and Monroe (Platte County). The consolidation moved high school students to Genoa, where the Twin River High School was soon opened (The Columbus Telegram 2011).


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 2000
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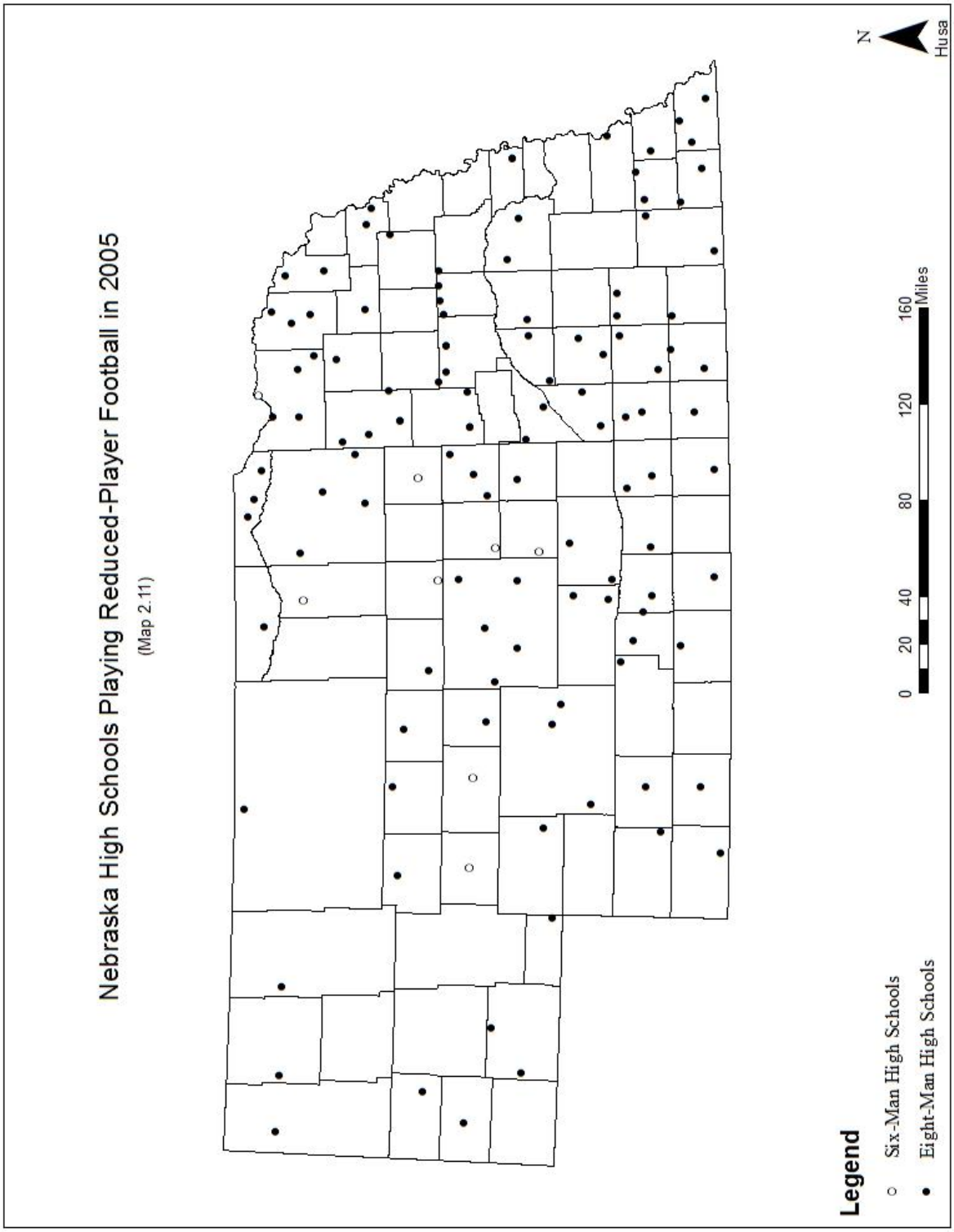
Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

The Pawnee County communities of Steinauer and Table Rock consolidated their districts in 2001 before merging with Humboldt (Richardson County) in 2002 to form the Humboldt-Table Rock-Steinauer school district. Humboldt had recently merged with part of the closed Elk Creek (Johnson County) district. In 2004, Dawson-Verdon (Richardson County) closed and joined Humboldt-Table Rock-Steinauer. Five years later, when Southeast Consolidated (Richardson County) closed, Humboldt-Table Rock-Steinauer added sixty percent of their district, including parts of Nemaha County (Beatrice Daily Sun 2010). Another 2002 consolidation that included multiple counties occurred when Cross County Community opened. Cross County Community was formed from the merged districts of the historically Swedish community of Stromsburg in Polk County and Benedict in York County. Both the Humboldt-Table Rock-Steinauer Titans and the Cross County Community Cougars have spent most of their history playing eleven-man football.

Hitchcock County Schools was formed by the consolidation of Trenton, Culbertson, and Stratton prior to the start of the 2004 school year. The school districts came together after Culbertson's enrollment became too low to maintain a K-12. In 2007, Stratton, left to join the Dundy County school district to the west. To the north, Perkins County Schools consolidated Grant and Wheatland in 2005. Wheatland, which had consolidated Madrid and Elsie in 1967, won eight-man state championships in 1976 and 1981 to go along with Grant's eight eight-man state championships won between 1975 and 2004. The Perkins County Plainsmen began as an eleven-man school before declining population led to a switch to eight-man in 2014. Northwest of Perkins County,


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 2005
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Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

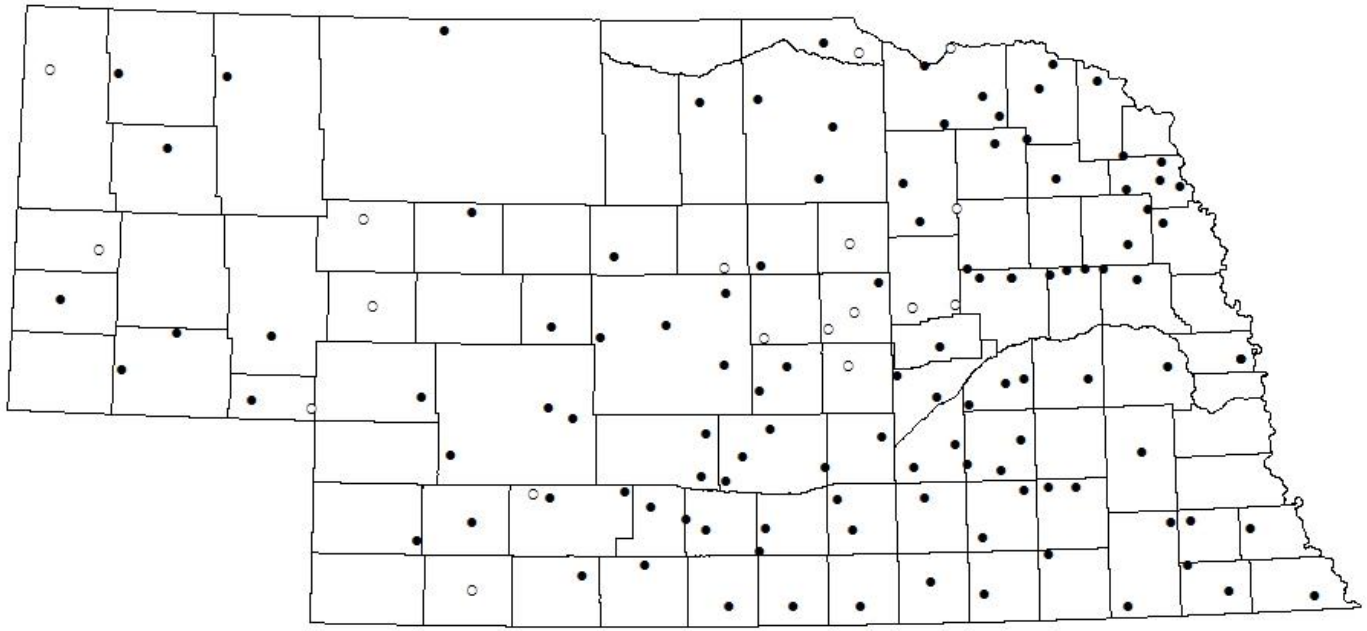
in 2005, Creek Valley opened after the consolidation of two longtime eight-man high schools, Chappell (Deuel County) and Lodgepole (Cheyenne County) (The North Platte Telegraph 2006).

Johnson County Central opened in 2007 after Tecumseh consolidated with Nemaha Valley, which had been playing eight-man football. In central Nebraska, after Prague (Saunders County) had initially agreed with North Bend Central (Dodge County) to become a cooperative in athletics, Prague High School closed in 2009 and consolidated their district with East Butler (Butler County). Like the Nemaha Valley Cardinals, the Prague Panthers lost their eight-man football team when the high school closed (North Bend Eagle 2010).

Ewing (Holt County) played their last season in 2009 after winning the 2008 eight-man Class D2 state championship. Nine of the fourteen players on the roster their final year were seniors. In 2010, they joined the eleven-man O'Neill (Holt County) football team. This co-op would later be dissolved in 2016 when Ewing choose to join the football team of Chambers (Holt County) and Wheeler Central (Wheeler County). Chambers and Wheeler Central had been in a cooperative athletics agreement since 2012. In the nearby community of Elgin (Antelope County), the community's public school began a cooperative in sports with Pope John, Elgin's Catholic high school, in 2010 (Clearwater Record and Ewing News 2016). Both the Chambers/Wheeler Central/Ewing Renegades and Elgin/Pope John Wolfpack play eight-man football.

Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 2010

(Map 2.12)



Legend

- ○ Six-Man High Schools
- • Eight-Man High Schools

0 20 40 80 120 160 Miles

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(Table 2.8)

Year	11-man Schools	8-man Schools	6-man Schools
2010	161	115	18
2011	161	115	18
2012	156	114	14
2013	156	114	14
2014	155	108	18
2015	155	108	18
2016	147	107	25
2017	147	107	25

