

Indiana remains in the middle of a people marching westward

■ Rural Daviess County is new population center, a statistical quirk bearing no resemblance to a norm.

By Scott L. Miley

scott.miley@indystar.com

RAGLESVILLE, Ind. — Northern Daviess County doesn't look like the crossroads of American culture.

Amish buggies roll down gravel roads. Horses graze in muddy pastures. But somewhere in this quiet rolling farmland — at 38 degrees, 45 minutes North latitude and 86 degrees, 56 minutes West longitude — lies the median center of population for the United States, a statistical curiosity that shifts a little farther south and a little farther west with each census.

How do they figure the median? Equally divide the 281,421,906 Americans who were counted in the 2000 census. Separate them into quadrants with one line running north and south, the other east and west. The intersection of those lines would put you smack in the middle of...

"Excuse me for a moment," says Frederick Broome, a geographer who helps pinpoint population centers for the De-



Robert Scheer / staff photos

Small school, small town: The outstretched hand of Melody Sommers, a teacher's aide, greets Marjorie Wagler (left) and Rosie Mae Raber (carrying folder) at Van Buren Township School in Rablesville. The village of 70 people in rural Daviess County (below) is near the new midpoint of the nation's population.

partment of Commerce.

From his office in Washington, he laughs. "I can see you standing down there with a camera and saying that from this point, half of the population is to the east and half to the west."

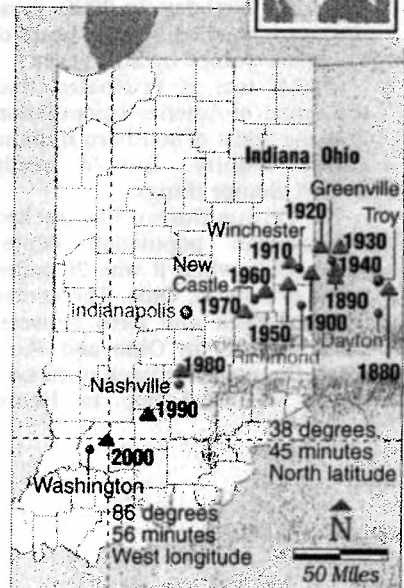
"You look out in every direction and take a picture and you get a photo of seven cows."

His vision of the spot near Rablesville isn't far off.

There are actually 28 head of cattle near the population center, which seems to be in a stream at the rear of John Henry Kemp's 119-acre farm.

The shifting center

If lines were drawn dividing America's 281 million people equally into four quadrants, the center would be about 13 miles northeast of Washington, Ind., in Daviess County. Population patterns have shifted the center to the southwest in each census since 1940.



John Bigelow / staff graphic

See Middle, Page B5



Middle

■ Center has moved across state since 1940 census.

From B1

Wearing baggy blue jeans, suspenders and black-brimmed hat, he looks at a topographic map.

"You're real close, yeah."

His farm is close to the population center, yes, but light-years away from representing the typical American.

For one thing, Kemp is Amish. (The census shows about 81,000 Old Order Amish and some Mennonites in America; there are 62

million Roman Catholics.)

Kemp, 63, and his wife, Ida Mae, 61, have been married 40 years. (Fifty-two percent of America's households had married couples, down from 55 percent in 1990.)

The Kemps have a phone but no electricity. They don't own a car. (Of America's 115 million households, 9.7 million reported having no vehicles. One vehicle was reported by 35.3 million, two vehicles by 40.3 million, and three or more vehicles by 19.1 million homes.)

The Kemps have 10 children. (The average family size decreased from 3.16 people in 1990 to 3.14 in 2000.) And 32 grandchildren.

Four of the sons live on the

same land with the Kemps.

"That's the way we like it," Kemp says.

The Amish influence on census data is skewed, statistically, by Mike Shake in nearby Raglesville.

In the midst of buggy country, he runs an automotive repair shop, the only business in the village of 70 people.

The Kemps have no cars. Shake owns 13.

"We have a ball. We drag race. Everybody gets into that around here," Shake says. "It's beautiful down here. Laid-back. Good neighbors. Good friends. Everybody knows everybody, and everybody knows everybody's business, but that's a small town."

At 44 and with three children, Shake's been married 26 years. (The vast majority of men and women in 2000 were married by their 35th birthday. In 2000, most men were married by 26.8 years of age; most women by 25.1 years.)

Shake, too, is fascinated that the center of America's population is in the midst of southern Indiana Amish country. But it really doesn't change things.

The Census Bureau has tracked the median population center since 1880, when it was 20 miles north of Dayton, Ohio. The center bounced back and forth between Darke County in Ohio and Randolph County in Indiana until taking a westward hop to Henry

County in 1960.

The midpoint leaped to northeastern Brown County in 1980, then to the northern tip of Lawrence County in 1990.

In 2000, the center again moved westward. Growth in western states outpaced the rest of the nation. California gained 4.1 million people, the most of any state.

Keeping tabs on the population center is a trivial pursuit.

"This is more of historical value than it is of what you might call current value," says Broome, the geographer. "It's a reference point, nothing more."

■ Call Scott L. Miley at 1-317-444-6178.

Census trivia

Other centers:

U.S. geographic center: West of Castle Rock in Butte County, S.D.

Conterminous U.S. geographic center: Lebanon in Smith County, Kan.

U.S. mean population center (as if weights of identical size were placed to represent the location of each person): 2.8 miles east of Edgar Springs, Mo.

Indiana's center for 6,080,485 population: Near Terhune in Boone County.