Human beings have long been imbued with a species deep wanderlust. We look to the horizon and wonder what lies over the mountain, across the valley, or beyond the sea. Americans often do more than wonder. We venture forth to satisfy our images of elsewhere. Challenging home and rootedness is the celebration of journey and the call to adventure.

Researchers know something about “rootedness.” They actually have defined the concept of “aging in place.” But little is known about the experience of mobility and the real meaning of “place” as it relates to growing older in America.

Kevin McHugh understands something about the idea of aging in place. But he is more intrigued by the folks who spend portions of their golden years migrating back and forth between home and travel destinations. And then there are the legions of people who actually take their homes with them and, in essence, age on the move.

McHugh and colleague Robert Mings focus their scholarly interests on human migration patterns and population redistribution. Both are associate professors of geography at Arizona State University. McHugh and Mings have introduced a variation to the concept of aging in place. They study the notion that elderly may reside in many different places, forging attachments to those places via seasonal migration and repeated movement. Results of their work will appear in the September 1996 Annals of the Association of American Geographers.

Despite plenty of earlier studies that looked at migration patterns of elderly populations, McHugh says that little really is known about “the experience” of mobility and place in aging. He and Mings are taking a closer look at the meaning of home, place, and migration among a specific group of older Americans. In a long-term project, they are following 12 couples who are repeat winter residents at Phoenix area recreational vehicle (rv) parks. In many respects, these couples are typical of elderly seasonal migrants who circulate between summer residences in the north and winter homes in the Sun Belt regions of the United States.

“We are most interested in the evolving attachments and relationships these people make with place over the course of their lives,” McHugh says.
It is important to understand that these RV parks are not encampments. They are “winter homes” to the people who set up there each fall and winter. They are havens of activity,” McHugh says.

But is aging in place really necessary and, if so, how does it enhance or improve the quality of life for older people? How important is it for “snowbirds,” those migratory humans who descend on Arizona every winter, to maintain ties in two places? How important is it for them to come to Arizona in the first place? And how do they adjust? McHugh and Mings are interested in these and other questions.

“Mobility is important to these people,” McHugh explains. “We find that the elderly couples in our study have varying migration and place attachment in aging are sown in earlier stages of life. They identify three specific types of place attachment among their 12 snowbird couples. We describe these types as still rooted in place, suspended, and footloose,” McHugh says.

For the elders who remain rooted in a home place, home is the place where family, friends, and a lifetime of experiences provide identity and support in old age.”

“We’d like to continue studying these people for as long as we can. They travel frequently and stay in Arizona during the winter months. This gives these people something to brag about with their neighbors.”

Some people simply cannot adopt such a mindset. They can’t break away from the rooted place they created. A recent study conducted by the ASU Center for Business Research, Arizona roosted 340,000 snowbirds in 1995. The center’s report estimated their economic impact at more than $950 million. In the Phoenix East Valley alone, 120,000 winter visitors poured about $350 million into Arizona’s economy.

Almost without exception, McHugh says that people traveling to Arizona as winter residents are first introduced to the area by relatives or close friends. The ASU researchers find RV parks to be a catalyst for permanence. “Many snowbirds first came to Arizona in a RV for a short visit,” McHugh says. “After they retire, they increase their length of stay. In older age, many reduce their level of travel and become increasingly committed to summer and winter residences.”

“Our findings indicate that there are as many seniors living in Phoenix-area RV parks as there are elderly living in Sun City and Sun City West,” McHugh says. “More than 75,000 people live in Phoenix-area RV parks during the winter.”

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The data also indicates that Yuma is among the fastest growing snowbird ports of call. The Colorado River city’s winter population of 135,000 doubles its normal summer figure of 65,000.

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金钱在各个城市和郊区被使用，从而创建了这种生活方式。有钱人总是在美国的多个地方生活：海滩上的小屋，山中的小屋，城市里的公寓。这在当时是一个非常显眼的现象。

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“Typically, place is conceived as stationary. Aging in place (at home) is the norm, journey a departure,” McHugh and Mings wrote in their paper, The Circle of Migration: Attachment to Place in Aging. “Among seasonal migrants, sense of place and well-being derive from recurring patterns and rhythms of movement. The dialectic of home and journey is a unified whole. Snowbirds desire to maintain a migratory lifestyle for as long as possible; cessation of seasonal movements may be felt as a loss of home and identity.”