*Data from annual Nebraska High School Activities Association bulletins

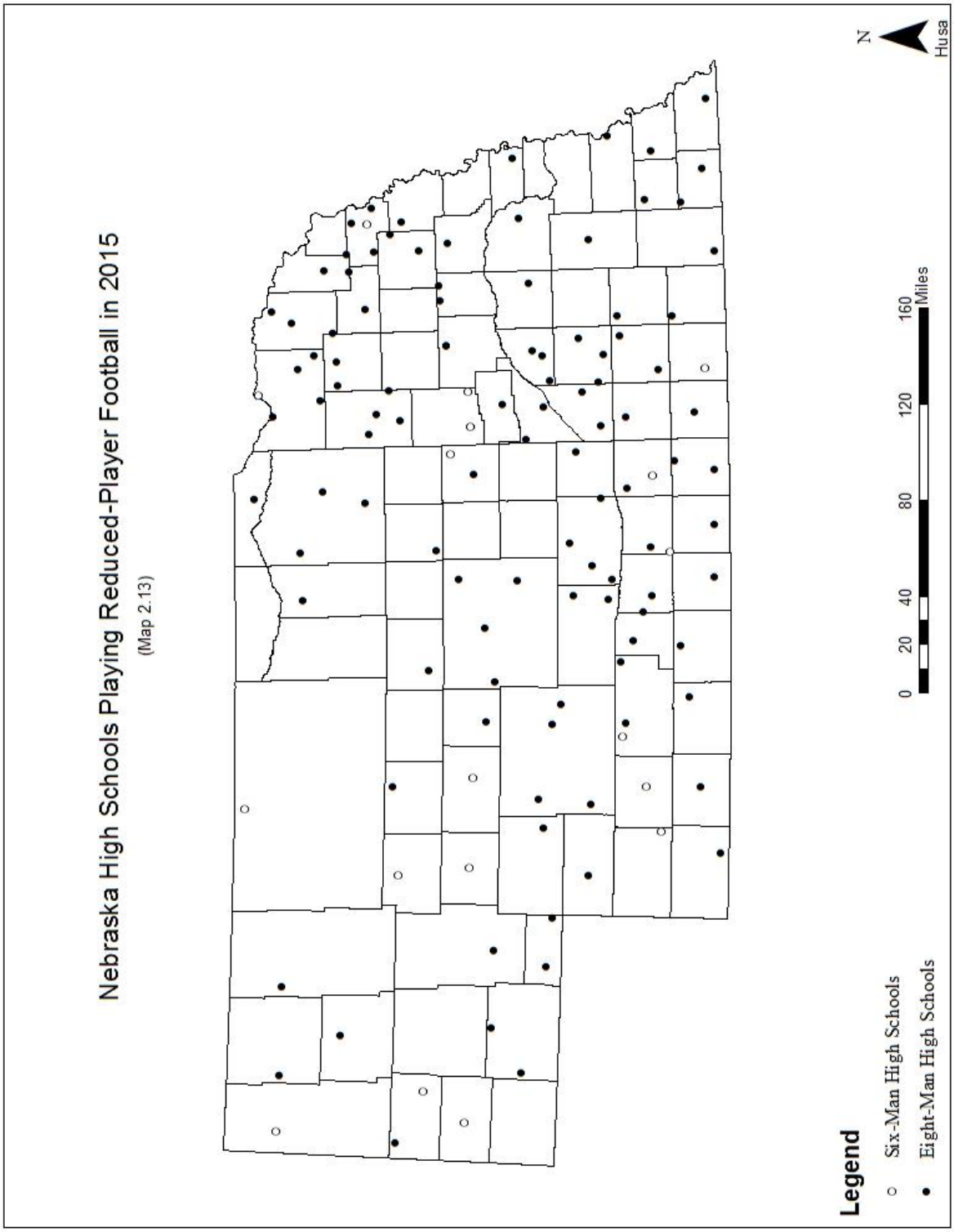
In Clay County, Clay Center High School closed in 2009, merging with Sandy Creek at the beginning of the 2010 school year. Clay Center had been one of the smallest high schools playing eleven-man football before moving down to eight-man in 1993 (Lincoln Journal Star 2009). In Cedar County, Laurel-Concord, which had opened after a 1962 consolidation, began a sports cooperative with Coleridge in 2010 before consolidating in 2014 (Northeast Nebraska News 204). In 2011, eight-man Newman Grove (Madison County) began a sports cooperative with eleven-man Boone Central (Boone County), which continues today (Albion News 2011).

Along the Elkhorn River Valley, Howells (Colfax) and Dodge (Dodge County) consolidated their schools in 2012. The consolidation moved high school students to Howells, and elementary students to Dodge. Former rivals, the Howells-Dodge Jaguars are a combination of the Bobcats of Howells and the Pirates of Dodge. The Pirates had an excellent run in eight-man football in the nineties, winning the Class D1 eight-man state championship in 1994, 1995, and 1996, and the Class D2 eight-man state championship in 1997 and 1999. Dodge added another Class D2 eight-man state championship in 2006.

Not to be outdone, the Howells Bobcats had a dynasty of their own, winning six straight Class D1 eight-man state championships from 2000 to 2005, and two more in 2008 and 2009, as well as adding a Class D2 eight-man state championship in 2010 (Norfolk Daily News 2011).

In 2013, Stapleton (Logan County) dissolved their cooperative agreement with the football team of McPherson County High School, located in the county seat, Tyron. After the dissolving of the Stapleton-McPherson County Cyclones football team, which had been playing eight-man football since 2009, Stapleton remained in eight-man while McPherson County switched to six-man. In 2014, Arcadia (Valley County) and Loup City (Sherman County) combined their football teams. By forming a cooperative football team, boys from the former six-man Arcadia and eight-man Loup City were able to play eleven-man football (Sandhills Express 2013).

Newcastle (Dixon County) closed their doors in 2014, after graduating a class of five, choosing to consolidate with Hartington (Cedar County) the following school year. This came as a surprise to many people as Newcastle had been sharing sports, including an eleven-man football team, and other extracurricular activities with Ponca (Dixon County) since 2012. While many parents from Newcastle sent their children to Ponca, the Hartington district provided a lower tax rate, resulting in tax savings for Newcastle landowners. This helped Newcastle officials justify consolidating with Hartington, which is twenty-eight miles away, over Ponca, only ten miles away. The Hartington-Newcastle Wildcats play eight-man football (Sioux City Journal 2015).


Nebraska High Schools Playing Reduced-Player Football in 2015
(Map 2.13)
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40
80
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160
Miles
Legend
Six-Man High Schools
Eight-Man High Schools

Central Valley High School opened in 2014 in Greeley (Greeley County). Central Valley was created from the consolidation of Greeley-Wolbach, a consolidation that had taken place in recent years, and North Loup-Scotia, which had opened after a 1958 consolidation. The communities of Greeley, Wolbach, and Scotia are located in Greeley County, while North Loup is in Valley County. The Central Valley Cougars are able to play eight-man football after combining the boys from the two former six-man teams of Greeley-Wolbach and North Loup-Scotia (Nebraska TV 2014).

In 2015, Maywood (Frontier County) combined their football team with Hayes Center (Hayes County) so that both schools had a chance to compete among the six-man teams. In their first game, they beat Banner County, which had to forfeit at halftime due to high temperatures and only having six players and no possible substitutions (North Platte Telegraph 2015). Later in the 2015 season, Lyons-Decatur Northeast (Burt County) and Bancroft-Rosalie (Cuming County) played each other in eight-man competition, knowing that during the next season the two schools would combine their football teams and play eleven-man football (Norfolk Daily News 2015).

Looking at the tables, it is evident that six-man football has continued to grow in recent years. Many high schools in the panhandle and west central counties currently play six-man football, and many journalists speculate that high schools in the southwest and southeast parts of the state will soon join them. These predominantly rural areas are subject to further depopulation as more people move to cities to explore new

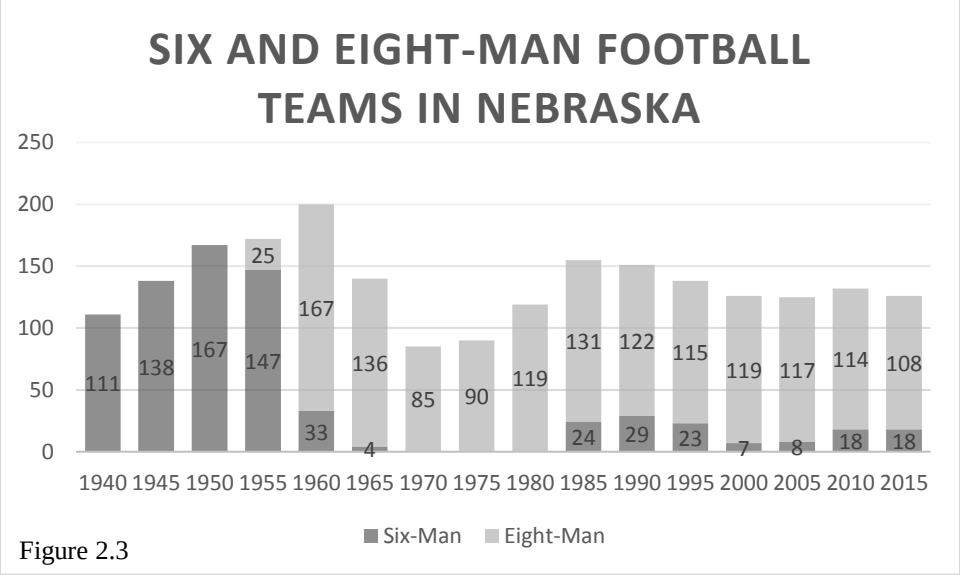


Figure 2.3

opportunities. Many of the young adults have left the area, choosing to start their families in urban settings.

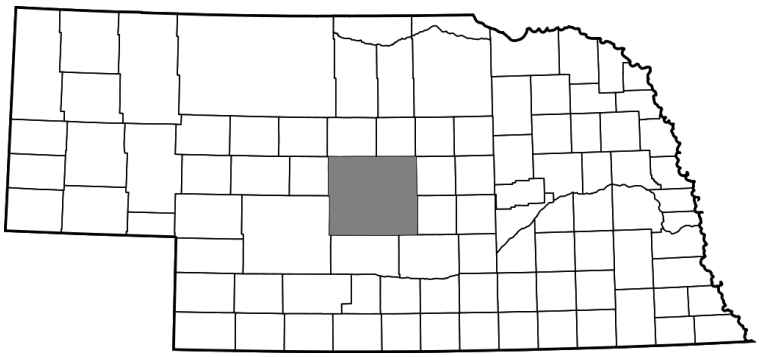
Since the invention of six-man football in 1934 and the state's introduction to eight-man football in 1951, the number of high schools playing reduced player football in Nebraska has changed drastically on a yearly basis. The above segmented bar graph (Figure 2.3) shows the amount of reduced player high school football teams at five-year intervals.

While there are still a great number of six and eight-man football teams in Nebraska, it is evident that many small towns across the state have been forced to consolidate their high schools or join teams with a neighboring school due to low student enrollment numbers. This can be seen when comparing the maps of 1955 (Map 2.1) and 2015 (Map 2.3), where almost all the white dots representing six-man football teams in small towns have disappeared. The black dots representing the eight-man schools in 2015

are featured in central locations due to the many consolidations of these former high schools. The act of so many newly consolidated high schools and cooperative football teams playing six and eight-man football proves that rural depopulation is still a problem in Nebraska, while the increase in the number of high schools playing six and eight-man football shows that this trend is likely to continue.

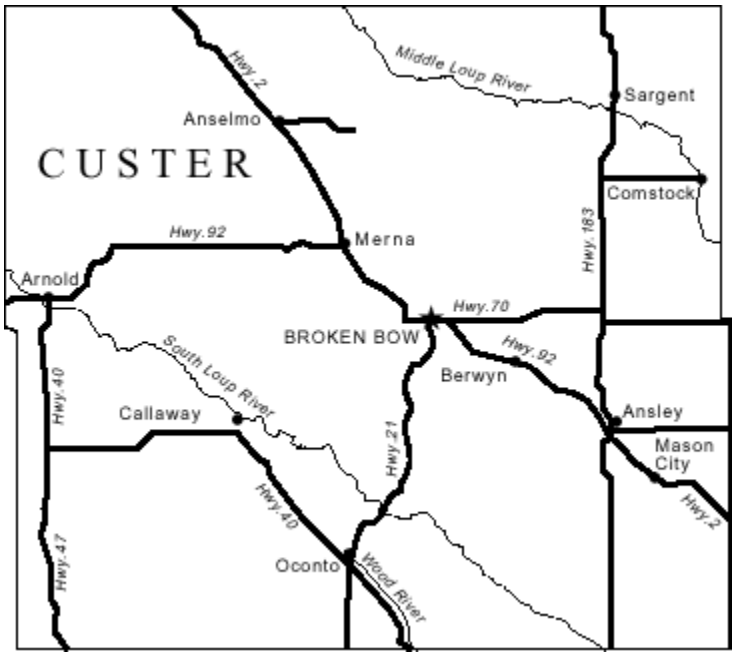
The historical geography of six and eight-man football in Nebraska is certainly an expression of rural depopulation, but it is also important to realize that this geography is much more than dots on a map. Every dot has its own stories to tell of life in a small town. They are stories of Friday nights in Autumn, rich in memories of pep rallies and homecoming dances, and boasts of broken records and heroic comebacks. Some high school football teams have disappeared with the decline of the small towns they played in, but their presence will always be symbolic of the culture of rural Nebraska. Like the communities that six and eight-man high school football teams represent, they face the challenges of a disadvantage in size and the fears of being overcome by a larger force, but they hold their ground and fight with everything they've got to survive.

