“The times they are a changing.” Since day one of Griggs County history, the population has been anything but stable.

Tracking the population changes tends to show two trends in the history of our county. In 1879 when Mr. Opheim built the first log cabin down by the river (which is now located in the Courthouse yard) he was one of the first Americans to permanently settle in the area. However, he wasn’t alone for very long. By 1920 the population boomed to a staggering 7,402. Reading through the old Courier articles shows these first 41 years as a period of almost unbridled optimism. I recall one article bragging that there was not a single individual in Cooperstown that could not invest a dollar in anything and have less than a doubling of their investment value within a year.

However, that period of rapid growth came to an end around 1920 when the second trend in our population began and which continues to the present. Since 1920, we have seen a slow but steady decline in population in every census down to the current population of 2,420. There are doubtless a number of significant factors that contributed to this decline, but modern farming methods may account for some of the it . New farming methods have meant that farming simply doesn’t require nearly as many people to farm the same amount of land as it did in the early years. In fact, it’s hard for farms to be profitable if they don’t cover acreage that was inconceivable in the early days. But, delving into all the factors that led to a declining population is definitely beyond the scope of this column.

However, I don’t think this population loss means we must be pessimistic about our future. I think a lot of us accept the declining population as a reality of modern times—we are not in a bad situation, we are just in a different situation.

Another important trend in our population is the increasing percentage of our population which resides in cities. While cities have seen some decline in population, the areas outside of the cities have seen significant decline. In 1920 only 26% of the county’s population lived in Cooperstown, Binford, and Hannaford. The other 74% of the people in the county lived primarily on farms and in the smaller towns such as Sutton and Jessie. However, by 2010 this had changed quite dramatically—the three biggest towns had a 54% majority of the population—people living in the cities now comprised a majority of the county.

Cooperstown has seen a much smaller decrease in population than the rest of the county. The population in Cooperstown has only declined 11% from 1920 to 2010. All of the other cities and towns have seen decreases between 53% and 89%. It’s doubtless that its role as the county seat and home to manufacturers and the area hospital have all sustained Cooperstown’s population. In spite of that stability, I think we all can remember having lots of things that have disappeared in Cooperstown. I can remember when there were about 6 gas stations, 3 grocery stores and several hardware, clothing and general merchandise stores including Coast To Coast, Penney’s and Gamble’s.

Indeed the times have changed in Griggs County. However, my opinion is that we don’t need to be pessimistic about these changes. We simply need to continue a long tradition of building upon our strengths, taking pride in our neighborhoods, and helping our neighbors as they help us.

We hope you enjoy this new column, “Historical Highlights.” We’ll do our best to share stories from Griggs County’s past that you’ll find interesting, enjoyable and even inspiring. And, as you can see, we’ll probably share some of our thoughts and opinions on our history as well. Please send story ideas and your comments about this column to the editor and we will respond.

For more information and detailed population numbers, visit the Griggs County Museum’s website at griggscountyhistoricalsociety.com where you will find the population by city and township for each census since the first pioneers arrived here.