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## Article Title: Age and Sex Composition of the Population on the Nebraska Frontier, 1860-1880

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Article Summary: Wishart examines the assumption that frontier societies consisted of young families plus a large number of single men. For five Nebraska counties he finds evidence that supports these conclusions. The predominance of unmarried males over females, relatively small at the time of settlement, did increase as years passed.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Frederick Jackson Turner, Everett Dick, Mari Sandoz, James C Malin, Mildred Throne, William L Bowers, Rodney O Davis

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Keywords: young adults, children, single males, Richardson County, Burt County, Franklin County, Stanton County, Furnace County

Charts: Fig 1: Excess of Males, 1860; Fig 2: Age of Population Richardson County, 1860; Fig 3: Age of Population Franklin County, 1884; Fig 4: Excess of Males, 1880; Fig 5: Age of Population Richardson County, 1875; Fig 6: Age and Sex of Population, United States, 1880; Fig 7: Age of Population Furnas County, 1875; Age of Population Furnas County 1884

# EXCESS OF MALES, 1860

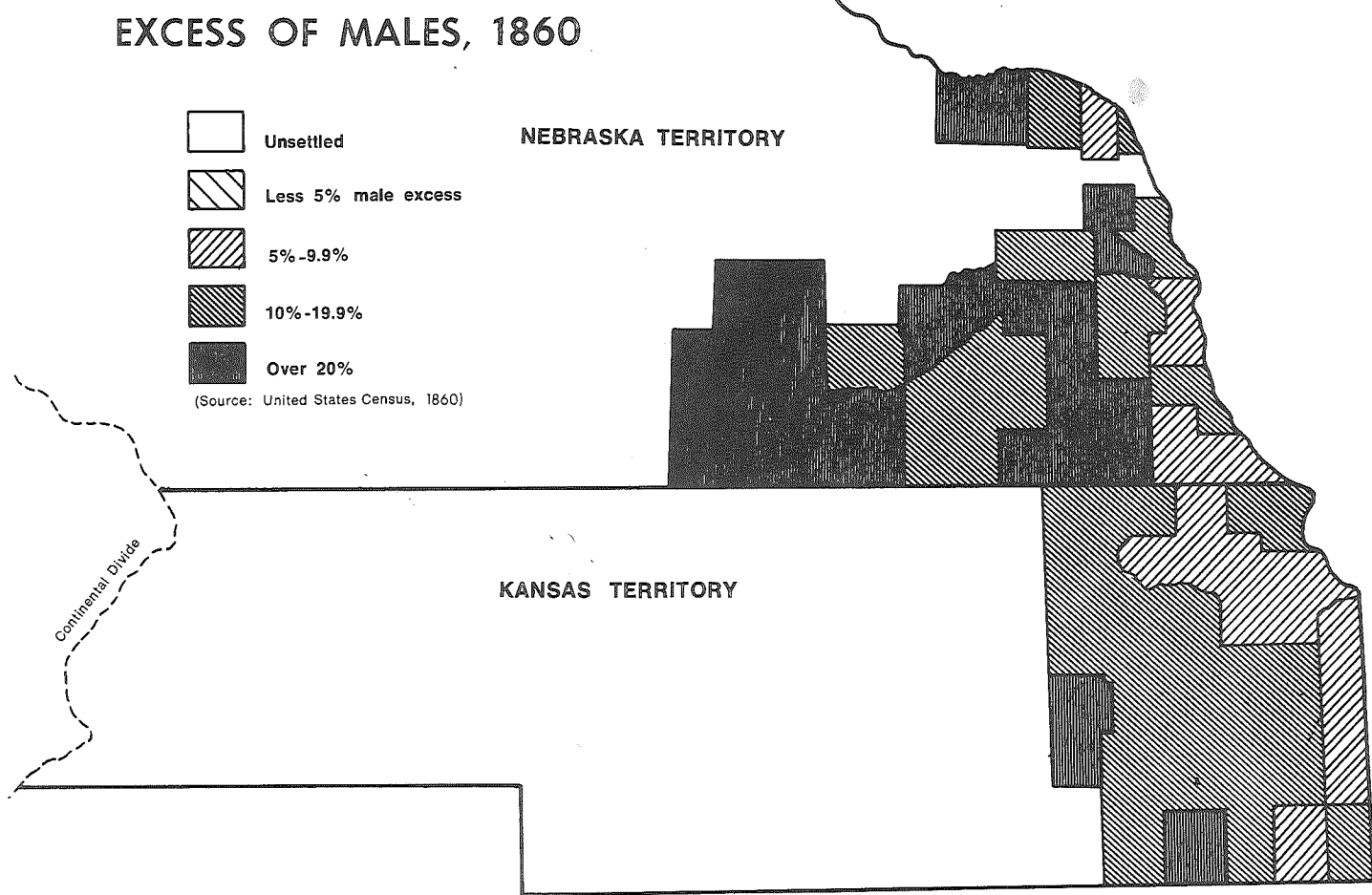


Figure 1.