“To date, he and Mings have followed the 12 couples for more than four years. Their findings point toward key themes in the couples’ evolving attachments and relationships with place. These themes form the three phases of what the ASU researchers call “the circle of migration.””

“We like to continue studying these people for as long as we can. We haven’t determined the length of our study. It could last for several more years,” McHugh explains. “The mindset of these couples is a break from the concept of home as a rooted, stationary place. They have several homes. Their lives are defined by the movement they engage in each year. They refuse to adhere to the idea of planting themselves in one spot.”

But some people simply cannot adopt such a mindset. They can’t break away from the rooted place they created.

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McHugh says that the RV parks offer a wide variety of activities, most of them park-centered. However, some involve churches and charitable organizations. Many snowbirds have close friends in the park and they exchange summertime visits.

In terms of demographic statistics, the RV lifestyle allows communication with different people from all parts of the country. To them, the concept of diversity is “Bill’s a banker, I’m a plumber, Joe’s from Nebraska, and Pete’s from Ohio.”

McHugh thinks that the Sun Belt states which have experienced great growth in recent years likely will see a big push of migration thanks to the baby boomers.

“The boomers came of age as the economy was being restructured. Their migration from the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt was spurred by the decline of Northeast and Midwest industry,” he explains. “Mobility has been a way of life for the boomers. I think that will continue as they age.”

The notion of aging in place is changing as well, especially as millions of boomers move into their fifth decade of life. Soooo, what will be the middlebrow version of aging for the baby boomers?

Researchers are not fond of speculation. McHugh is no different. “What does the future hold? That is beyond difficult to answer,” he laughs. “There are lots of variables at work. For example, you must consider the fact that retirement ages are rising. And that many people choose to ‘retire’ or change lifestyles many times over the course of their lifetimes. Money makes it possible. But will enough money always be available to the middle class?”

McHugh expects many aging boomers to establish a fixed home place with time allocated for frequent travel.

“The boomers are mobile. They are accustomed to traveling to conventions, vacations, or visiting relatives,” he explains. “Barring a major change, like a renewed energy crunch, I think the idea of circulation, of moving about often, will be important to them.”

As a result, forms of circulation likely will increase as an alternative to permanent migration.

“The boomers are the best educated and healthiest older generation history has produced. I think that as the boomers reach preretirement and retirement age, all sorts of circulation patterns will become more common, especially for the middle and upper income groups most able to afford it.”

Not all Americans are locked into the idea of “home” as a single, fixed location. A different mindset has emerged.

“Home is where we want it to be,” McHugh says.

Research on human migration patterns is supported by ASU’s Adult Development and Aging Program. For more information, contact Kevin McHugh, Ph.D., Department of Geography, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.965.7533.
The sheer number of baby boomers is one problem, Sullivan says that the problem is compounded by the fact that individual members of this mass of humanity are living longer than ever before. Nearly 80 percent of all Americans now live past the age of 65.

“The National Institute on Aging projects that by the year 2040, men will live to the average age of 86 and women to 91.5,” Sullivan says. “Since 1909, the average life expectancy has increased by 28 years.” The ASU sociologist says that in the United States today, there are more than 33 million people age 65 and over.

“That number will grow gradually through the rest of this decade,” she says. “Currently, about 13 percent of the population is age 65 or older. That figure will remain stable until the end of the decade. It will increase rapidly after 2010 when the boomers really begin having an impact.”

All of the Baby Boom generation will have celebrated their 65th birthday by the year 2030. The United States then will include more than 70 million people who are age 65 and older.

“The impact will be enormous. Percentagewise, however, much depends on what happens with immigration,” Sullivan explains. An influx of young adults would change the percentage. Fertility rates could fluctuate as well. In any event, by 2030, more than 22 percent of America’s population could be age 65 or older.”

Deborah Sullivan works among the front rank of sociologists studying the phenomenon. The Arizona State University researcher focuses her interest on how a change in demographic structure affects various societal issues.

“The graying of America will impact social security and retirement funds,” Sullivan says. “There is no doubt about that. Healthcare, family structure, and social services also will be seriously affected.”

