

A Geography of Teen Activities in Small
Texas Towns

by

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Geography

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Abstract

Eight small Texas towns, Aransas Pass, Ingleside, Rockport, Hearne, Caldwell, Decatur, Pilot Point and Celina, were visited in order to observe their teenager's weekend night activities. These observations were used to describe the activities in each town, define town-to-town constants in the activities and, to model and explain the spatial variability in these activities. The presentation of this information is supplemented by maps and 1980 U.S. census data.

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Recognized as an acceptable pastime by many youths, loitering in a public place on a weekend night is a widespread teen phenomenon. This investigation is aimed at discovering the local customs and situations of this activity in selected Texas small towns. A synthesis of this information makes certain town-to-town constants in these activities apparent and allows an explanation of the similarities. The development of a model of the spatial variability of teen activities within a town is also suggested.

Eight towns were studied: Aransas Pass, Ingleside, Rockport, Hearne, Caldwell, Pilot Point, Decatur and Celina (Fig. 1). Small towns were chosen to keep the study reasonably simple by reducing the number of separately functioning hangouts. Field observation in each town began with an general reconnaissance in order to get a feel for the area and to discover the main hangout. After determining the parking area around which teenagers center their activities, an obscure part of the lot was chosen and from this location detailed field notes and maps were compiled. The part of town around which the activities revolve is to be called the core. Cruising cells, or corridors, were discovered by following several vehicles as they left the core area to drive through town. If a path were taken consistantly, it was deamed a corridor for cruising traffic and therefore mapped. In addition to the the corridors, a sphere of these activities was discovered by following vehicles. The sphere encompasses the core and corridor as well as those parts