# AGE AND SEX COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION ON THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER, 1860-1880

By DAVID J. WISHART

The visionary views of Frederick Jackson Turner have been subjected to continuous appraisal and reappraisal.<sup>1</sup> In that section of historical demography which is concerned with the age and sex composition of the frontier population, Turner's generalizations have been perpetuated in popular historical literature. These generalizations, "macro" in concept and area, need to be treated quantitatively and examined in greater detail in smaller areas.

Traditionally it has been held that frontier societies consisted of young adults and their children, and that single men predominated in these harsh frontier environments. For example, Everett Dick is of the opinion that "a new country is made up of young people. Generally there were from three to thirty times as many unmarried men as unmarried women."<sup>2</sup> Native Nebraska author Mari Sandoz has written that "girls and women were scarce in the early West, particularly the footloose, the unmarried."<sup>3</sup>

If these generalizations are correct, it might be expected that the population structure would "age" as the frontier society matured and stabilized. It might also be expected that the excess of single males on the frontier would be reduced as the initial problems of pioneer settlement were overcome and conditions rendered more suitable for the female.<sup>4</sup>

It would be unjust to claim that this field of study is totally untilled. James C. Malin has made exhaustive studies of the character of the population in frontier Kansas.<sup>5</sup> Malin found

that young couples were in a minority and that the median age of the heads of families was 35 years. Mildred Throne, studying the early settlement of Wapello County, Iowa, found that the settlers came in family units but that the predominant age group was between 31 and 40 years.<sup>6</sup> She also concluded—contrary to the traditional view—that single men were at a premium in the frontier period because of the predominance of the family unit. William L. Bowers added more valuable information to the subject in his study of Crawford Township, Washington County, Iowa.<sup>7</sup> Bowers found that there was only a very small aging of the population as the frontier period passed and that single males actually increased with the passage of time. Bowers also concluded that although the numerical discrepancy between males and females was reduced from 1850 to 1870 there was still a shortage of females even in 1870.

The most recent treatment has come from Rodney O. Davis in his study of Dayton Township, Cedar County, Iowa.<sup>8</sup> In Davis' study area the population was "a family society from the beginning."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, whereas single males formed 18 percent of the working population in 1860, they constituted 42 percent in 1880. In the light of this survey of the literature, the reader might concur with Malin, who described the population composition of the frontier societies as "a subject of much inconsistent and contradictory treatment."<sup>10</sup>

In this study the hypotheses were tested over larger units than in the examples noted above. Certain counties were chosen as case studies to illustrate the situation in eastern Nebraska during the first two decades of settlement (1860-1880). The counties were chosen according to the availability of data and according to their location and period of settlement.<sup>11</sup> By varying geographic conditions and historical period it was hoped that significant patterns might be repeated as the frontier wave moved on. In order to give visual expression to the statistics, full use was made of maps and population pyramids.

By 1860 the frontier of settlement had moved into eastern Nebraska. The Missouri River counties of Nebraska were settled, with population densities in excess of two persons per square mile. Douglas County had achieved a population density of 21.8 persons per square mile, and the settlers moved up the river valleys where wood was available for construction, fencing, and firewood. Conditions differed little from those previously

encountered in Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. Despite the difficulties of frontier life noted in many primary accounts, the eastern Nebraska environment was not particularly harsh; nor was it an unfamiliar type of environment to the settler who had probably moved westward with a number of stopovers.

Figure 1 indicates that males were in an excess on the most westerly margins of the settled area of Kansas and Nebraska in 1860. Nowhere, however, did this excess match the figures that Dick suggested. Even in Polk, Shorter, and Dawson Counties of Nebraska there were two females for every three males. The isolation of Plains settlement may have been particularly difficult for the female, but it seems that the discrepancy between the numbers of males and females may not have been as great as some have suggested. As Throne revealed, the settlement seems to have been a family movement, and single males were less common in the frontier areas than might be expected.