Numbers tell part of the story. This year (1996) the first of the “Baby Boomers” reached the magic age of 50. Baby boomers are defined as any of the more than 80 million Americans who were born between 1946 and 1964, including immigrants. It’s more than the boomers’ sheer numbers that promise to redefine what it means to grow old in America,” Sullivan explains. “As the best educated and healthiest older generation in the nation’s history, this group is poised to rewrite the story of aging in America. They’ve changed the meaning of education, of marriage, and of work. There’s every indication that they will change the ways in which we live out the last third of life.”

Boomers are likely to produce a sea of change in the cultural tastes of older Americans. What they liked in youth, they’ll like in old age. Lawrence Welk will be out, the Rolling Stones will be in. Boomers like cynical humor, rock ‘n’ roll, and country-western. Many of them voted for George McGovern. Now, millions of them listen to Rush Limbaugh.

The concept of “acting your age” will change because the older folks will look and act younger. Seniors will have adventures, go on safaris, fall in love, and run in marathons. Instead of looking at aging as an extended youth, people will consider it an experience in and of itself.

Sullivan says that when they complete their life cycle, the boomers will have left their imprint on nearly every aspect of American life, from political and economic institutions to the way in which Americans work and retire. “Businesses will realize that these older customers control a lot of spending, politicians will vie for their approval, and their health will be better than previous older generations,” she adds.

But boomers may have to work longer. We won’t know for sure until after 2010. In many cases, they have to work beyond age 65 to become eligible for government entitlements such as Social Security. In fact, 3 million boomers who celebrate their 50th birthday in 1996 must wait until they reach age 66 to receive full Social Security benefits. Those born in 1960 or later will be forced to wait until they reach age 67.

Demographers explain that boomers can be split into two groups: Haves and Have Nots. The Haves tend to have college degrees and come from two-earner households. The Have Nots make up 45 percent of the population who have a high school education or less.

Have Nots are careening toward retirement with low pay jobs, no pension or health coverage, and little if any financial security by way of savings and home equity.

Combined, all baby boomers will create the biggest challenges to date for Medicare and Social Security, each of which will require fundamental changes.

The sheer number of baby boomers is one problem. Sullivan says that the problem is compounded by the fact that individual members of this mass of humanity are living longer than ever before. Nearly 80 percent of all Americans now live past the age of 65.

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“Not only are we getting a large population of people age 65 and over, but the life expectancy for these folks has increased as well,” Sullivan says. “In general, people 65 to 75 who are in good health need little help. But after that 76th birthday, an accumulation of chronic disabilities occurs. The cumulative effect is that by age 85, nearly half of the population needs help with basic daily activities.”

People want to be independent for as long as possible. How do we compensate for physical limitations with human help, architectural design, or with mechanical devices? Sullivan argues that transportation looms as a critical concern that will force communities to adapt.

“During the 1950s and 1960s, the older population generally was confined to inner cities simply because of the way urban growth occurred. People tended to stay where they were,” she explains. “The suburbs have been in vogue during the past two decades. Unfortunately, the physical environment of cities is more amenable to public transportation.”

Communities everywhere will be forced to change.

“The population that needs the most assistance is growing faster than any other age group,” Sullivan says. “The number of people over age 85 is projected to swell rapidly from 3.5 million today to 8.4 million in 2030. That total will explode as the tidal wave of surviving baby boomers floods into the oldest age groups. It will crest at around 18 million in 2050, before receding into history. Meeting the needs of this group will present an unprecedented social, economic, and political challenge.”

Retirement communities face special problems because few of their aging residents live in close proximity to other family members. The ASU sociologist is looking at the extent to which friends can substitute for family members in providing a variety of daily living tasks critical for maintaining independent living, or instrumental activities such as yard work, shopping, and jobs that could be done by paid helpers.

Sullivan says that the issue of help for the elderly is clouded down the road because of the massive changes in family structure that occurred during the past 20 years.