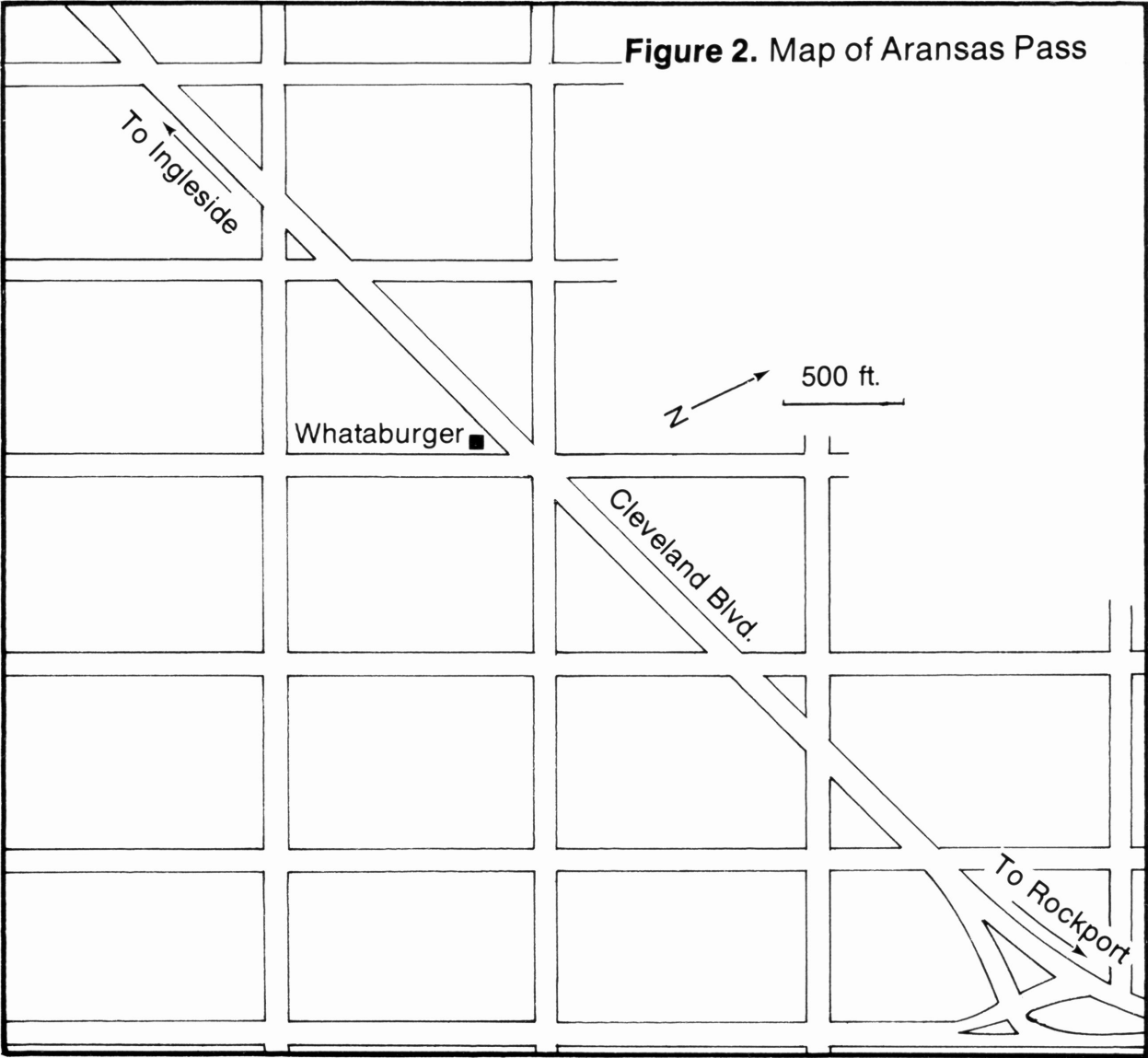


Figure 1. *Texas State Map*

of the activity which took place away from the most commonly used paths. Additional information on the local traditions was gained through informal interviews with convenience store clerks and local policemen. The participants were not disturbed with questions during the observations. Finally, Chamber of Commerce brochure maps of each town were used as base maps on which observed information was plotted. The position of these points of interest was taken from carefully prepared field maps which contained much data on the static as well as the dynamic portions of the activities.

Aransas Pass was the largest town studied. The teenagers center their weekend night activities on the parking lot of the Whataburger on Cleveland Boulevard (Fig. 2) They spend the better part of the evening standing in the parking lot with a group of friends or sitting in a car talking. Very few were observed eating in the restaurant. Driving along Cleveland Blvd., to Ingleside and into the surrounding countryside are popular alternatives to remaining stationary in the parking lot. The activity is dominated by white males, but a few minorities and women were included. The more sociable individuals circulate from group to group. The parking lot is well lighted, and therefore, all beer drinking is done inside the vehicles. American made pickup trucks and family sedans are the most common types of vehicles. A considerable amount of time is spent discussing, admiring and driving these vehicles. Passing through the parking lot are mostly groups of single individuals, usually of the same

Figure 2. Map of Aransas Pass



sex. A few couples make appearances at the parking lot but do not stay long. These couples do not appear to cruise Cleveland Boulevard. Frequent trips are made by groups of males to Ingleside. They drive northwest along Wheeler Avenue (State Highway 35) and turn left on FM 1069 (Fig. 3)

After a drive of about 5.5 miles, the Aransas Pass teenagers arrive at the parking lot of the Ingleside H.E.B. grocery store (Fig. 4). The group of teenagers in this parking lot contained a few individuals from Aransas Pass throughout the evening, but the focal point is not dependant on them for the form of its activities. Again, the parking lot is well lighted, white males in pickups predominate, and dating couples were not observed. The family sedan was noticably missing in Ingleside. It was replaced by sportier American cars, chiefly Ford Mustangs, Chevrolet Camaros, and Pontiac Trans-Ams. The cruising activity takes place along South Main Street. Convenience stores are located at both ends of this artery, and each is used by the teenagers for refreshment and relief. A Dairy Queen is located across the street from the H.E.B. Seemingly arbitrary trips are frequently made into the surrounding countryside from the parking lot. The vehicles were again the center of much of the teenagers' attention as were the convenience stores.