CHAPTER THREE
HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL IN CUSTER COUNTY



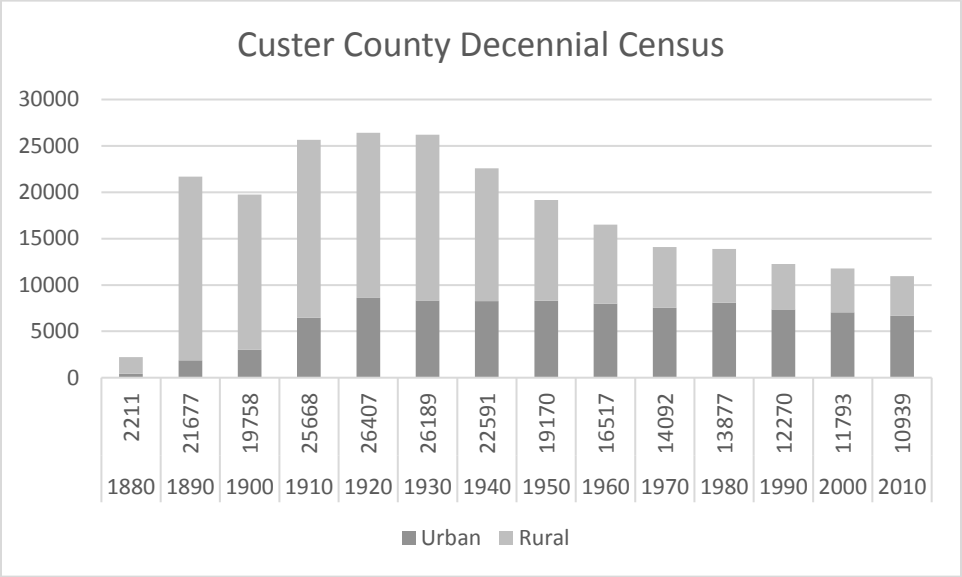
(Figure 3.1) The Location of Custer County within the State of Nebraska

In an attempt to establish a connection between rural depopulation and the changing geography of six and eight-man football teams from small town high schools, I used Custer County as a case study. I choose Custer County because of its large area, as well as its central location within the state of Nebraska. As is evident in the maps from the previous chapter, Custer County has undergone a high fluctuation in the number of high schools playing reduced player football over the years. Custer County is also a good choice as it has historically been one of the most populous counties in Nebraska despite its distance from Lincoln and Omaha. The Census Bureau recorded populations of more than 25,000 people in 1910, 1920, and 1930. In fact, in 1922 when the state of Nebraska assigned a prefix number to each license plate based on the number of registered vehicles in each county, Custer County was given the fourth highest number. The county's population has steadily declined since then; of the ninety-three counties in Nebraska, Custer County was ranked 24th in 2015 with an estimated population of 10,806 (Nebraska Blue Book).



(Figure 3.2) Custer County Map

Custer County, established in 1877 and named after the famous Indian fighter, sits in fertile valleys created by the South and Middle Loup Rivers that provide excellent farming land on the edge of the Sandhills region. The county seat, Broken Bow, lies in the center of the county, as well as approximately ten miles southeast of the geographic center of Nebraska. The city is home to the *Custer County Chief* newspaper and the Custer County Historical Society/Museum and Research Center, two excellent sources for conducting a historical geography of the county. Broken Bow is the largest town in Custer County with a population of 3,559 people (2010 census). By comparison, Arnold, the next most populous Custer County town, had 597 people at the 2010 census. Other communities with populations above 500 include Callaway (539) and Sargent (525). The next five most populous towns in Custer County, as of the 2010 census, are Ansley (441), Merna (363), Mason City (171), Oconto (151), and Anselmo (145). There are three



(Figure 3.3) Custer County Population Graph (Nebraska Blue Book)

communities with populations under 100, including the villages of Comstock and Berwyn, as well as the unincorporated community of Westerville (Nebraska Blue Book).

The first population census in Custer County was taken in 1880, three years after it was established as an official county. The first census listed a total of 2211 people, with 419 living in Broken Bow. The county experienced a population boom in the middle of the decade, coinciding with the arrival of the railroad in 1886. Despite the northwestern portion of the county remaining unsettled through much of the late 19th century due to its sandy soil, Custer County reached a population of 21,677 by 1890, before a slight dip to 19,758 in 1900. The Kinkaid Act was passed in 1904, creating profitable settlement opportunities in the Sandhills. Properties were distributed in sections of 640 acres, giving settlers much more land compared to the 160 acres that had been previously available via the Homestead Act. A new land office in Broken Bow was opened in 1904 to serve the

entire Sandhills region and the unoccupied spaces in Custer County were soon claimed, raising the population to 25,668 at the 1910 census (Custer County Historical Society).

With the growing population came a growing need for educational opportunities. The first school districts were divided so more schools could be formed. Over time, schools began to add higher grades as students wished to receive a full education. Broken Bow High School, the oldest high school in Custer County, was opened in 1886, the same year the railroad first passed through the city. During the latter half of the decade, when the county was rapidly growing, high schools opened in Callaway (1889) and Ansley (1890). As the 19th century drew to an end, high schools would open in Mason City (1894), Merna (1895), Sargent (1897), Anselmo (1899), and Comstock (1900). Throughout its history, Custer County had a total of 17 four-year and 50 two-year high schools, including at one point having the record for most high schools in any United States county (Custer County Historical Society).

There are currently six high schools in Custer County. Most of these high schools share the same name as the town they are located in. As of the 2016-17 school year, Broken Bow High School had 251 students, making it by far the largest high school in the county. In fact, the other five high schools each have enrollment numbers that are less than one hundred. Anselmo-Merna High School, located in Merna, has the second highest enrollment at 95 followed by Callaway High School (92) and Sargent High School (82). The two smallest high schools in the county are Ansley High School (62) and Arnold High School (50) (Nebraska Department of Education).

As of the 2016 season, the Nebraska School Activities Association recognized five high school football teams competing in Custer County. The Broken Bow Indians are the only eleven-man high school football team in the county. The eight-man Anselmo-Merna Coyotes are the only other high school in Custer County to have their own football team. There are three cooperative high school football teams in the county that each play eight-man. One cooperative team, the South Loup Bobcats, is made up of a combination of players from the high schools in Arnold and Callaway. The Twin Loup Wolves are a combination of players from Sargent and Loup County High School, which is in Taylor, the Loup County seat. The Ansley-Litchfield Spartans are another cross-county cooperative football team, with Ansley combining players with the nearby Sherman County town of Litchfield (Nebraska Schools Activities Association).

Football in Custer County can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the county newspapers had snippets of games played between the young men of Broken Bow, Mason City, and Ansley. These snippets, dwarfed by articles on the assassination of President William McKinley and on Theodore Roosevelt taking his place, often listed little more than the winner and the loser of the game. These football games took place between teams that were formed by the able and willing local boys. In the early 1900s, the sport of football was far less popular than baseball, where each team was a source of pride for the community it represented. In the high schools, basketball was the most common sport, but as area enrollments grew, many Custer County schools were able to add a football program to their extracurricular activities.

High school football in Custer County began in 1906, when the Broken Bow

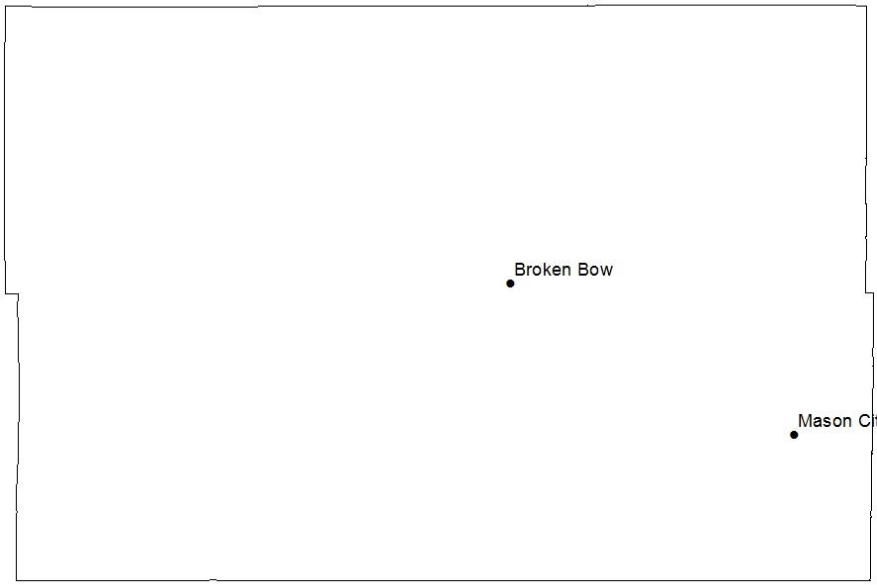
(Figure 3.4) 1906 Broken Bow Indians Football Team (Custer County Historical Society)

Indians (Figure 3.4) played their first official season. High school football in Nebraska, still in its early years, was slowly moving west as more schools started football programs. Due to a lack of high schools playing football in western Nebraska at this time, early competition for Broken Bow included a technical school in North Platte and the Kearney Military Academy. Eventually, high schools in Ravenna, Ord, and Lexington started their own football programs and began playing Broken Bow annually. In 1909, Mason City became the second Custer County high school to begin playing football. The Mason City Wildcats became the biggest rival of the Broken Bow Indians, with the two teams often playing on Thanksgiving Day (Custer County Historical Society).

Two more high schools experimented with football in 1912, with Ansley playing a game against Mason City, and Sargent playing against Broken Bow. The Sargent Bulldogs were able to add more games to their 1913 schedule, although according to their 1914 high school annual, the team was forbidden to play out of town football, perhaps due to difficulties traveling. Early Sargent teams also had a reputation for being the lightest team in the area, with an average weight of only 140 pounds. Despite their

High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1910

(Map 3.1)



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- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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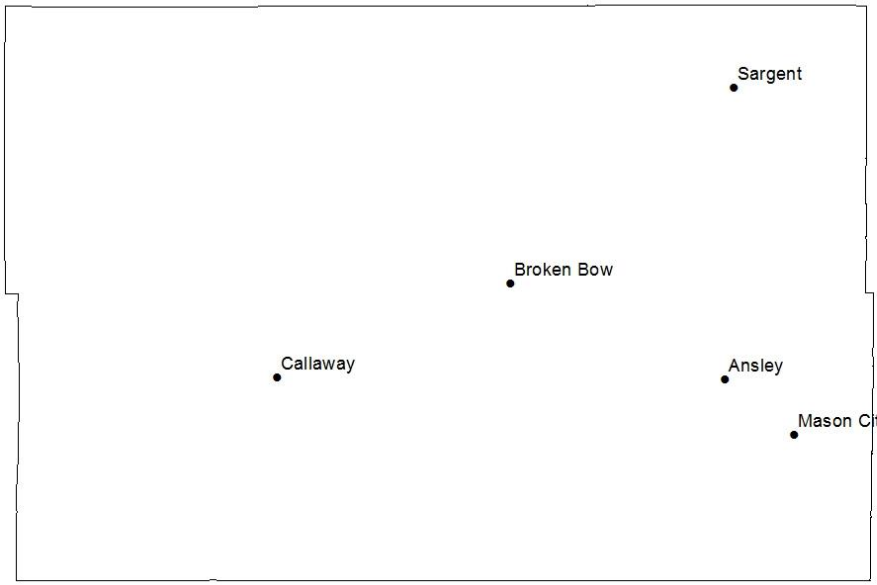
High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1920

(Map 3.2)



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- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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physical disadvantage against most teams, the Bulldogs were able to win most of their games with speed (Custer County Historical Society).