Richardson County, for example, had only a 10 percent excess of males in 1860, while in Douglas County the difference between the numbers of males and females was even less. These data are inclusive for all age groups, and male excesses in the adult age groups alone would probably be greater.<sup>12</sup> However, the hypothesis of a numerical dominance of males in the frontier is not strongly supported in the case of eastern Nebraska.

Figure 2 does indicate, however, that the frontier population of Burt and Richardson counties consisted of young adults and children. In both cases the young adult age group from 20 to 30 years was disproportionately large, as was the group of children under 10 years of age. There were also fewer persons over 40 years of age than was the case for the United States as a whole.<sup>13</sup> This pattern is significant and will be traced westward at later dates as similar frontier conditions were encountered. It seems that young adults—younger than Throne found in her study—and children were characteristic on the Nebraska frontier.

By 1870 settlement had expanded westward along the Platte River. In the north the Sandhills were already acting as a barrier to settlement and were still the domain of the Indian. On the Missouri River, however, population densities reached 55.5 persons per square mile in Douglas County, where Omaha was rapidly growing. The completion of the Union Pacific Railroad

in 1869 was about to open up a new era of settlement on the plains.

The "frontier type" of population composition had moved westward, and as Turner has suggested, frontier patterns were being repeated. By 1870 Franklin County—organized in 1867—had, as Figure 3 indicates, an age structure characterized by young adults and children. In this case, however, the largest age group of adults was that of 30 to 40 years. This age distribution compares favorably with the conclusions of Malin and Throne.

Despite the period of economic depression and environmental catastrophes from 1873 to 1878, the decade of the 1870's marked the first stage of the "Great Boom" period of settlement on the Great Plains. Thirty-one counties were organized in Nebraska in this decade and the settled area extended to the western boundary of the state south of the Platte.

The generalized map taken from the 1880 Census (Figure 4) shows that males were more numerous than females on the most westerly borders of the settled areas in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. As was the case in 1860, however, the differences in numbers between the two sexes in the settled areas were not as great as some have indicated in the past.<sup>14</sup> The 1880 Census for example states the traditional viewpoint:

The most marked cases of the excess of males are in the territories and newer states of the west where settlement is most recent, where immigration is still active and where the luxuries and comforts of life are greatly abridged by the necessities of frontier existence.<sup>15</sup>

Not only was the excess of males on the frontier less than expected in the area studied, but in three of the five sample counties the numbers of single males increased as the settlement matured. This corresponds closely to Davis' conclusions in Iowa and may indicate the ingress of single males to fill new job openings in the developing communities.

Figure 5 shows the population pyramids for Burt and Richardson counties in 1875. Since 1860 (Figure 2) the population structure had "aged" to approach the norm for the United States in 1880 (Figure 6). To a certain extent Franklin County had also passed the frontier stage of population structure by 1875, as Figure 3 indicates.

Stanton and Furnas counties, however—organized in 1866 and 1873 respectively—showed in 1876 the same skewed distribution that has been traced westward since 1860. A comparison of Figures 7 and 8 will show that the dominance of the young-adult and child age-groups had been reduced in these two counties by 1884.

Although this sample of counties is limited and the units of study too large for detailed analysis, certain conclusions may be made. The initial phase of settlement in each county was characterized by the family unit of young adults with children. In all but Franklin County the most important age group of adults was that from 20 to 30 years of age. As has been stated above, this is younger than Throne and Malin have found in their study areas and conforms with the popular frontier image of newly married couples and young children. As the frontier society matured young immigrants ceased to constitute such a high proportion of the total population. The initial settlers aged, and the population structure became more typical of the normal pyramid. It is also concluded that males were more numerous than females on the frontier. This numerical difference was often small, however, and instead of decreasing as the frontier period passed, the excess of single males often increased with longer settlement. It remains for someone to test these hypotheses in a series of township studies similar to those conducted in Iowa. Only with such detailed studies will the complexities of the historical demography of frontier areas be resolved.

## NOTES

1. The essays of Frederick Jackson Turner have been collected in Ray A. Billington, Ed., *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1961).

2. Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890* (Johnsen Publishing Company: Lincoln, Nebraska, 1954), 232. Dick does modify this statement by noting that "the great disparity of numbers between the two sexes decreased rapidly."

3. Mari Sandoz, *Love Song to the Plains* (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1961), 123.

4. In popular historical literature the settler would send for his wife or sweetheart once he had established himself on the land. See Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Brown, Little and Company: Boston, 1937).

5. James C. Malin, "The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, IV (Nov. 1935), 339-372. James C. Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to its History* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1961), 279-291 *passim*.

6. Mildred Throne, "A Population Study of an Iowa County in 1850," *Iowa Journal of History*, 57 (October, 1959), 305-330.