Seven miles north of Aransas Pass on State Highway 35 is Rockport, located on Aransas Bay. Rockport offers teenagers a beach with nearby grocery and convenience stores. A two mile

Figure 3. Map of Aransas and Ingleside

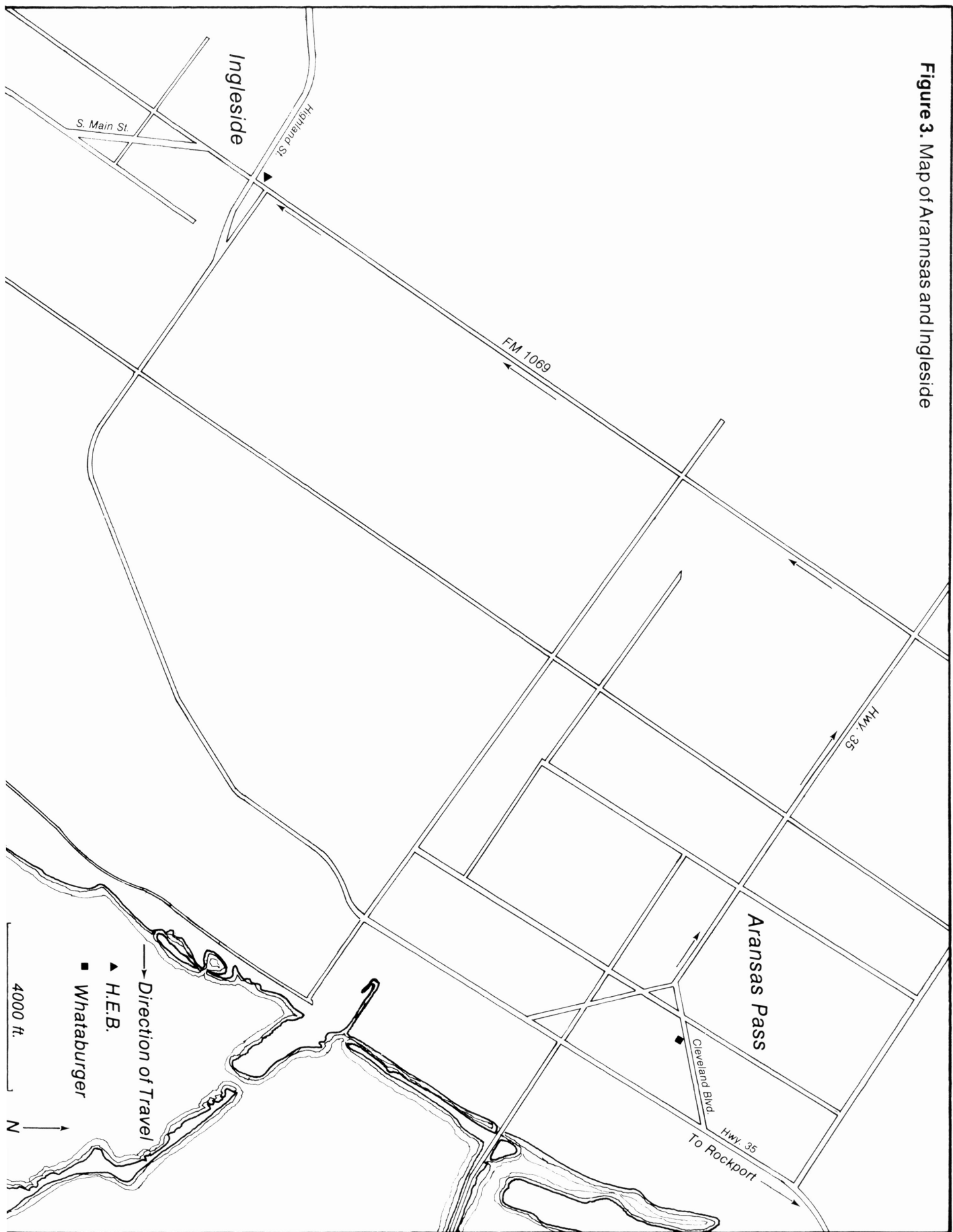
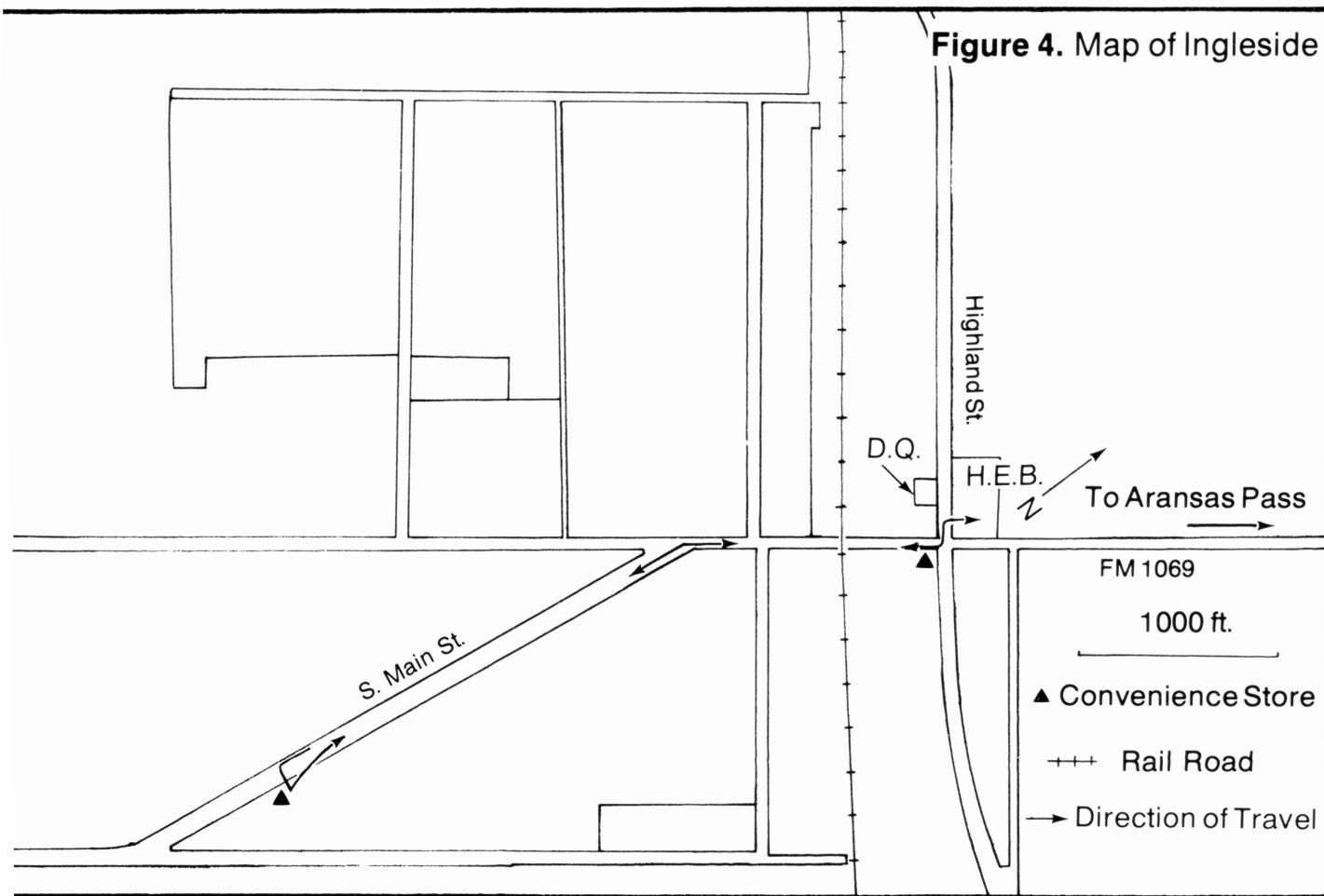
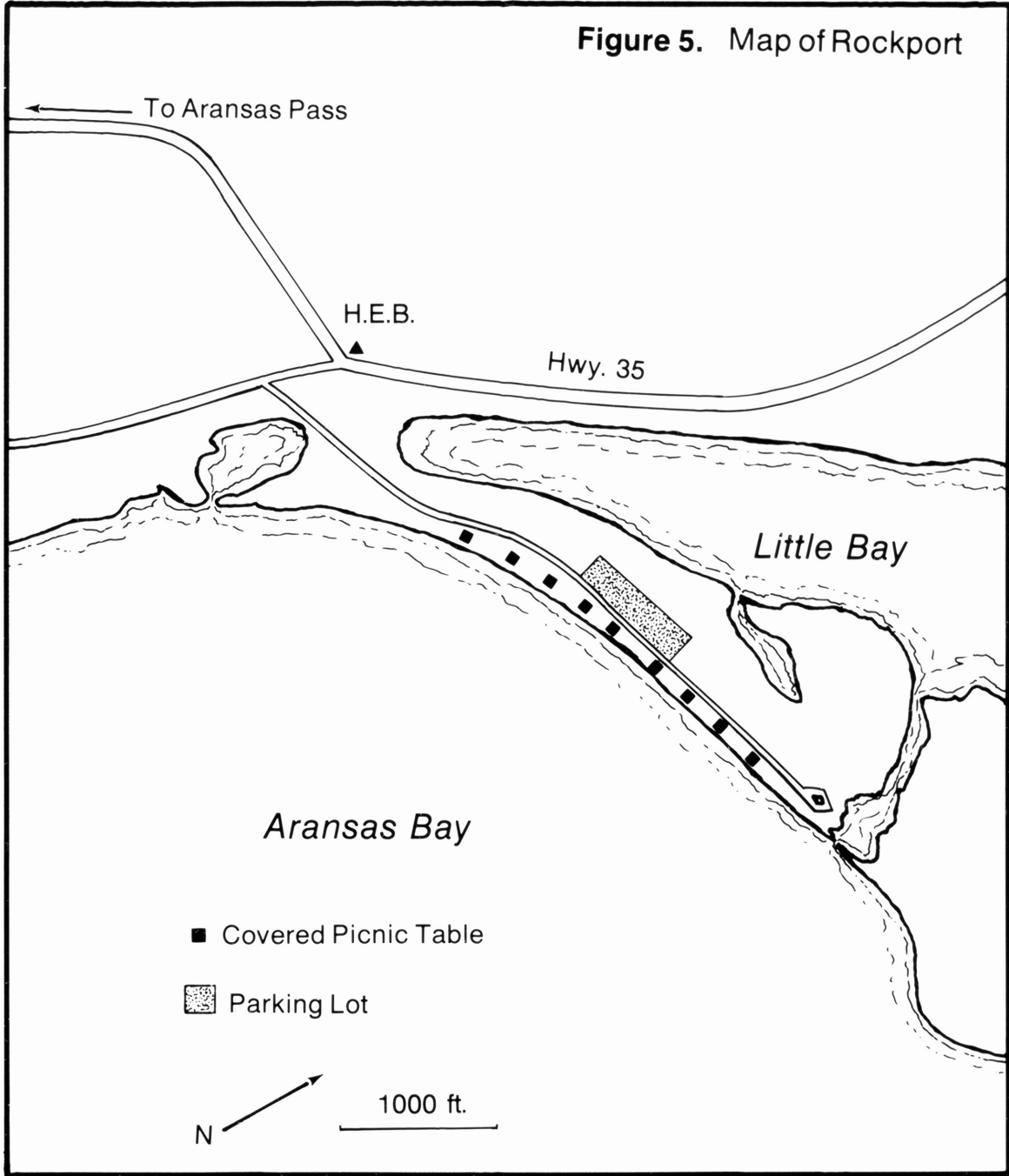