The first full season of Ansley High School football was played in 1913. While the Ansley Warriors were considered worthy opponents, teams did not want to play on the Ansley football field. In 1914, when Broken Bow traveled to Ansley, they described their experience as being "handicapped by the nature of the field" (Custer County Chief 1914). They would go on to describe the field as sandy and rough, far from the firm and smooth ground they were used to playing on. The Broken Bow-Ansley game was called in the middle of the fourth quarter as the Ansley crowd rushed the field to protest a call by the referee that led to a Broken Bow touchdown. This touchdown was the only time either team scored during this game.

Arnold became the fifth Custer County high school football team in 1914. Unfortunately, tragedy struck the Arnold Cardinals in their third season, when fifteen-year-old Wilbur Gettys passed away while playing a game in Ansley. Gettys did not get up after being tackled by three opponents late in the game. Physicians rushed out onto the field, but nothing could be done. It was initially believed to be a broken neck, but later it was ruled that Gettys died of heart failure, raising questions about the physical requirements for football players and "how far a growing lad should go into training for football" (Custer County Chief 1914). After the team captain put an end to the sport for the rest of the reason, the school decided to permanently disband the football program. The Arnold Cardinals wouldn't take the field again until 1947.

The Callaway Bears played their first four games of football in 1916. Hoping to have a longer schedule in 1917, Callaway was forced to end its season after only two games due to a small pox outbreak in the school. The 1918 season wasn't any kinder to Callaway, as well as most of the teams in the state, as a combination of World War I and a flu epidemic resulted in many games being cancelled. After only playing one football game in each of the next two seasons, largely due to the boys putting a priority on playing baseball, the Bears were finally able to enjoy a full season in 1921. They scored the program's first points against Farnam, and then picked up their first win against Broken Bow's second team (Custer County Historical Society).

The Broken Bow football team began to travel further across the state towards the end of the decade. Trips to Greeley and Gothenburg in 1917 signaled a high school that was willing to travel to face the state's top competition. The football team was very popular and usually had two or three "auto loads" of fans travelling with them. The Indians earned a reputation for being one of the finest teams to play in all of Nebraska, and were a credit to the city of Broken Bow. High school teams were becoming advertisements for the communities they represented, and Broken Bow was considered one of the best, on and off the field (Custer County Chief 1917).

In 1918, as the United States fully engaged in World War One, many Custer County men left to fight in Europe. Throughout the football season, the newspaper reported draft lists that got bigger by the week. Members of the Broken Bow football team who weren't old enough to enlist in the war were required to do military work as part of the high school's new cadet company group. Students trained with wooden guns

that resembled Springfields, preparing themselves to enter the war when they came of age. Many football games were cancelled during the 1918 season and instead of box scores, the newspapers were full of letters from soldiers, hospital reports, and articles honoring returning soldiers and those who didn't make it home. Still, among the advertisements for the Red Cross and Liberty Bonds, and numerous examples of anti-"Hun" sentiment, lay two or three sentences about the results of a game as the fans continued to support their teams in the few games that were played that season (Custer County Chief 1918).

Comstock High School played their first football season in 1922. Uniform colors for the Pirates were voted on by the students, with boys wanting orange and black, and girls wanting blue and gold. With more girls than boys among the student body, blue and gold won the vote. Even though the football team was small in numbers, they were known for playing some of the larger schools in central Nebraska. In fact, the schedules for the Pirates were often filled with the same teams that Broken Bow was playing. Unfortunately, they didn't have the same luck as the Indians, who almost went undefeated in 1923, only losing by three in the state championship to Grand Island. Broken Bow had defensive star Rob Ray Robertson, who would later go on to play for the University of Nebraska. Along with Robertson, Custer County was represented on the Cornhuskers roster by John "Choppy" Rhodes, a fullback from Ansley (Custer County Historical Society).

Both Anselmo and Merna began playing football in 1925. The two schools, only eleven miles apart, became rivals right away. In their first game against each other, the

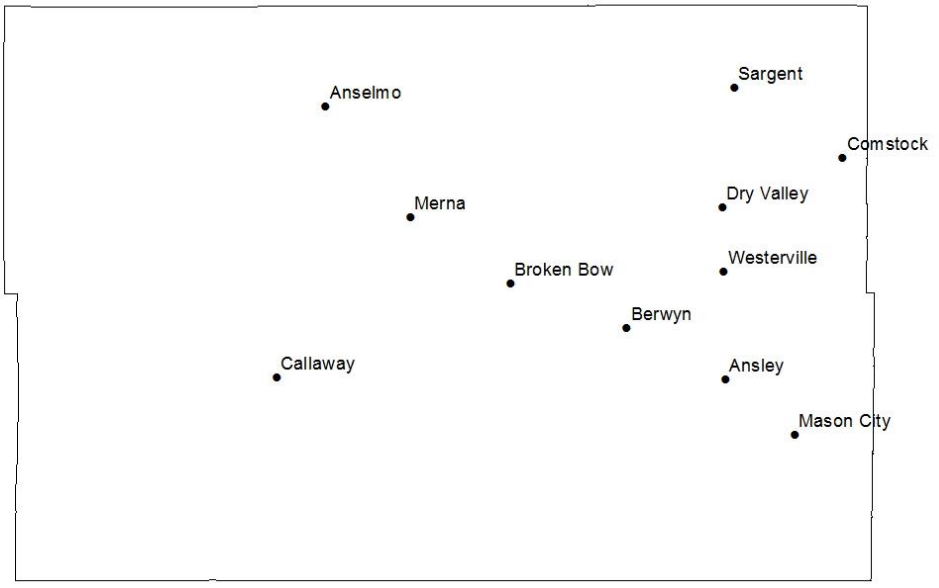
Merna Coyotes beat the Anselmo Eagles by a score of 39 to 12. In the early years, both schools would play each other at least twice a year. The Merna community was especially excited to get a football team. Before their first season began, their coach wrote a three-part article for *The Merna Messenger* that detailed the rules of the game. After their first game against Anselmo, the team was given a large banquet to celebrate their win. Anselmo's program took a while longer to generate a bigger buzz, often playing against second teams from larger schools, but by the end of the decade the Eagles had gained the respect of their opponents (The Merna Messenger 1925).

Three smaller Custer County high schools would start playing football towards the end of the decade, with Berwyn and Dry Valley playing their first seasons in 1929, and Westerville in 1930. Berwyn, which had opened as a two-year high school in 1914, had just added the eleventh and twelfth grades two years prior to their first football season. The Eagles had to overcome the problems that came with being a small high school. In fact, the eleven people that graduated in the class of 1931 were the largest class that Berwyn ever had. The football team used seventh and eighth graders to practice against. Unfortunately, Berwyn could not sustain an eleven-man team in the early 1930s (Custer County Historical Society).

Dry Valley High School, which opened in 1922, played their first football season in 1929. Their first graduating class, consisting of one student, was in 1925. The first few years were understandably tough for the Dry Valley Trojans as they had difficulty finding eleven boys who were willing and able to play. The Trojans were able to find success in 1932, however, as they went undefeated. Like Berwyn, Dry Valley was only able to play

High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1930

(Map 3.3)



Legend

- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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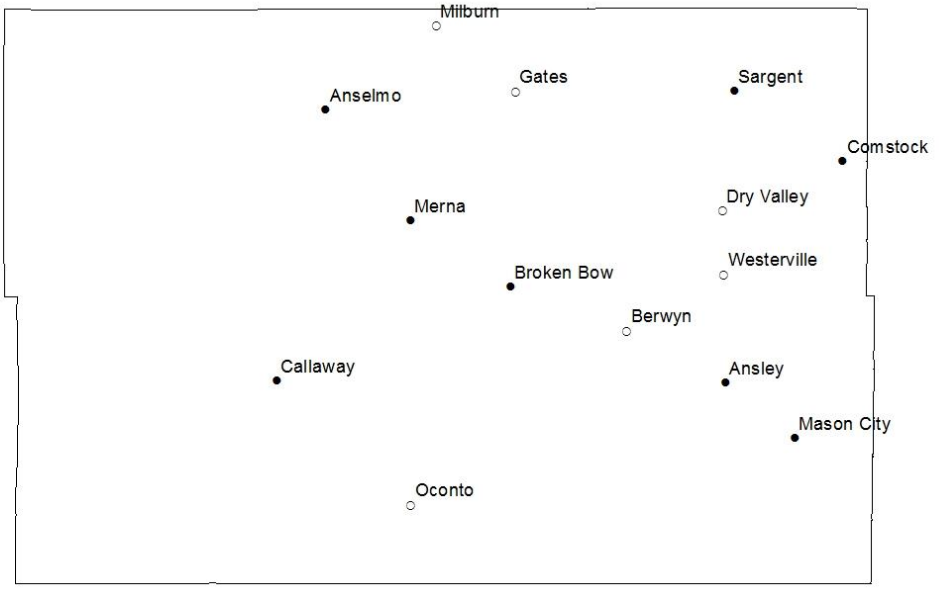
High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1940

(Map 3.4)



Legend

- Six-Man Football Teams
- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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eleven-man football for two more years as the challenges associated with low enrollment caught up to the football program. In fact, Dry Valley went from having around 40 players in 1930 to only 9 in 1935 (Custer County Historical Society).

The Westerville Wildcats faced many of the same problems as Berwyn and Dry Valley, having low enrollments every year since their school opened in 1921. In their first season, they only played four games, two of which were against Dry Valley. Their other two games were successful as they beat Berwyn and then upset a strong Mason City team. Westerville High School, which opened in 1921, never had a class with double digit students, although they came close with nine students in 1932 and 1939. Like Berwyn and Dry Valley, Westerville gladly welcomed six-man football to Custer County in 1935.

The first six-man game in Custer County was played in Dry Valley when the boys at the school put on an exhibition for their fans. The Trojans quickly built a schedule against other teams playing six-man football in central Nebraska, including Berwyn and Westerville. Two other small high schools in the county, Milburn and Oconto, were able to use the new six-man game to have their first football programs in 1935. The following year, Gates High School fielded their first football team, joining the other six-man schools. These six schools, the smallest in Custer County, created the Little Six Conference, where they competed against each other in football, basketball, and track (Custer County Historical Society).

Gates High School, annually strapped for funds, had trouble investing in a football program from the school's opening in 1920. However, much like the rest of the

small high schools across the state, Gates realized that they needed a football program or else they would lose the boys interested in playing the sport to other schools that offered the opportunity. For the early Gates Pirates teams, no two uniforms were alike and their old helmets offered little protection. In fact, it was implied that most of their equipment was previously worn gear that had been thrown out by Broken Bow. Their football field was also known for consisting primarily of sand burrs, weed, and gravel. The Pirates never let their shortcomings diminish their play as they were able to win many games during their program's short history (Custer County Historical Society).

Although small in size, the high schools in the Little Six Conference provided a large amount of entertainment. In 1936, Westerville finished runner-up in the six-man state championship. The next year, the Oconto Tigers took their place as the best football team in the Little Six Conference. Berwyn enjoyed undefeated seasons in 1938 and 1941, with the latter resulting in a second-place ranking in the state. The Milburn Badgers were also able to etch their names in history by winning the Little Six Conference in 1940. The Badgers football program ended abruptly after their coach left during World War II. When the school couldn't find another coach to replace him, the boys enrolled at other schools so they could play sports (Custer County Historical Society).

Dry Valley High School experienced a similar situation when their coach left in 1940. When they couldn't find a coach, civics teacher and avid football fan, Pauline Forsyth (Figure 3.5), took the reins. The wife of a Broken Bow banker, Forsyth endured a lot of early criticism for being one of only a handful of female coaches in the state. She issued uniforms for the eleven boys on the team, studied textbooks, created a calisthenics

(Figure 3.5) Dry Valley Coach Pauline Forsyth with One of Her Players (Custer County Historical Society)

schedule, and preached the study of the fundamentals. Coach Forsyth's hard work and dedication paid off immediately as her team beat rival Westerville in their first game. Dry Valley's success would continue with an undefeated season in 1942. Sadly, low enrollment numbers would lead to the end of the Trojans football program (Custer County Historical Society).