7. William L. Bowers, "Crawford Township, 1850-1870: A Population Study of a Pioneer Community," *Iowa Journal of History*, 58 (January, 1960), 1-30.

8. Rodney O. Davis, "Prairie Emporium: Clarence, Iowa, 1860-1880. A Study in Population Trends," *Mid-America*, 51 (April, 1969), 130-139.

9. *Ibid.*, 133.

10. Malin, *Grassland*, 289.

11. The data for the population pyramids were collected from the original census returns housed at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

12. Davis and Throne concentrated on the adult age groups by considering the numbers of "householders."

13. Figure 6 shows the population pyramid for the United States in 1880. The 1860 population pyramid would differ in detail but, in general, would take similar form.

14. If data were available for places beyond the settled area (with population densities of above 2 persons per square mile) the excess of males might prove to be much greater.

15. United States Bureau of the Census, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, I, Population (Washington, D.C., 1882), xxxiv.



# AGE OF POPULATION

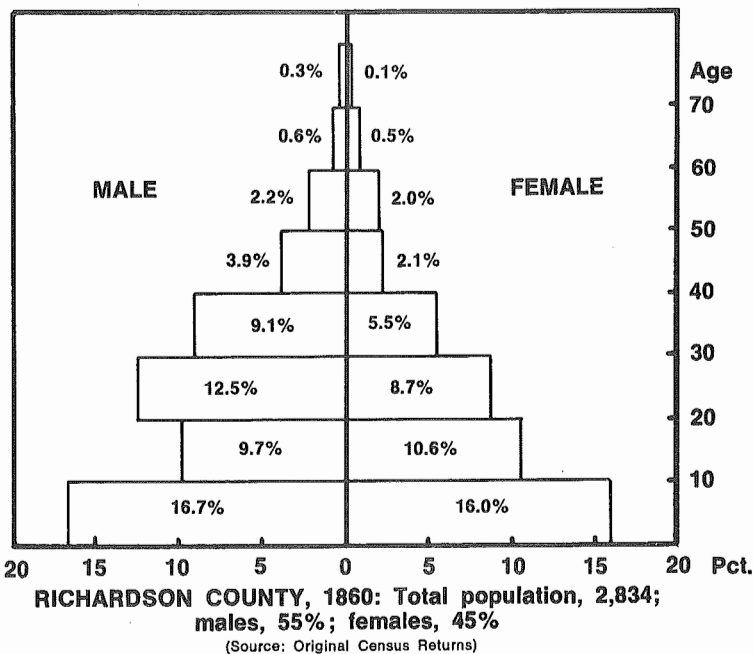
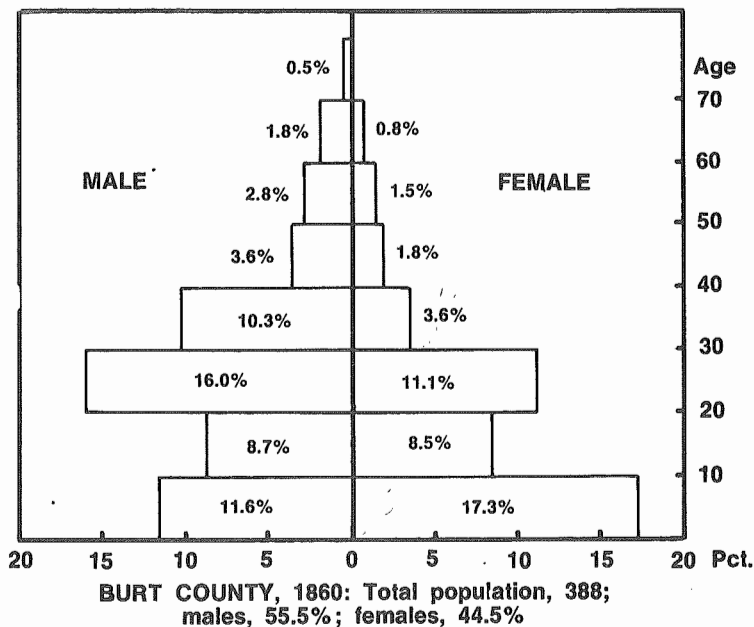
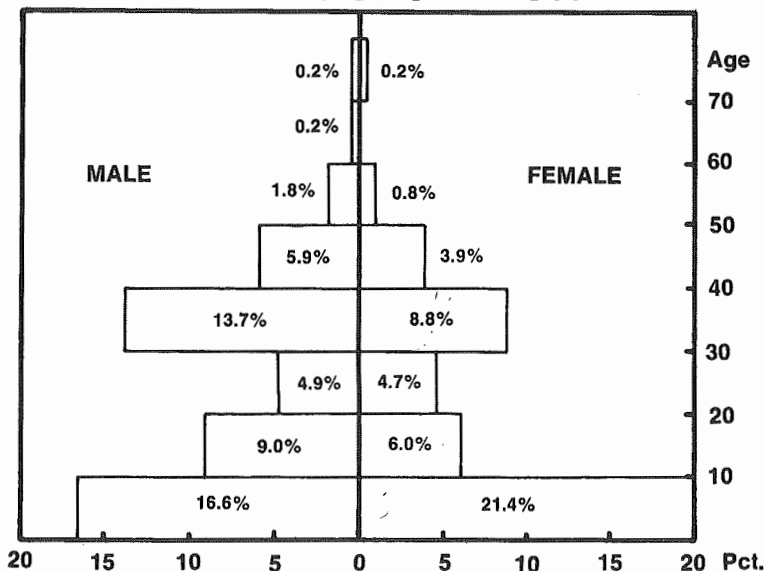
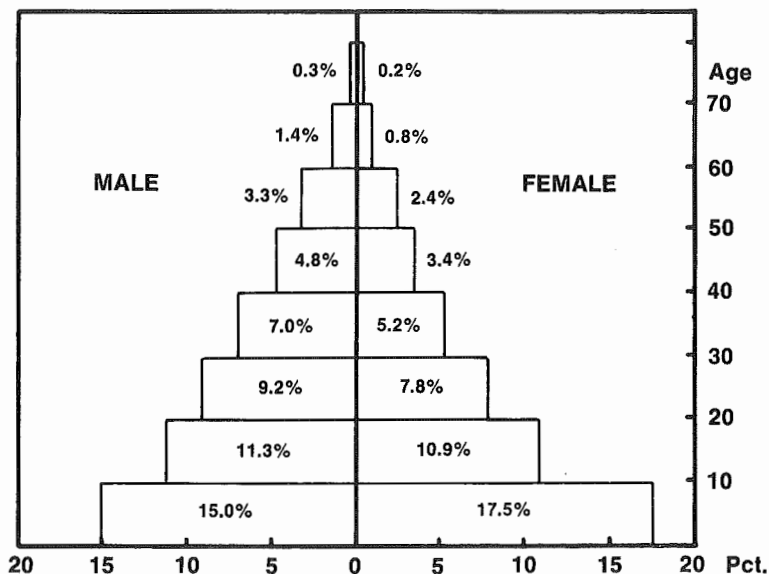