“Half of our marriages end in divorce. There also is evidence that children of divorce have diminished contact with the non-custodial parent,” she explains. “Implications are that when these children are adults that diminished contact continues. In the future, there will be many people 55 and older who have been non-custodial parents. Many will not receive help from their children.”
Migration on their minds

"Retraining and education will be important, because lifetime contracts between corporations and their employees are becoming extinct." – Morris Okun

Due to the aging of the United States, it is aging. Only recently, however, have they started to gauge how the change in demographic structure will affect such societal issues as retirement, health care, family structures, and social services.

Morris Okun directs the Adult Development and Aging Program at Arizona State University. He says that aging is an area that intersects with virtually every other discipline of study.

"Gerontology is a whetstone research area. We have much to learn about aging and its effects on the individual family and society," he explains. "Our program is a loosely networked group of more than 60 faculty members who study a variety of issues that relate to aging."

Some of these issues include interventions that help seniors to maintain emotional and physical health, to develop grandparenting and communication skills, to enhance understanding of written medical materials, and to negotiate their environment more effectively.

"Although humans have always dealt with changes wrought by the aging process, the field of gerontology is relatively new," Okun says. "As a society, we are only beginning to recognize that older people have different needs. We are just starting to turn our attention to learning about how to serve those needs."

Baby boomers are coming of age and a large number of them are likely to migrate to Arizona. That’s good news for the state, a major player in the seasonal migration phenomena.

Okun says that current research efforts focus on what causes people to migrate, who migrates and why, as well as on the consequences of migration.

"Arizona’s seasonal visitors may not be counted in our census, yet they may use a lot of our resources, especially health care and social services," Okun explains. "Because these people are not reflected in the census, the state receives no credit. Seasonal migration produces many benefits. But there are costs associated with it that must be addressed."

Arizona and other Sun Belt states already have experienced significant growth. They will experience a vast increase in migration as the baby boomers continue to age.

Although the senior population is healthier, more active, and living longer than ever in the nation’s history, Okun does not believe that society has done a good job of increasing active life expectancy.

"The key word is ‘active.’ That should change once the boomers are seniors and demand changes in health care and government policies," he says. "Seniors should be given a more active role in the future. Useful resources are lost when a society fails to give someone a chance simply because they are older."

Fortunately, gerontologists are exploring ways to improve the quality of life for seniors so they can continue to live actively and relatively free of disease.

"Today’s active senior lifestyle affects not only health, but the way in which the tourism industry and senior centers cater to their clientele. Education is an important part of that service."

"One thing about the boomers, most of them believe they can learn anything they want to," Okun adds. "This translates into a lifelong quest for experience and education, something already hinted at in both adventure travel and adult education. There’s no question that the boomers will change the definition of retirement. Education will be a key."

"There will be plenty of older people to serve. Based on information gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2050, demographers predict that one in five Americans will be older than 65. The ‘oldest old’, those age 85 and over, are the most rapidly growing age group. In the United States alone, the 85-and-older group is expected to double in size by 2020, reaching more than 7 million. The baby boomers will be the first American generation to taste longevity. As they age, they will produce vast cultural and social changes." Okun says.

As a result, Okun believes that the future holds increased opportunity for people to work delivering services directly to older people.

"I’m cautious about predicting specific jobs. But certainly, the growth in the older population will provide opportunities for those attuned to their needs," he says. "‘Elder Law’ is one of most rapidly growing areas of legal practice."

The aging baby boomers will leave a deep imprint on nearly every aspect of American life, Okun agrees. "Changes are already under way. Whether it is the difference between yesterday and today more evident than in the faces featured in magazine ads, he says. "The long entrenched youth culture on Madison Avenue is losing its appeal. A decade ago, few national advertisers featured older customers in their ads. Today, you see seniors all over the place."

The shift is a function of the growing senior population and, more importantly, by the amount of discretionary dollars they have available. Smart businesses are waking up to the fact that senior customers control a lot of spending power. On the flip side, boomers hope corporations will change their attitude in another important way by providing more jobs for older workers.

"Retraining and education will be important, because lifetime contracts between corporations and their employees are becoming extinct," Okun says. "That is where our program can provide a useful service." Okun explains. "On the one hand, boomers will demand more education specifically designed to meet their needs. On the other hand, boomers will create opportunities for those who develop the necessary skills and knowledge to provide services to them as they age."