As in much of the rural United States, the 1930s were extremely hard on Custer County. The 1930 census counted 17,458 people on farms, most of which suffered throughout the decade. In the 1930s, Broken Bow did not have a single year where they reached their normal annual precipitation amount. The accumulated deficiency throughout the decade was forty-five inches, or two years of normal precipitation. The loss of crops to drought in the eastern, fertile half of the county led to the loss of cattle

and hogs on the ranches in the western half. The Custer County banks also felt the impact of the Great Depression, with their numbers declining from twenty banks in 1930 to eleven in 1935. Over the last half of the decade, 450 farms disappeared, causing a 15% decline in the county's farm population. Of the more than 3,500 people who moved out of Custer County from 1935 to 1940, all but 500 had been families leaving their farms (Custer County Historical Society).

As the United States prepared to enter World War II in the Pacific Ocean and western France, the citizens of Custer County turned their attention to supporting the soldiers as they fought the "Japs" and "Nazis" (as the newspaper put it). The men who didn't enlist in the war stayed behind to work on the new war bases being built across the nation, while also preparing their families with lessons in air raid protection and civilian defense. The women of Custer County helped support the efforts of the nearby North Platte Canteen, a Union Pacific railroad stop where local citizens provided hospitality to soldiers on their way to the east coast to disembark to Europe. Custer County women were also known for their fabrication of surgical dressings as part of a Red Cross project. School children took first aid classes and held scrap contests to help overcome the tire and iron shortage in the United States, while the boys helped on farms, especially as Nebraska began sending combines to other states to help with harvests. The loss of so many boys to work, along with the 18-year-old boys who enlisted in the war, resulted in many games being cancelled, and in some cases, like Callaway, the entire season would be cancelled (Custer County Chief 1944).

The loss of rural population hit the smallest schools the hardest. Berwyn and Westerville relied on students from the farms surrounding their communities. The school districts of Gates, Dry Valley, and Milburn each brought together large rural areas that served farm families that lived far from any population centers. Despite the recovery of the rural economy in the 1940s, these small high schools were never able to get their enrollment numbers back to where they had been. Gates and Milburn both closed in 1942. Dry Valley would close three years later in 1945. Due to low enrollment numbers, Westerville quit playing football in 1948, although the school would stay open until 1956. Berwyn's last season came in 1949, and the school closed in 1950 (Custer County Historical Society).

In the latter half of the 1940s, Custer County became one of the leaders in pump irrigation development, boosting its agricultural economy, while also maintaining its status as one of the largest livestock producers in the region. The introduction of the internal combustion engine in tractors and combines led to farms increasing by 120 acres on average in Custer County. Rural population declined by 24%, while the number of farms decreased by 20%. The population in Custer County dropped by more than 3,000 between the censuses of 1940 and 1950 (Figure 3.3), with the biggest loss coming from rural depopulation (Nebraska Blue Book). Unfortunately, rural numbers would continue to drop, right through the present.

Although county population would decrease by more than 3,000 people in the 1950s, schools in Custer County had a bright future as the "war babies" began entering school in the early years of the decade. For the time being, however, the enrollments of

High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1950

(Map 3.5)

High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1960

(Map 3.6)

the high schools in the smaller communities continued to decline. In 1951, Anselmo made the switch to six-man football, joining Oconto, the last high school of the Little Six Conference that remained open. Along with Oconto, Anselmo kept their rivalry with Merna alive, playing a six-man game once a year. Enrollments in Mason City were also going down. In 1952, the Wildcats were the second smallest team playing eleven-man football in the state, with only 27 boys. Mason City would later move to six-man football in 1955, losing to Anselmo in their first game. Mason City, however, would be the first team in Custer County to play eight-man football, in a game against Rockville in 1958. Their schedule featured a mixture of six and eight-man games. The eight-man game was gaining popularity in the area, and by keeping the six-man option open, they could continue playing Anselmo and Oconto. Comstock would join Mason City among the ranks of the eight-man football teams in 1959. The Oconto Tigers moved to eight-man in 1960, ending six-man football in Custer County (Custer County Historical Society).

In the late 1950s, high school enrollments went up as the "war babies" came of age. At the same time, elementary numbers were slumping, especially in rural areas. One of the major pushes behind the loss of rural students over the latter half of the decade was the large number of farm families who relocated to bigger towns after a three-year drought forced them off their land. Due to a lower number of students, rural districts began merging with town districts, which helped the high schools in bigger communities increase their student body. A similar pattern appeared across the entire state, leading to many consolidations in the 1960s. Anselmo High School would close in 1960, with the Eagles playing their final six-man game the previous fall. Under Coach Bill Gallagher,

(Figure 3.6) Anselmo vs Mason City, 1958, Six-Man Football Game (Custer County Chief)

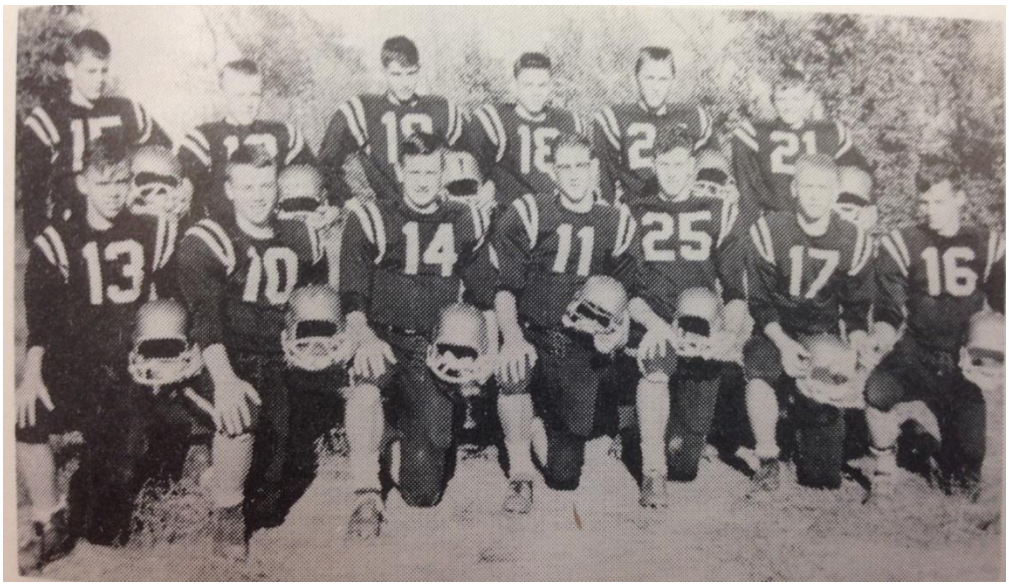
the Anselmo Eagles had been one of the finest six-man teams in the state, winning 27 straight games between September 1955 and October 1957, and going undefeated in 1958 (Figure 3.6). After graduating six people in their final class, the students of Anselmo started attending Merna High School (Custer County Historical Society).

In the summer of 1964, the two school districts of Anselmo and Merna were officially merged and a consolidated school was opened in the fall. Around 150 students would attend the first year at the new Anselmo-Merna High School. Anselmo-Merna also kept Merna's nickname, the Coyotes, and school colors of red and white. The building that housed the former Merna High School was used for the new school, while plans for a new, larger building were being designed and approved. The old Anselmo schoolhouse, on the other hand, was used for Sunday School classes, Farmer's Co-op meetings, and other local events such as birthday parties and wedding receptions (Custer County Historical Society).

I was fortunate enough to meet Darrel Sybrant, one of the first coaches of the Anselmo-Merna football team. While Coach Sybrant wasn't with the Coyotes for long, he also coached Broken Bow and nearby Arcadia in Valley County as well as spending seasons in the booth as a commentator in Central Nebraska. After reflecting on his first experiences calling a six-man football game, including its sandlot and fast paced style, Coach Sybrant discussed the population changes in Custer County and how it seemed like he woke up one day and half of the county had disappeared. Most high schools had enrollments around fifty in the 1960s, he said, but by the early 1970s, some high schools were lucky to have fifteen students. As a coach, he saw the loss of population reflected in his football teams as first they lost substitutes, followed by their starters, and eventually the whole team.

Coach Sybrant discussed how employment opportunities in the cities were more lucrative than farming, especially with the long droughts and heavy hails that farmers were experiencing. Custer County lost 540 farms during the 1960s as rural depopulation declined by almost twenty-three percent, slightly higher than the state average. School enrollments in smaller towns were directly impacted as more rural families moved to larger communities, such as Broken Bow. In fact, in the early 1960s, there were more kindergarten students in Broken Bow than there were high school students in Comstock, Mason City, and Oconto (Custer County Historical Society).

Comstock High School closed in 1965 due to falling enrollment and economic difficulties. The community itself had lost almost 100 people between the censuses of 1960 and 1970. After some debate, the Comstock school district consolidated with Ord,



(Figure 3.7) 1965 Mason City Wildcats Football Team (Custer County Historical Society)

located twenty miles east in Valley County. At the time, the Ord Chanticleers were one of Broken Bow's conference foes. Today, Ord High School competes among the larger class of Class C schools. Even though the citizens of Comstock now support the Chanticleers, there is still a great deal of sentiment for their old high school football team (Custer County Historical Society).

The 1965 football season would be the last for the Mason City Wildcats (Figure 3.7), with the high school closing in the following spring. Although Ansley and Litchfield are both closer to Mason City, the schoolboard elected to consolidate with Loup City. Loup City was chosen as they had room for all the incoming Mason City students, could provide bus transportation across the entire district, and, in a time when many high school teachers were losing their jobs due to school closings and consolidations, Loup City agreed to hire all former Mason City instructors. The Loup City Red Raiders had traditionally been a Class C, eleven-man team until the 2016 season, when a sports

cooperative agreement with six-man Arcadia began. The Arcadia-Loup City sports teams now play as the Rebels (Custer County Historical Society).

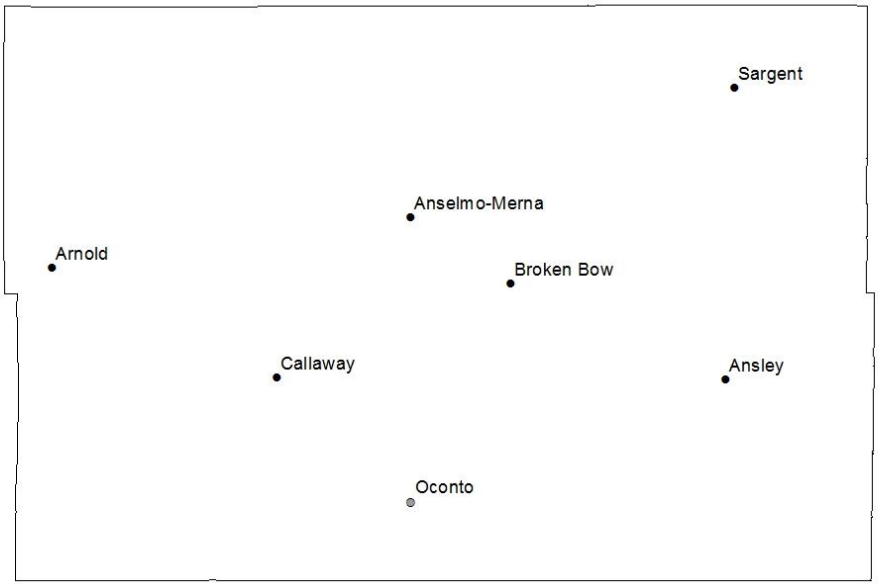
The Callaway Bears made the headlines off the gridiron in 1968. After a two-hour Monday practice, the Callaway football team assisted volunteer firemen and other residents in hunting for an elderly woman who had strayed from the Good Samaritan home. The groups searched back roads and through corn fields, while trying to call the woman through a loudspeaker on the back of a truck. Three football players found Miss Ella Whitehead, who, despite falling in a cornfield, was unharmed and returned to the home (Custer County Chief 1968).