Figure 2.

# AGE OF POPULATION



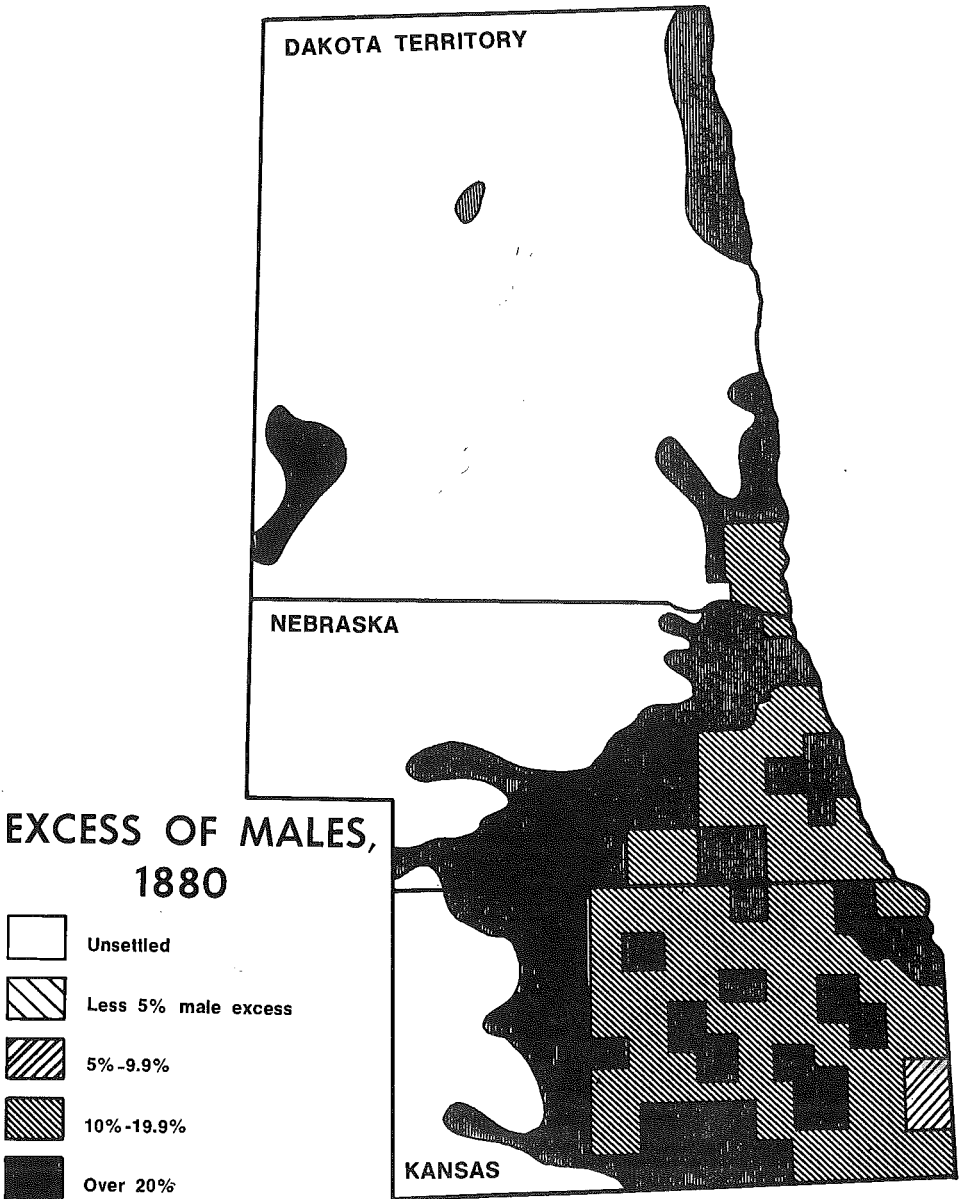
FRANKLIN COUNTY, 1870: Total population, 511;  
males, 52%; females, 48%



FRANKLIN COUNTY, 1884: Total population, 2,781;  
males, 52.5%; females, 47.5%

(Source: Original Census Returns)

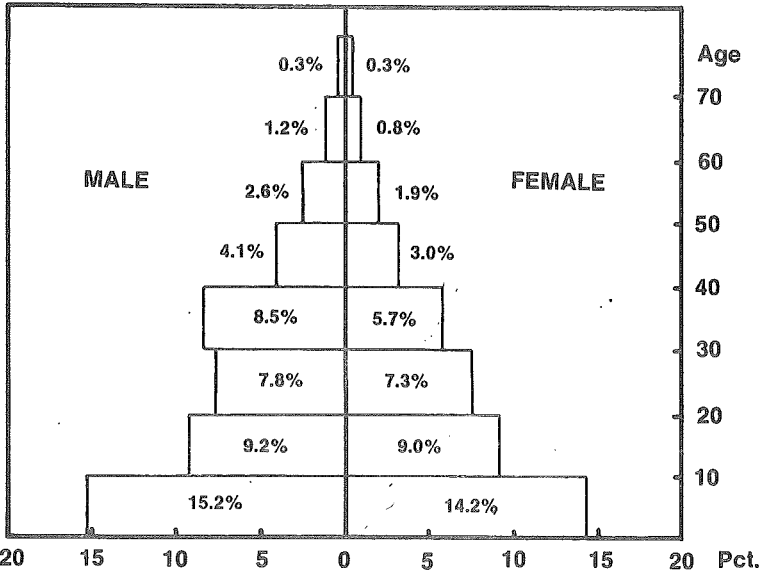
Figure 3.



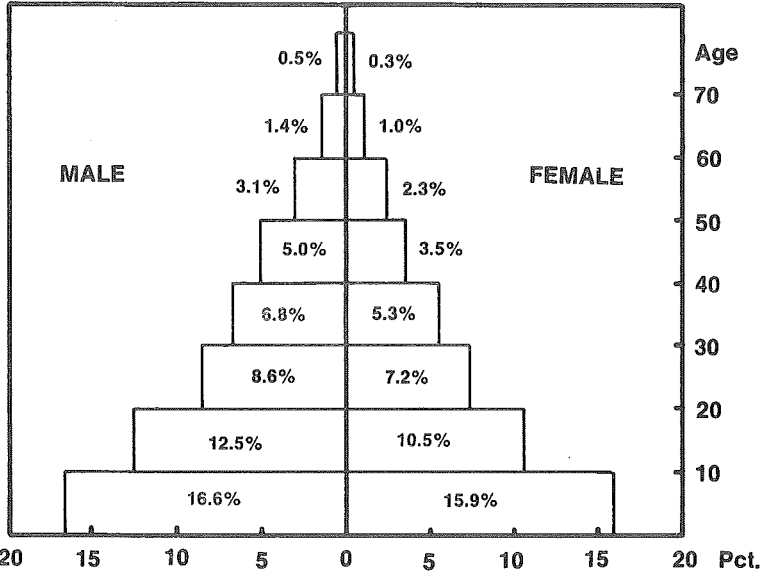
(Source: United States Census, 1880)

