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## Lure for Long Commute: Cheaper Homes

By RICHARD D. LYONS

LEAD: ON any workday Michael and Geraldine Ready leave their home in Matamoras, Pa., shortly after 5 A.M. to drive to the Metro North railroad station in Port Jervis, N.Y. From there, they travel via New Jersey Transit, PATH and the IND subway to their jobs in midtown Manhattan.

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"Some people think we're out of our minds to commute this far," Mrs. Ready said. "It's 3 hours and 20 minutes door to door - on a good day - but we never felt comfortable living in New York City and we think the trip is worth it."

Hardly less formidable in the annals of heroic commuting, in the nearby community of Gold Key Lake, also in Pike County, Pa., Tom Ward leaves home about 5:30 A.M. to drive to Dover, N.J. There he boards a New Jersey Transit train for Hoboken, then the PATH subway to the World Trade Center and from there walks to work near Wall Street, arriving at 8:15.

"My wife, two children and I were renting in Suffolk County and we couldn't find a house on Long Island that we could afford, so we started looking in Pennsylvania and found a brand new three-bedroom house for \$82,000," Mr. Ward said. "We love living away from the city; going home every night is like going on vacation."

Driven by the quest for cheaper housing, these commuters and thousands of others are undertaking trips of 50 and even 100 miles or more to work in Manhattan. Many see themselves, not as victims of a booming real-estate market, but as beneficiaries of the graceful life in exurbia they have found in place of a more frantic life in New York City or a closer-in suburb.

Frank P. Maimone leaves his home in Langhorn, Pa., at 6:30 A.M. for the two-hour trip to his Manhattan office while his wife, Angie, heads the other way to her job an hour away in Philadelphia.

"We find living in Bucks County a relief from the craziness of New York," Mr. Maimone said, a point of view expressed by many other former New Yorkers who have moved to that area.

AND in the nearby town of Yardley, 16 Lever Brothers executives travel by car and train two hours to Manhattan, citing the affordability of housing in Bucks County as the main reason for their commute.

Increasingly, in and near such communities as Allentown, Pa., Riverhead, L.I., Goshen, N.Y., and New Haven, people are buying homes and braving the commute because they prefer either the esthetics or the economics of living in the country, despite the sometimes high costs of getting to work.

The weekly cost of commuting by bus from Allentown, for example, is \$77.60, while a monthly commutation ticket from Port Jervis to Hoboken is \$168. In addition, there are subway fares, the upkeep of a car and parking fees.

But most commuters seem to shrug off such costs as well as the delays and inconveniences in much the same way that the survivors of New York living put up stoically with the crowds, the sirens and the filth. It might even be said that long-distance commuting is becoming a trend.

Almost every index of long-distance transportation points to more people traveling farther to get to their jobs in Manhattan, despite the brain-numbing hours it might take to get to either midtown or Wall Street, where most of them work. It all points to a wider metropolitan area, indeed the consolidation of a megalopolis stretching along the Atlantic Coast from north of New Haven to south of Philadelphia.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority has in the last decade experienced dramatic growth in extended commutations to Manhattan, with use up 19 percent on the line from Port Jervis, 44 percent from east of Stanford, 26 percent from north of White Plains and 62 percent on the upper Hudson line north of Croton.

Since 1984 the average number of weekday round trips to either Newark or Manhattan has risen to 5,000 from 3,500 on New Jersey Transit's run from Trenton and to 425 from 300 on the Atlantic shore run from Bay Head.

On the two most distant runs on the Long Island Rail Road - from stations east of Bay Shore and Ronkonkama - commuter ridership has risen 7 percent in six years. Company officials predict a further increase after modernization programs are completed.

DAILY bus ridership on the Short Line from northern New Jersey and Orange and Rockland Counties in New York has increased more than 15 percent in the last decade, with commuters coming from as far away as Goshen and Montgomery in Orange County.

Jersey Shore Commuter Bus Company ridership from the Asbury Park area has doubled in two years to 400 people. The increased demand has led to a waiting list of potential customers. "People are literally begging us for service, but we can't do anything until four more buses arrive to join the 16 already in service,"

said James Keelen, a vice president of the bus company.