An important milestone in Custer County high school football history occurred in 1972 with the retiring of long time Broken Bow head coach, Mark Russell. Coach Russell had been head coach of the Indians since 1946. In the 26 seasons under his guidance, Broken Bow only had six losing seasons. With 142 victories, he finished his career as one of the winningest coaches in state history. Along with football, Russell coached the track and field team while also teaching physical education (Custer County Chief 1972). The Broken Bow Indians now play their home games on Mark Russell Field.

While one Custer County coaching legend was riding off into the sunset, another was just beginning to build a dynasty down the road in Ansley. Dan Moore, hired in 1971, quickly turned the Warriors into one of the best programs in the state. Ansley beat Republican Valley for the Class C state championship in 1977, and finished as runner ups to Grant in both 1978 and 1979 (Custer County Historical Society). Unlike the rural population, the Warriors' performance would not decline over the next decade.

High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1970

(Map 3.7)



Legend

- Eight-Man Football Teams
- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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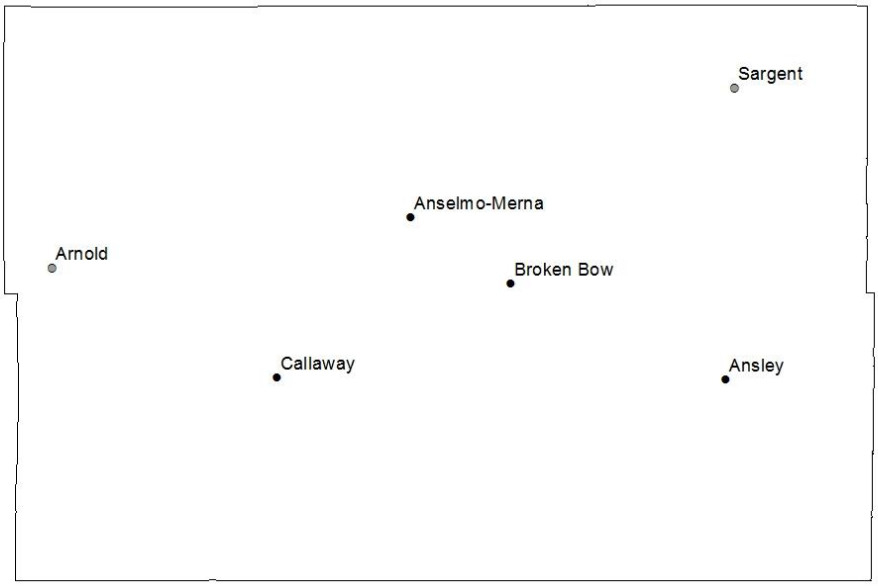
High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1980

(Map 3.8)



Legend

- Eight-Man Football Teams
- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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(Figure 3.8) 1980 Arnold Cardinals Football Team (Custer County Chief)

Although Custer County's total population remained relatively similar between the censuses of 1970 and 1980 (Figure 3.3), urban population numbers surpassed those of rural population. The southern half of the county was one of the areas that suffered the most from rural depopulation, which was one of the biggest contributing factors to the closing of Oconto High School in 1977. Oconto had a final graduating class of five seniors in 1977. After Oconto closed, there was no eight-man played in Custer County until 1980. Custer County was one of the 83 counties in Nebraska which lost population over the 1980s, declining by twelve percent (Custer County Historical Society).

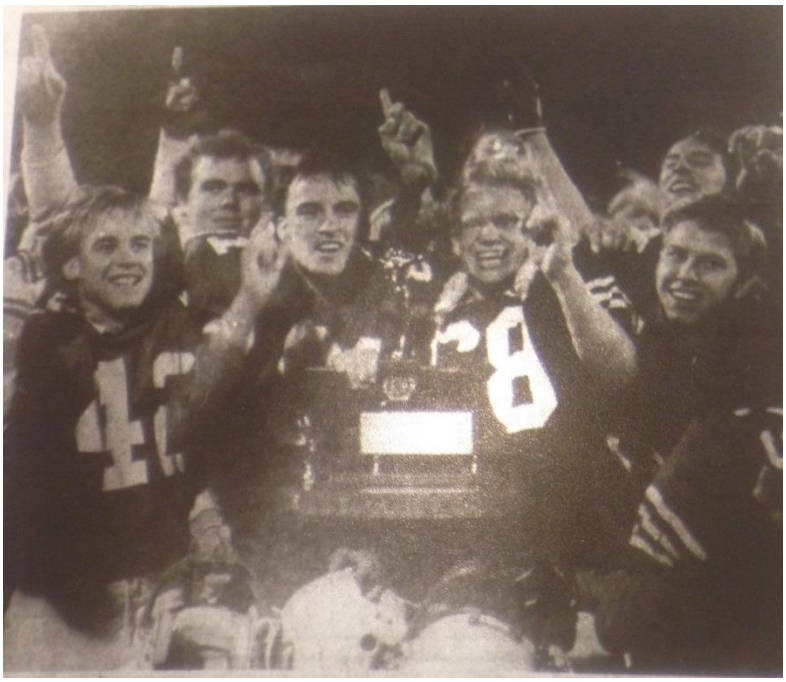
Arnold (Figure 3.8) and Sargent both made the switch to eight-man football in 1980. In the 1980 fall sports preview, both the Cardinals and Bulldogs head coaches told the *Custer County Chief* that playing eight-man football would make their teams more competitive and make scheduling games against area schools a lot easier (Custer County Chief). The move would also help their depth issues, with Sargent suiting up only eleven players in the 1979 season finale due to injuries. Tammy Hendrickson, Custer County

Museum and Historical Society curator and Sargent alum, recalled how the move to eight-man affected the Bulldog marching band. With the field being shortened from one hundred to eighty yards, the band initially had trouble with their formation, as their routine had always began on the fifty-yard line.

Anselmo-Merna and Callaway began playing eight-man football in 1981. While the school boards called the decision a financial one, due to not wanting to travel long distances, both team previews boasted of newfound depth. Ansley moved to eight-man football in 1982, leaving Broken Bow as the lone eleven-man football team in the county. The Warriors continued their dominance under Coach Dan Moore from 1982 to 1992, playing for the Class D1 eight-man state championship seven times, and winning it all in 1986 (Custer County Historical Society).

I was fortunate to get an interview with Coach Moore about his time at Ansley. Despite all their success, Coach Moore stated that Ansley fans were upset over the move to eight-man. Losing their eleven-man team was a loss of pride and status, as eight-man was considered a step down. To Coach Moore and his players, however, eight-man football wasn't much different, especially for a run-oriented team like the Warriors. He also recognized that they didn't have much choice but to make the switch to eight-man as so many other high schools in the area were doing the same. Unless they were willing to spend more time and money on traveling, scheduling eleven-man games was becoming harder for high schools in central Nebraska.

Much like Coach Sybrant, Coach Moore saw the population change in Custer County reflected in his football teams. At first, it became tough to hold eleven-on-eleven



(Figure 3.9) 1987 Broken Bow Class B State Champions (Custer County Chief)

scrimmages in practice, followed by difficulty doing the same thing with an eight-man team, and eventually having trouble filling starting spots if a few injuries occurred. What was happening in Ansley was happening across Custer County. Population was declining, especially in rural areas as farms got larger and new machinery led to less workers. Young people were leaving the area after high school to pursue better opportunities and start families in cities like Lincoln, Omaha, or Denver, and the families that stayed in Custer County were becoming smaller as parents were having fewer children. During Coach Moore's career at Ansley, Custer County's population declined by almost 2000 people.

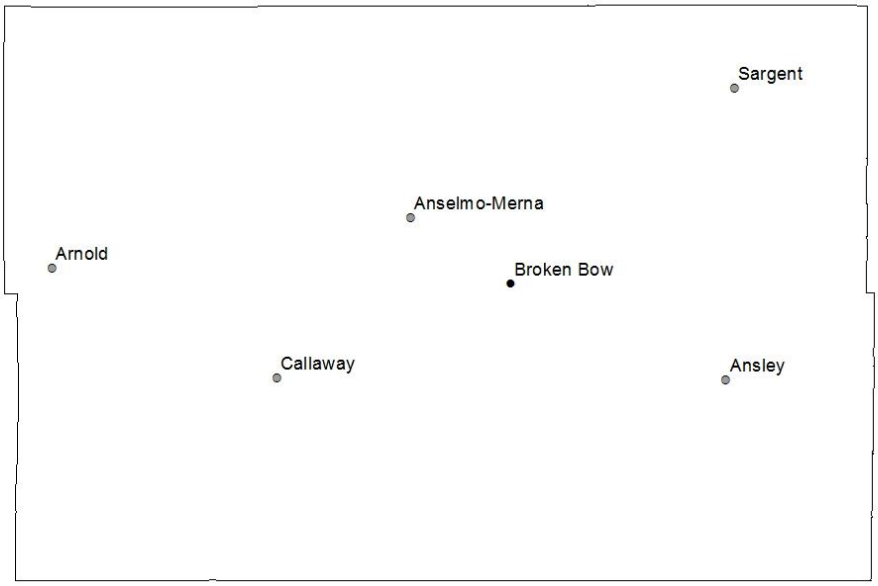
Not to be outdone by the smaller schools in Custer County, Broken Bow won the school's first and only state championship in 1987 (Figure 3.9). After starting the season ranked tenth, Dan McLaughlin was able to top the rankings in his first and only season as

head coach of the Indians. Governor Kay Orr, who visited Broken Bow on the day of the championship game and deemed the city the "capital for a day", was among those cheering the Indians on against the Antlers of Elkhorn, the number one Class B team in the state. After some early struggle, the "inspired tribe of Indians" were able to pull away from the Antlers and finish with a ten-point victory. After the game, it was a long time before the signs in the town square business windows reading "Good Luck Indians", "Go Bow", and "Take State", among other exhortations, were taken down. The trophy was put on display in the school and a championship banner was hung (Custer County Chief 1987). Two years later, the class of 1989 would be the school's 100th graduating class.

The depopulation of Custer County even began to effect Broken Bow High School in the early 1990s, resulting in a move down to Class C in 1994. Until recent years, Broken Bow had ranked among the top fifteen Class C schools in student enrollment. The other five high schools in Custer County started the 1990s off in Class D1, among the larger group of high schools playing eight-man football. The 1990s were a decade of improvement for Custer County, with housing rehabilitation projects, computer labs being added to schools, new tourism and recreational opportunities being presented, and the introduction of prescribed burning to revitalize the land. They were also a decade of remembrance, with schools, churches, and post offices celebrating centennial anniversaries. Alumni reunions held for graduates from Anselmo, Dry Valley, Oconto, and Westerville brought people together and kept communities tight knit while various building renovations preserved small town life. As the new millennium began and the future arrived, Custer County was honoring its settlers and celebrating its heritage.