Figure 4.

# AGE OF POPULATION



**BURT COUNTY, 1875: Total population, 4,041;  
males, 53%; females, 47%**

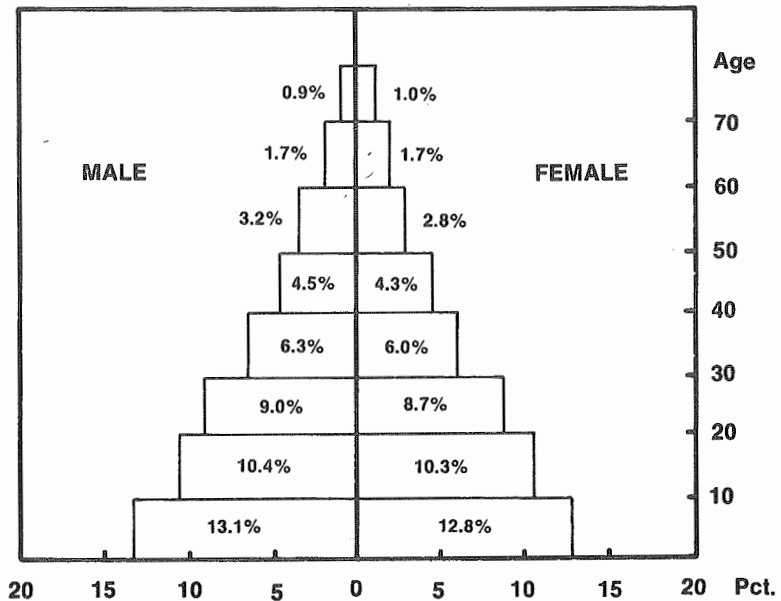


**RICHARDSON COUNTY, 1875: Total population, 11,327;  
males, 53.5%; females, 46.5%**

(Source: Original Census Returns)

Figure 5.