Okun and others have taken steps to meet the educational needs of practitioners who serve older adults. They surveyed members of this group to establish their existing level of interest in professional development activities in the field of gerontology.

"Based on the results of that survey, and in collaboration with the ASU College of Extended Education, we have started two new seminar series," Okun adds. "The first is focused on managed care for seniors. The second deals with legal and ethical issues in caring for elders."

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The increasing out-of-wedlock birth rate is another demographic trend that concerns sociologists. “A total of 31 percent of all the babies born to women in their 20s are born to unmarried women,” Sullivan says. This trend also has serious future implications regarding informal support for older people. Sullivan also has found that overwhelming numbers of older people come to a retirement community married, not single. The “snowbird” is very much a married couple phenomenon with singles in the minority. As the communities age, the composition changes. “Mortality takes its toll. Death, not divorce, splits senior couples,” she says.

Sullivan’s studies in Sun City, Ariz., show a “piling up” of widows. “Women live longer and generally marry a man who is slightly older,” she explains. “Also, the remarriage rate for men is much higher. More than 74 percent of men over 65 live with a spouse, while only 40 percent of women in that age group do so. The numbers of women who live alone increase as women age.”

Although the waves of recent retirees and those entering retirement soon are in better physical shape than their historical predecessors, elderly women do not have it so good. “Some retirement plans did not include survivor benefits. As long as the male spouse was alive they were okay,” Sullivan says. “But when he died, the pension went with him. Women were particularly impacted by railroad retirement plans. Today, many single, elderly women scramble for economic support.”

Sullivan and other sociologists believe financial security for members of future generations will depend on the individual’s willingness to save. Many companies have switched from traditional retirement plans provided by the firm to plans that rely on worker contributions such as the 401(k). Also, many worry that Social Security and Medicare programs may be altered or eliminated by the time later boomers quit working.

The baby boom generation is one of the most educated in history. Even so, 1.6 million of their children drop out of high school between the ages of 16 and 19. “We face a critical problem of having increasing numbers of young people dropping out of high school. They say, ‘It’s okay. I’ll get a GED.’” Sullivan says. “Unfortunately, a GED will not permit young people to effectively compete for a job in the global economy.”

Behind the boomers, looming as a second demographic wave, is the so called “Generation X.” Generation X is defined as the group born when the baby boom ended, in or after 1965. Education will be key to their success or failure.

Interestingly, the welfare of Generation X is important to the baby boomers. “The interdependence of generations continues. Down the road, Generation X will be supporting the boomers in their old age,” Sullivan says. “It would be prudent for the boomers to make sure that members of Generation X receive a good education.”

Over time, the family unit provided the primary support for older people. This is still true for informal support. The advent of Social Security, however, changed the status of formal support. Economic support for the elderly has gradually shifted to societal exchange.

“We now have one generation handing money to another,” Sullivan explains. “This income transfer from workers to non-workers is moderated through government outside of the household. Most older people prefer it that way. They don’t want money to interfere with the bonds of affection that provide psychological and social support.”

Sullivan has a sense of déjà vu regarding the shifting demographic scene. “Colonial times featured an agrarian-based society. The old people owned the land. Usually, the younger people lived with their folks,” she says. “By holding onto land ownership, the older people could expect to receive help. Thus, the parental generation helped establish the one that followed. Adult male children were heavily dependent on their parents for land. In return, they provided assistance and support.”

As the nation moved into the industrial age, children no longer were totally dependent upon parents for economic help. There were wages to be earned in the factories. “Mortality takes its toll. Death, not divorce, splits senior couples,” Sullivan adds. “The situation changed again as we moved into a post-industrial society.”

Sullivan says, “I think young people are again very dependent upon their parents’ help, especially to get educated and established. Today, when you ask who is giving money to whom in an American family, it is still, by and large, the older people giving money to the younger ones.”

The more things change, the more they stay the same. “We have a tendency to become insulated in our thinking and assume that social, economic, and political conditions of the immediate past will carry us through both good times and bad,” Sullivan adds. “The fact is that nothing could be further from the truth.”

Demographic research at ASU is supported by the Center for Healthy Aging Studies at Sun Health Corporation and many internal ASU departments and programs. For more information, contact Deborah Sullivan, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 602.956.4492.