Increasingly, the most popular areas for long-distance commuting are in eastern Pennsylvania, mainly because the prices of homes are so much less than those in eastern Long Island, western Connecticut, central New Jersey or the northern suburbs of New York City.

Then, too, many long-distance commuters say the pleasures of country living beat life in the concrete canyons of New York, although some once-rural communities are growing so fast that the problems of crowded schools and strained transportation services are trailing the new arrivals.

"The trend toward long-distance commuting is fact and the key issue is the price of housing," said Boris Pushkarev, vice president for research and planning for the Regional Plan Association. The independent group studies problems affecting the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut area and makes recommendations for possible improvements to business and government.

"The overall numbers of people coming from long distances, while they are increasing, are still small compared with the tens of thousands of riders who take the Long Island Railroad or PATH," Mr. Pushkarev said, "but their numbers are bound to continue to rise as long as relatively cheap housing continues to be available farther out."

AS evidence that the trend is likely to continue, Mr. Pushkarev cited increasing demand for the resumption of commuter rail service from such New Jersey towns as Netcong, Hackettstown and Lakewood. Indeed, lobbying for the restoration of service over existing rights of way is becoming intense, he said.

"Sociologically, long-distance commuters are a fascinating group of people, especially so since it seems strange to most people that others can spend six hours a day or more on the road," he added.

Yet to hear Christopher M. Altieri tell it, his choice for a long-distance commute was anything but strange. "My wife and I couldn't afford anything in the city," he said, "and besides it's nice to get out into the country and away from the rat race."

Mr. Altieri puts in a 15-hour day door-to-door, leaving his home in Lords Valley, Pa., at 5:30 A.M. to drive 20 miles to the train station in Port Jervis, where he boards a New Jersey Transit train that leaves at 6:04 A.M.

Almost \$2 million has been spent this year improving commuting facilities at Port Jervis by building a new shelter and providing parking, and Mr. Altieri commented that "the service to Hoboken is excellent, although I wish I could say the same for the PATH service to the World Trade Center, which has frequent delays."

From the PATH station he walks 10 minutes to his office at Shearson American Express where he is an accountant, arriving about 9 A.M. Reversing the process after work, he takes a train from Hoboken at 5:42 P.M. and arrives home about 8:30.

"Of course it's a long commute but when my wife, Valerie, and I decided to get married earlier this year we couldn't find a house we could afford on Long Island near Northport where I grew up," he said. "There simply wasn't anything worth looking at that was less than \$200,000."

By contrast, in the Hemlock Farms development at Lords Valley the Altieris bought an 11-room house with five bedrooms and three baths situated on an acre and a half near a lake. The 3,500-square-foot contemporary house cost \$95,000 and carries taxes of \$700 a year.

"I have a good feeling going home at night to a home I own, not the two-room apartment that we had been renting," he said. "For the first time in my life I feel that through home ownership I am building a future for my wife and myself, and that means more to me than the commute."

Davis R. Chant, the real-estate agent in Milford, Pa., who sold the Altieris their home, conceded that such long-distance commutes were "a little off the wall" but insisted that more and more people who work in Manhattan are looking at housing in northeastern Pennsylvania.

"The irony is that 25 years ago lots of people commuted to Wall Street from this area, but over the years the train service deteriorated so badly that ridership trickled to almost nothing," he added. "Now ridership is picking up again as Metro North invests in new facilities and equipment."

Metro North operates the service jointly with New Jersey Transit.

"I have seen many people buy summer homes in northeastern Pennsylvania, gradually convert them to all year use, and start commuting because they like the beauties of the country," Mr. Chant said, "but most people buy here because they can get a lot more house for their money."

He estimated that the prices of houses in Pike County, Pa., were from one-third to one-half those of houses of comparable size in Westchester and Long Island. This may not remain so for long as Pike County's population has increased 25 percent so far this decade to 25,000 people.

Commuters from Bucks County, which is between Trenton and Philadelphia, relate somewhat the same statistics, although the prices of homes even a two-hour commute away are rising rapidly in some areas, partly because New Yorkers are moving in.