# AGE AND SEX OF POPULATION

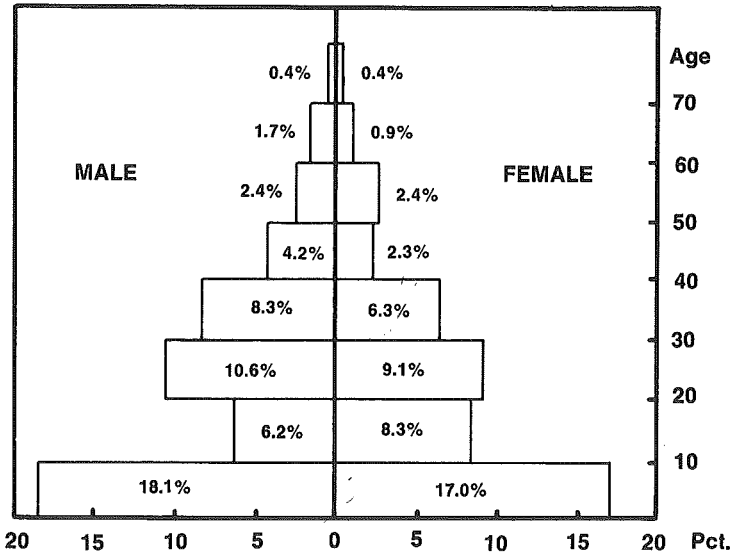


**UNITED STATES, 1880: Total population, 50,155,783;  
males, 50.4%; females, 49.6%**

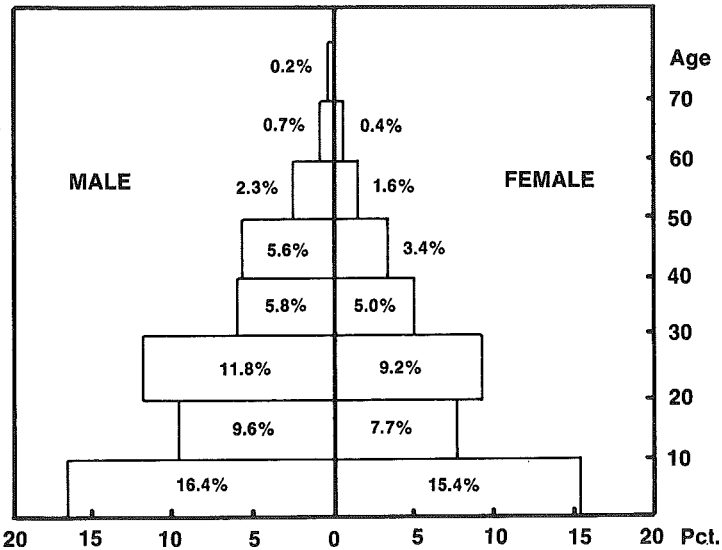
(Source: United States Census, 1880)

*Figure 6.*

# AGE OF POPULATION



**STANTON COUNTY, 1875: Total population, 1,841; males, 52%; females, 48%**

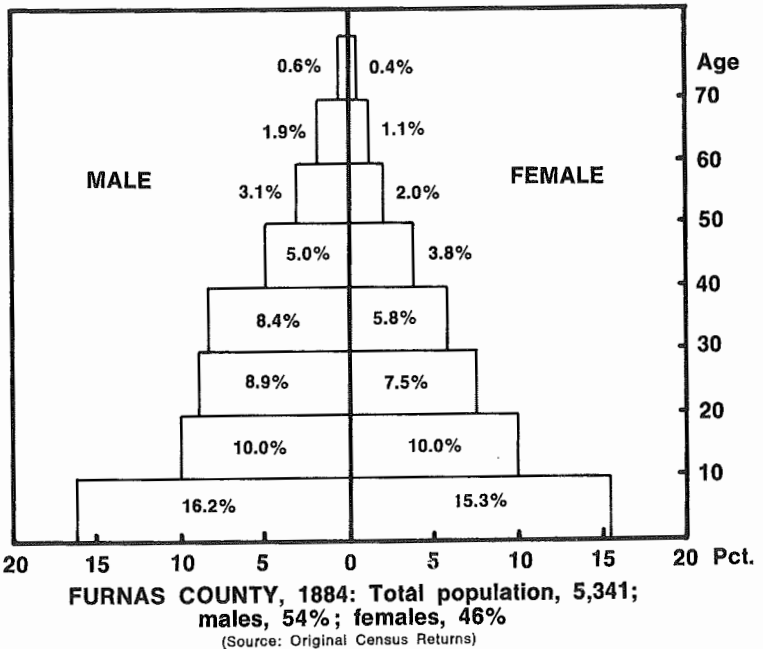
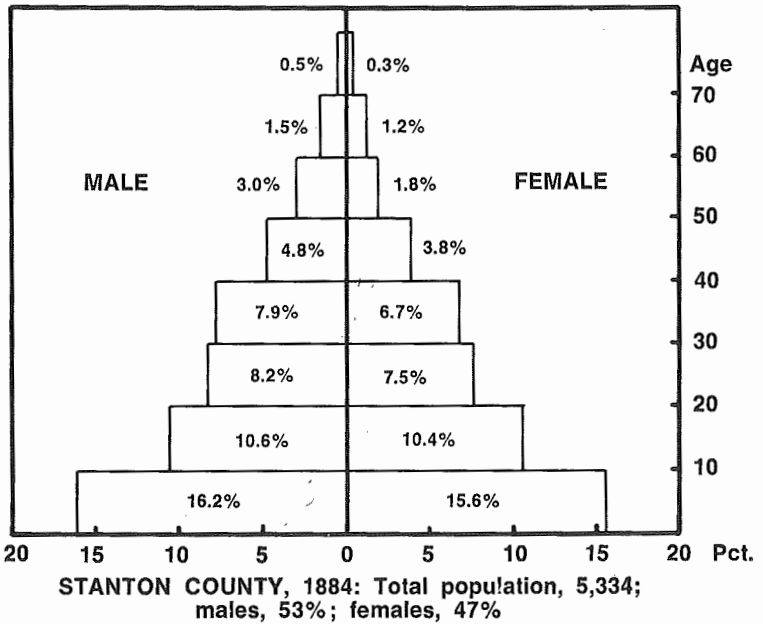


**FURNAS COUNTY, 1875: Total population, 1,566; males, 53%; females, 47%**

(Source: Original Census Returns)

*Figure 7.*

# AGE OF POPULATION



*Figure 8.*