High School Football Teams in Custer County, 1990

(Map 3.9)



Legend

- Eight-Man Football Teams
- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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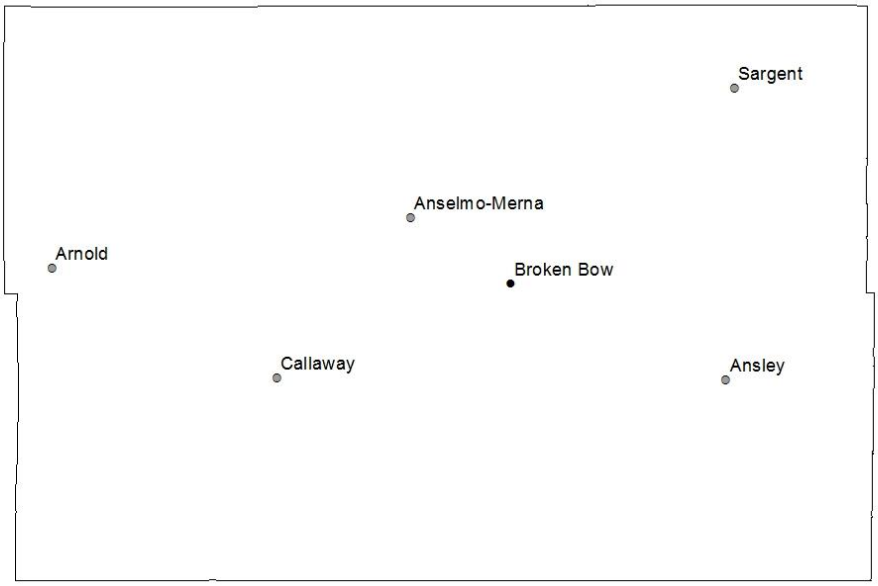
High School Football Teams in Custer County, 2000

(Map 3.10)



Legend

- Eight-Man Football Teams
- Eleven-Man Football Teams

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On the football field, Anselmo-Merna and Ansley both finished seasons as Class D1 Runner-Ups, in 1996 and 1997, respectively. Callaway dominated the Gridiron Conference, an unofficial group of high schools that competed in eight-man football although their enrollments were over 70, disqualifying them from the state playoffs. After leading Arnold for 21 seasons, Coach Rod Johnson retired after the 1998 season, followed by Coach Dan Moore who retired following the 1999 season after 29 years as Ansley's leader. Just beginning his career, Mike Kozeal was hired as Sargent head coach in 2000, leading the Bulldogs to Class D2 Runner-Ups in his first season. Coach Kozeal would take the Bulldogs back to Class D2 Runner-Ups twice more in 2005 and 2010, before winning the Class D2 championship in 2011. In 2008, as enrollments continued dropping in every high school in the county, Arnold would become the first six-man football team in Custer County since 1959. Further depopulation and declining enrollments would lead to cooperatives between high schools to keep athletic and academic opportunities available for students (Custer County Historical Society).

South Loup was formed in a 2010 cooperative agreement between two Custer County high schools, Arnold and Callaway. Due to declining enrollment and projections of further decline, the Cardinals and Bears went from being rivals to teammates. Perhaps as a sign of a new beginning, the students from each school voted on new colors and a new team name. The blue and white Bobcats played their first football season in the fall of 2010. Both schools voted to alternate the practice site on a weekly basis and divide home games evenly among both communities. One of the biggest issues mentioned by coaches was communication, where keeping in contact with the kids from the other

school is difficult since they don't see them as much on a school day. The Bobcats also had the early issue of Arnold players having to make the transition from six-man to eight-man football, but all worries were erased before the first game of the season. The South Loup football team has benefitted from its depth and competition for positions, something that both Arnold and Callaway had lacked before the cooperative agreement. The South Loup Bobcats not only brought together students from Arnold and Callaway, but also united the parents and alumni in both communities (Custer County Chief 2010).

The high schools of Sargent and Loup County (Taylor) began their first season as cooperating schools in sports and activities in 2011. After the cooperative agreement became official, the students of both high schools began to compete together as the Twin Loup Wolves. The first football season for the Wolves was the fall of 2012, one season after the Sargent Bulldogs had won the eight-man Class D2 State Championship. Loup County High School, whose Wildcats had been playing six-man football since 1995, had been facing declining enrollment numbers for so long that they weren't sure they would have enough students out to support any of their sports programs. While Sargent wasn't having a problem getting students out for sports, their enrollment numbers, which are already low, are projected to continue declining in the coming years. The Sargent coaches gladly welcomed the co-op because, even though they had enough kids to play games, they didn't always have enough for a full-size practice. The Twin Loup cooperative has been successful on and off the field, keeping both high schools competitive in sports while bringing together the communities of Sargent and Taylor. Just last year, the Twin

Loup Wolves finished the 2016 season as the eight-man Class D2 State Runner-Ups (Custer County Chief 2011).

In the winter of 2011, Ansley and Litchfield (Sherman County) played together as one basketball team, the first step toward the two high schools playing as one cooperative program in all sports. The Ansley-Litchfield Spartans, the name chosen by the student body, began playing eight-man football in the fall of 2012. While Ansley's boys were used to playing eight-man football, Litchfield had been playing six-man football for most of the 1990s and 2000s. Even though both schools had enough boys for a football team, both coaches cited the need for the cooperative to provide more depth and competition. The decision to enter a cooperative was an easy one for both school boards due to declining enrollment and scheduling problems, as well as the desire to continue providing quality sports and activities. Ensuring quality programs has helped the high schools in Ansley and Litchfield keep their students from looking elsewhere for better opportunities, both academically and athletically (Custer County Chief 2011).

Although it cannot be confirmed, it is believed that each of these three cooperative agreements will extend well beyond the 2017 season, as the Ansley-Litchfield Spartans, South Loup Bobcats, and Twin Loup Wolves appear to be permanent teams. The question then becomes, however, whether or not these cooperative agreements can be seen as the first step to school consolidation, as the enrollment of each of the six schools involved in the agreements continues to decline. It will also be interesting to watch the futures of the Anselmo-Merna Coyotes and the Broken Bow

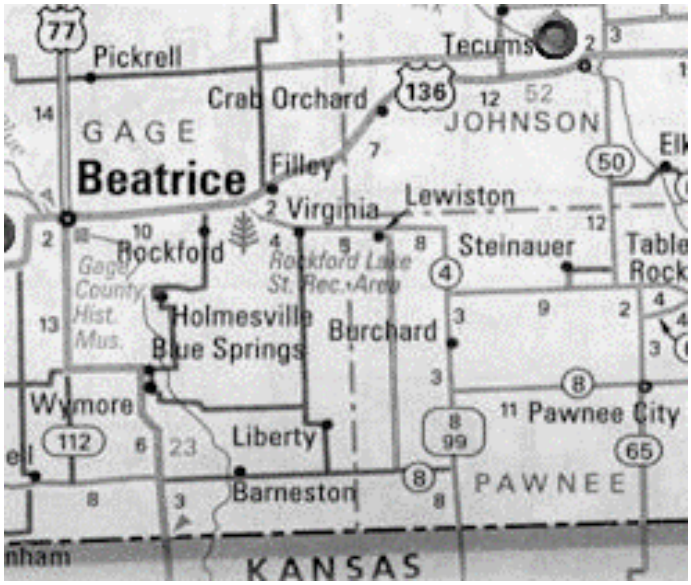
(Figure 3.10) Welcome Sign in Ansley

Indians as declining enrollments continue to be a cause for concern, for both the schools and their respective football teams.

No matter the case, high school football will continue to be a source of pride for the good people of Custer County. Among the people from the county that I had the chance to meet with, I happened across a group of farmers sitting at a table in the gas station in Ansley. As they drank their coffee, they discussed the prospects of the next Ansley-Litchfield football season, comparing current players to former Warrior greats. Even though the Warrior name has been replaced, and they must share their team with their neighbors in Litchfield, the community is still proud to call the Spartans their own. In the northeast portion of the county, Sargent Bulldogs decals can still be seen on the occasional car window, stuck next to a Twin Loup Wolves logo. To the west, the red paint on the Arnold football field, and the maroon paint on the Callaway field, have been

replaced by a coat of blue, the color of the South Loup Bobcats. Like the county itself, the high school football teams in Custer County continue to celebrate their past, while embracing their future.

CHAPTER FOUR
MY PERSONAL EIGHT-MAN FOOTBALL EXPERIENCE



(Figure 4.1) Map of Lewiston and Surrounding Area

This chapter serves as a personal geography of my time at Lewiston (Figure 4.1) High School, where I played on an eight-man football program. It tells how I feel connected to the stories from other people, teams, and schools that are included in my previous chapters. In many ways, my experiences from a small-town school are similar to the experiences of many other students; in many other ways, they are unique to me. It is important to note that most of this chapter is built on personal experience, and all the subjectivity that this entails. This chapter does not reflect the views of Lewiston Consolidated Schools or any affiliated members, but rather how my experiences within this space produced my sense of place. It is meant as a humanist geographical account that is inspired by works from Yi-Fu Tuan (Tuan 2012) and Anne Buttimer (Buttimer 1985).

I grew up a few miles northwest of Liberty, a village of 76 people (2010 Census) in southeast Gage County. Much like the other towns in the area, Liberty has continued to decline since the railroad boom in the decade before 1900. My grandfather, who built the house I grew up in, attended high school in Liberty. My father, uncle, and two aunts had to travel further for school, however, as Liberty High School closed in 1963. My father, born three years after Liberty had closed, went to school in Barneston, located a little over ten miles from our farm. Barneston High School would shut down after his freshman year, consolidating most of their district with high schools in Blue Springs and Wymore, and forming Southern High School, which is still open today. Our farm sits on the eastern boundary of the Southern school district, while the neighboring Liberty school district was absorbed by Lewiston Consolidated Schools. Due to relationships made through attending church services in Liberty and wanting my sister and I to be in the same school as our cousins, my parents chose to enroll me at Lewiston. In the fall of 1997, I began kindergarten with two other boys and nine girls.

Lewiston Consolidated Schools, located on the western edge of the small community of Lewiston in northwest Pawnee County, was built in 1901 to add secondary education for students of Nebraska school district 69. Over the years, the Lewiston school district has grown to cover 156 sections of land in Gage, Johnson, and Pawnee counties, including all or parts of the former school districts of Barneston (1981), Burchard (1959), Crab Orchard (1947), Liberty (1963), Steinauer (1966), Vesta (1953), and Virginia (1964). The school, which houses all grades, kindergarten through the twelfth grade, in the same building, has been able to stay open thanks to consolidating these districts into

their own. Outside of farming, the school is by far the biggest employer in the area, while also serving as one of the few entertainment options provided by students' endeavors in sports, music programs, and theatre plays.

While eight-man football is seen by some as an indicator of a school on the decline, it seemed like the normal way to play the game in my experience. Growing up, we drew football plays using only eight-players, doing our best to put them into action at recess. We idolized our high school football team, aspiring to be them in our own pickup game played behind the bleachers during Friday night home games. I will never forget my fourth-grade year, watching the run to the Class D2 State Championship in the fall of 2001, culminating in a double overtime victory over Greeley at Memorial Stadium. We couldn't wait until we were in high school, playing on the same field, and wearing the same jerseys. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, pee wee football wasn't an option in our area unless your parents were willing to drive you nearly thirty miles to Beatrice every night for practice and even further for games. If traveling expenses weren't pushing the budget, the insurance and equipment costs that went into playing for some of these teams shot down any hope a young boy had for playing football.

These same cost problems existed within the school as well. As I entered junior high, Lewiston had full contact football for seventh and eighth grade boys, but in previous years, they had only offered flag football to help eliminate the equipment and insurance costs. Our junior high football team was dressed in straight white helmets and pants, and maroon mesh jerseys with white numbers on the front and back. These simple uniforms were the sign of a low budget. We were only able to schedule four games due to

the small number of junior high football teams close to us. One of the games was against Sterling, who wore the same jerseys as us, and since both teams only had one jersey option, the home team would wear yellow strap-on vests over their jerseys. While the junior high football program may have had its issues, it was better than not having one at all, which was the case in many of our neighboring schools.

During my freshman year, I was one of the three boys from my class, and fewer than 20 total, to be on the football team. As members of such a small team, each one of us was on the varsity squad before the first time we stepped foot on the practice field. We practiced inside the old gravel track, one the track and field team had abandoned long ago in favor of hosting their "home" meets at Pawnee City. Our practice jerseys were the worn and torn varsity jerseys from the 1990s. We ran blocking drills with one old sled and we all used the same dummy to practice tackling. Our head coach, Neil Woofter, who lived just a block from the school, was the one who mowed the practice field as well as our actual football field. He spent his personal time each week preparing the field (Figure 4.2) for Friday night home games. It is not uncommon for a small town high school football coach to be in charge of almost everything in running the program, and it is not uncommon for them to do it as volunteers.