Agnes Fulper, a real-estate agent in Yardley, estimated that 20 percent of her clientele in the last several years have been commuters to Manhattan, plus others who are commuting to New Brunswick and Princeton where housing prices also have risen rapidly. This latter type of commute, from exurbia to the new offices parks and high technology plants rising in suburbia, also is acting to push the search for homes farther out into the countryside.

"The average price of a four-bedroom house in the Yardley area now is \$218,000 when it was \$110,000 only three years ago," Mrs. Fulper said.

ONE of her customers, Michael D. Offtermatt, an executive at Lever Brothers in Manhattan, said that on his transfer from New Orleans six years ago he had looked all over Westchester, western Connecticut and central New Jersey for an affordable home.

"I simply couldn't find a quality house for my family in the New York suburbs for \$100,000, so we started looking farther out, eventually in Bucks County," he related.

"As a result my wife and I found a beautiful home for \$107,000 - which is now worth \$289,000 - and are well satisfied despite my commute," Mr. Offtermatt said. "I know it sounds trite, but we did find the house of our dreams and to say we like the environment in Bucks County is much too mild - we love it." Mr. Offtermatt drives 15 minutes to the Trenton train station where he boards either a New Jersey Transit or an Amtrack train for the hourlong trip to Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan.

He said his one big complaint was not the train but the shortage of parking at the Trenton station, where on a typical morning cars are squeezed into every available space, legal and illegal. New Jersey Transit officials say they are well aware of the parking problem and plan to build a garage for 2,000 cars opposite the station.

Parking, however, is not the only problem for people who commute from Bucks County, according to local officials. Others include overloaded roads, overcrowded schools and sewage and water systems that need improvement - some of the very problems that the commuters were seeking to avoid.

Robert C. Moore, executive director of the Bucks County Planning Commission, said that because of commuters the area had undergone "a bombshell of growth that has put a big strain on roads and schools, and the highway situation scares us because many of the state roads are only 18 feet wide."

Mr. Moore noted that the 1980 census had counted 479,000 people in Bucks County and that recent estimates had set the number at least 50,000 higher, "so that roads, parking lots, and almost everything else are becoming more crowded, and its mainly because the houses here are cheaper than those in the suburbs of New York and Philadelphia."

AND by all accounts, the trend to longer and longer commutes from Manhattan - especially on newer buses that offer coffee and doughnuts, telephones, television sets, desk areas with access to VCR's and outlets for lap-top computers - is going to continue.

Joan Quigg, who operates the New Horizons Relocation service in Ramsey, N.J., said it had been her experience that people being transferred to this area "say they only want a 45-minute commute, then they see nothing they can afford and they say 'Well, maybe an hour,' then they say 'Perhaps an hour and 15 minutes.'"

"Well, if the price of housing continues to rise the way it has been," she said, "more people are going to have to go longer distances such as Bucks County and Port Jervis, and I've even heard of commuters from the Easton, Reading and Allentown areas."

Indeed, the Bieber Bus Company is offering daily commuter service from Reading and Allentown, with the first of seven buses leaving Reading at 5:30 A.M. and arriving at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan at 8:30.

Carl Lowe, a writer and editor who works in Manhattan, is a veteran of the Allentown commute, which took him three hours door to door.

"After a while I dreaded getting on that bus, and sometimes it was even worse because there was standing room only," Mr. Lowe related. "I always tried to sit down next to someone who was thin, so I would kill time waiting for a thin person to get on, then rush aboard and grab the adjoining seat."

"Another ploy I used to use to gain extra space on the trip home was to buy a big Chinese take-out dinner at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and carry it aboard with me," he continued. "Most people will do anything to avoid you if they see a lot of greasy food spread around you, even stand up rather than sit next to you."

Mr. Lowe, who is married and has three children, said, "Most people say they get used to commuting long distances, but I didn't, partly because of the absurd hours and partly because my kids were asleep when I left the house and asleep again when I got home. It made me feel uneasy, as though I were a stranger."

Earlier this year Mr. and Mrs. Lowe moved from Allentown to Massapequa Park, L.I., which he said his children dislike because they've become used to the quiet of the country.

"I run into people who say, 'Massapequa Park! - that's an hour-and-a-half commute! That's crazy!'" Mr. Lowe said, "What they don't know, and what I don't bother to tell them, is that it's only half as long as my commute on that damn Allentown bus."