Coach Woofter led the Lewiston football program for 36 years, calling both the offensive and defensive plays, while also teaching high school history and geography. During those 36 years, he also spent time as the head coach for girls basketball and the track and field team, and as an assistant coach for boys basketball. Even after officially retiring, Coach Woofter stayed involved with the school for five more years as a

(Figure 4.2) Lewiston Football Field

substitute teacher and a member of the school board, while also being an assistant football coach. As head coach of Lewiston, he had many teams with only twelve or thirteen players in total, playing against schools with twenty to twenty-five players. In a brief discussion about his coaching days, Coach Woofter told me that the biggest obstacle in putting a competitive product on the field every year was injuries. When your best players get hurt, inexperienced underclassmen are brought into the game, often when they're not physically or mentally ready to play at the varsity level.

In our senior year, our team had far more underclassman than juniors and seniors. The team was very undersized and inexperienced, especially when it came to offensive and defensive linemen. Despite a rough season, I have many fond memories on and off the field. After getting blown out by a Johnson-Brock team that had just moved down to eight-man, we crossed the state line to play Bern, which was one of the few eight-man

teams in northeast Kansas. For the third game, we travelled eighty miles to play Shickley, which was the longest trip of the year. The rest of the games were against fellow Pioneer Conference teams. A game against Falls City Sacred Heart had us in Falls City's Jug Brown Stadium, a one-hundred-yard football field used by the Class C Falls City Tigers, that is shortened to eighty yards for the eight-man Fighting Irish. Our four home games were against Freeman, Lincoln Parkview Christian, Diller-Odell, and Sterling.

Lincoln Parkview Christian was our homecoming game. One of the best weeks of the school year, the four high school classes would each decorate their own hallway while dressing up in different themes for each weekday, always ending with the same Friday theme of school spirit. Like every other Friday in the fall, the football players would wear their home jerseys while the girl of their choosing wore their away jersey, which usually topped an outfit that was reminiscent of the previous generation's cheerleaders. The entire school would gather in the gymnasium before the game, as the cheerleaders led a pep rally for the football team. After the game, a king and a queen were announced from the senior class, followed by a dance. During this particular game, one of our players broke a school record by scoring seven touchdowns. Despite his remarkable feat, the newspapers in Beatrice and Pawnee City offered little more than a few lines on his accomplishment. In fact, people seemed more surprised that a foreign exchange student from Germany kicked in our one and only field goal of the season during this game, as good kickers tend to be a rarity among eight-man football teams.

In our final home game of the year, known as Senior Night, we played Sterling. Senior Night was celebrated by players accompanied onto the field by their parents, as

the oldest boys prepared to play their final regular season home game. As well as recognizing the seniors on the team, Senior Night would give parents some of the limelight, which was well deserved after all their work behind the scenes, washing uniforms, prepping pre-game meals (sometimes for the entire team), and volunteering at the concession stand (the fourth-grade classroom) during the game. Senior Night would also be the final time that some students would play in the pep band, that some cheerleaders would energize the crowd, and that some fans would park their cars behind the end zone, where they were able to stay warmer than if they were in the bleachers. After not making the playoffs, Senior Night would be the last time the team would listen to AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* before the game, the last time the football field would be lit up on a Friday night until the next fall, and the last time high schoolers would meet in the student parking lot after the game, where the boys showed off their battle scars to impress the girls.

Throughout my high school career, there were rumors of a cooperative football team with Sterling and a school consolidation proposal with Pawnee City. Lewiston voted against entering a cooperative agreement out of fear that many athletes wouldn't get as much playing time. The Pawnee City consolidation proposal consisted of elementary (kindergarten through sixth-grade) students in both towns, with Lewiston getting the junior high school, and all the high schoolers attending Pawnee City. Surveys were sent out to the public to vote on the proposal. They were returned with overwhelming opposition, especially by parents who were on the west side of the district, furthest away from Pawnee City. After my graduation, there were a few more

consolidation rumors, but they were silenced when Lewiston added a new wing to the school and opened a preschool program. Even with the new additions, Lewiston's enrollment numbers have declined. Consequently, in recent years, the junior high football program entered a cooperative agreement with Southern's junior high team.

With the success of the junior high football cooperative, and low enrollment numbers, Lewiston agreed to combine high school football programs with Southern for the 2016 season. This agreement also included the 2017 season under the Nebraska School Activities Association's two-year classification system. With more players, the combined team was moved up to Class C1, a small move for C2 Southern compared to D2 Lewiston. Obviously, the biggest change was that the Lewiston boys would be playing eleven-man instead of eight-man football. The cooperative agreement not only added depth and competition for each position, but also gave both schools the chance to play against larger schools in Class C1. Although the team struggled in its first season, many coaches, players, and fans saw reasons to feel good about next year.

Despite the blessings of many people, however, the cooperative agreement has faced some backlash from the Lewiston community. Most of the negativity stems from the two teams not being a true cooperative, or a shared team, as Lewiston played under the unchanged name and logo of the Southern Raiders, competing in their jerseys and playing all home games on their field. Lewiston's name only appeared alongside Southern's on paper. This form of cooperative agreement is not unique to Southern and Lewiston, and it should not reflect negatively on either school. It is simply a one time,

two-year agreement, as both schools consider the futures of their football programs. Still, one can easily understand how this might upset a community.

For many Lewiston student, parents, alumni, and residents, the Tigers have long been one of their greatest sources of pride, entertainment, and connection to the school and the community. There have been so many memories made by players and fans alike on our football field and it is difficult to not see those lights shine on a fall, Friday night. The maroon-colored shirts and hats that we wear in support of our Tigers are traded in once a week for Southern Raider red, a color that we have so often seen in other sports on the opposite side of the gym. We have friends and neighbors whose relatives and kids attend Southern, but ours attend Lewiston, and we support the Tigers, not the Raiders. We bled, sweat, cried, and broke bones for our team, our school, not someone else's. This is a common sentiment among players who have lost their football teams through consolidation or cooperative agreements.

Fortunately, rumor has it that Lewiston is exploring switching to six-man in 2018. This decision is likely contingent on other neighboring schools doing the same, creating a domino effect of schools in the area making a similar switch to lower the travelling costs. It also bodes well for the area that six-man football is becoming more popular in Kansas. If some of the small schools in northeast Kansas make the switch to six-man football, it would be easier to schedule games. There is also the possibility that Lewiston will return as an eight-man football team as the school board and administration expand their efforts to increase student enrollment. While the school district struggles from an enrollment

standpoint, it's sitting well financially due to large donations from members of the school district.

One of the most promising signs for the future of the school can be found at its lowest level. Lewiston offers a pre-school program that is leaps and bounds better than other area schools. One of the biggest draws for the pre-school program is that it is paid for by the school, compared to the program in Beatrice, where the parents have to pay. This, along with difficulties in their attempts to build a new elementary school, has led to many Beatrice families sending their children to Lewiston. Once just a destination for students who had run into trouble at Beatrice, Lewiston has become a more attractive option both academically and financially. Lewiston has also been pulling in kids from south of the state line as many families fear that the Axtell (Kansas) school may be closing in the near future.

While the future looks bright for Lewiston, the reality is that the school will continue to face enrollment issues for some time. The district itself seems like a reflection of the high school as the population continues to decline. The small town dynamic is changing from the previous generation where our fathers took over our grandfather's farm, while our mothers married farmers and became housewives, taking jobs at the schools, churches, legions, and small businesses within the community. Our generation has become more mobile and been able to spread out into the world. We went to college further from home and explored the new opportunities that cities like Lincoln or Omaha present. We have found new professions and sold off the land that we inherited. The young adults from the area are settling down in the city, starting families and sending

their children to city schools. Once an area with four or five families in a square mile, there are now just a handful of farmers who own many square miles of land. The aging population can be seen in the small-town bars on Friday nights, and in the pews on Sunday mornings, where there seem to be fewer young adults each year.

When I was growing up, my father would often recall the time when the walls and roof that made the old Liberty schoolhouse were stripped and sold for their materials. Like so many shut down small town and country schools, there became little left outside of a commemorate plaque placed on a rock. I remember asking him to take me to the football field where the Mustangs of Liberty played, only to pull up to a cornfield that stretched beyond a private property sign. It is my fear that my grandchildren will find Lewiston in a similar state of ruin, and nothing more than a plaque on a rock, and the field that I played on turned into farmland. It is a fear shared by Nebraskans of all ages in almost every county, as enrollments continue to decline, and more and more eleven-man teams drop to eight-man, eight-man teams to six-man, and some teams disappearing altogether.

POSTSCRIPT

THE FUTUTE OF SIX AND EIGHT-MAN FOOTBALL

(Figure 5.1) Chester Baseball Field, Repurposed from Old Football Field

While the future of six and eight-man football is bright in Nebraska, it will come at the cost of losing high school football teams that are currently playing eleven-man. Many Class C1 and Class C2 high schools that are losing a majority of their games continue to explore switching to eight-man football. Although they have enough players for eleven-man football, they don't always have the numbers necessary to be competitive. Some high schools may have a lot of freshman and sophomores, and few experienced, upperclassman players. Not only does this hurt a team's chances on the football field, but playing so many inexperienced boys can lead to more injuries, as many incoming freshmen have not yet grown to the size they will reach as juniors or seniors. The number of forfeits is rising in high school football games each year due to injuries reducing teams to too few players. Many schools also don't have enough players for a full practice, so

their team isn't properly prepared for a live game. These same situations have led many eight-man high schools to make the switch to six-man football.

With so many eleven-man schools exploring the idea of dropping to eight-man football, and eight-man to six-man, the Nebraska Schools Activities Association has agreed to changes in the classification rules to address the previously mentioned problems. The modified rules are set to go into effect as soon as the 2018 season. With the first change, the NSAA will classify schools by the number of boys they have in grades 9, 10, and 11, compared to the current practice of measuring total (boy and girl) enrollments. The second change also effects the method by which schools are classified. Instead of fixing a set number of teams for each class, the NSAA will henceforth use enrollment numbers to classify schools, with the goal of reducing the wide enrollment gap that exists in both Class A and Class B high schools. Hopefully this will create fair competition in every game. The proposed classification will define Class A as the high schools with at least 425 boys, put Class B schools in the range of 160 and 424 boys, followed by Class C-1 where high schools have between 70 and 159 boys. The high schools playing eleven-man football with less than 70 boys will form Class C-2 (Lincoln Journal Star 2017).

The new boy enrollment count method will affect the classification of six and eight-man teams as well. For eight-man football, teams will be divided into two classes based on number of boys, with the larger half in Class D-1 and the smaller half in Class D-2. The cutoff for playoff eligibility will be set at 47 boys. Any school is welcome to play eight-man football, but they will be deemed ineligible for postseason play if their 9,

10, and 11 enrollment consists of more than 47 boys. The same can be said for six-man teams, where the cutoff will be set at 27 boys. Additionally, the six-man playoffs will be officially sanctioned by the NSAA for the first time since its disappearance from the state in the 1960s. By forming a sanctioned playoff system, the NSAA has acknowledged that six-man football will continue to prosper in Nebraska (Lincoln Journal Star 2017). While the future of six and eight-man football is still predominantly speculation, the higher eligibility cutoff that is being proposed for both six and eight-man is an indicator that the Nebraska Schools Activities Association is expecting many high schools to descend classes. These new rules are reflective of the large number of Nebraska high schools that are switching classes due to declining enrollments.

The geography of six and eight-man football in Nebraska will continue to mirror rural depopulation patterns as they have done throughout much of the history of the state. Due to further depopulation and subsequent school consolidation, families will continue to be full of children attending different schools than their grandparents, and in many cases their parents, even if they live in the same area. Thriving communities where mothers and fathers grew up will continue to become nothing but ghost towns to their daughters and sons. Old school buildings will be repurposed or stripped and sold for their materials. Plaques and trophies will be put in storage, collecting dust. Some abandoned eighty-yard football fields will be cultivated and used as farmland, like many have before them, disappearing along with the population.

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