Figure 4. Map of Ingleside



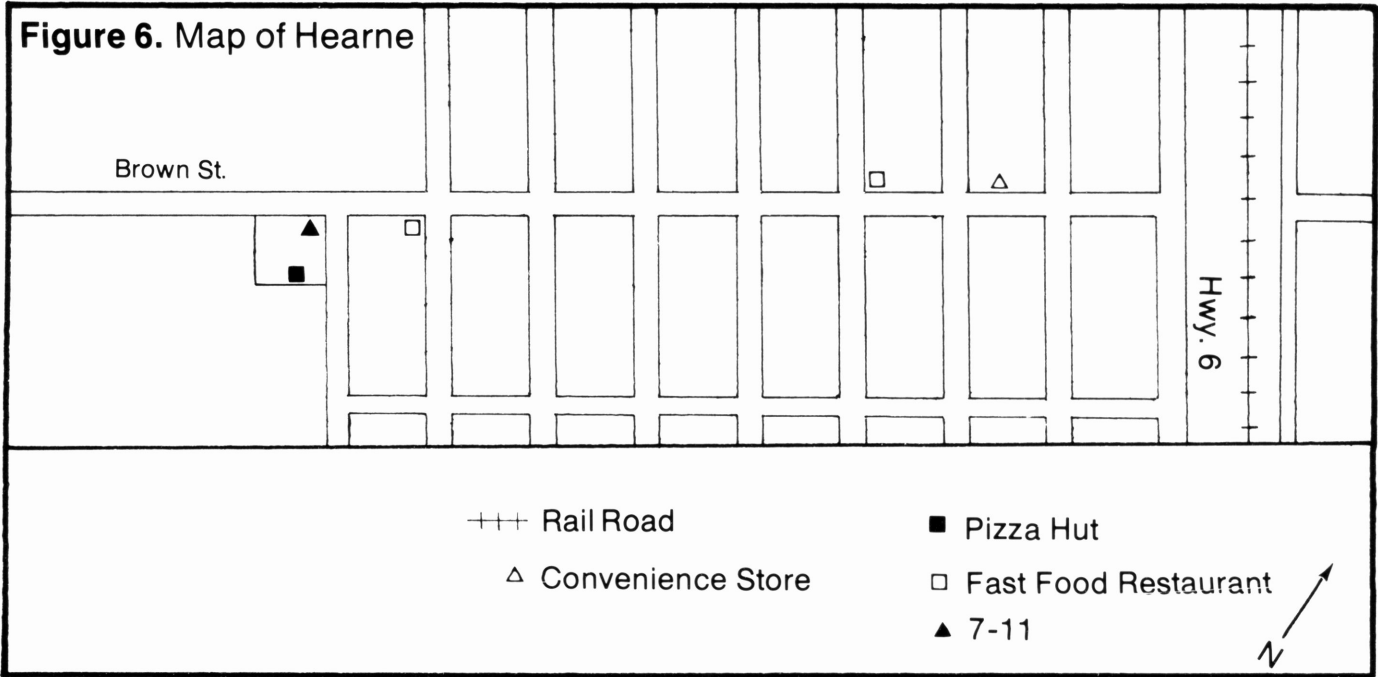
stretch of road with a loop at the east end lies between Aransas and Little Bays (Fig. 5). A broad beach with covered picnic tables and no street lights is south of the road. Along the north edge of the road lies a well lighted parking lot. Probably because of its natural beauty and seclusion, Rockport's beach attracts the widest variety of people of any focal point observed. Hispanics and Anglos dominate the area ethnically, but neither group outnumbers the other. A wide range of age groups were represented on the beach. Bicyclists and walkers were observed promenading along the road at a leisurely pace. Only Rockport's core attracted individuals without a car or a truck. In addition to dividing two different environments -- the dark beach and the well lighted parking lot -- the road divided two different sets of activities. Along the beach, a diverse group of people ranging from couples sitting alone to family groups was present. These groups were older and more stationary than the crowds of teenagers observed in Aransas Pass and Ingleside. Some people were sitting at picnic tables, some had brought lawn chairs and others remained in their vehicles. All of them, though, were calmly facing the water. Across the road in the parking lot, on the other hand, were large groups of teenagers facing each other, playing loud music, drinking beer and moving about frequently. Many spent as much time making laps on the road as standing and talking in the parking lot. As with Aransas Pass and Ingleside, the automobile was at the center of much of the teenagers' attention. Trips to the nearby convenience store

Figure 5. Map of Rockport



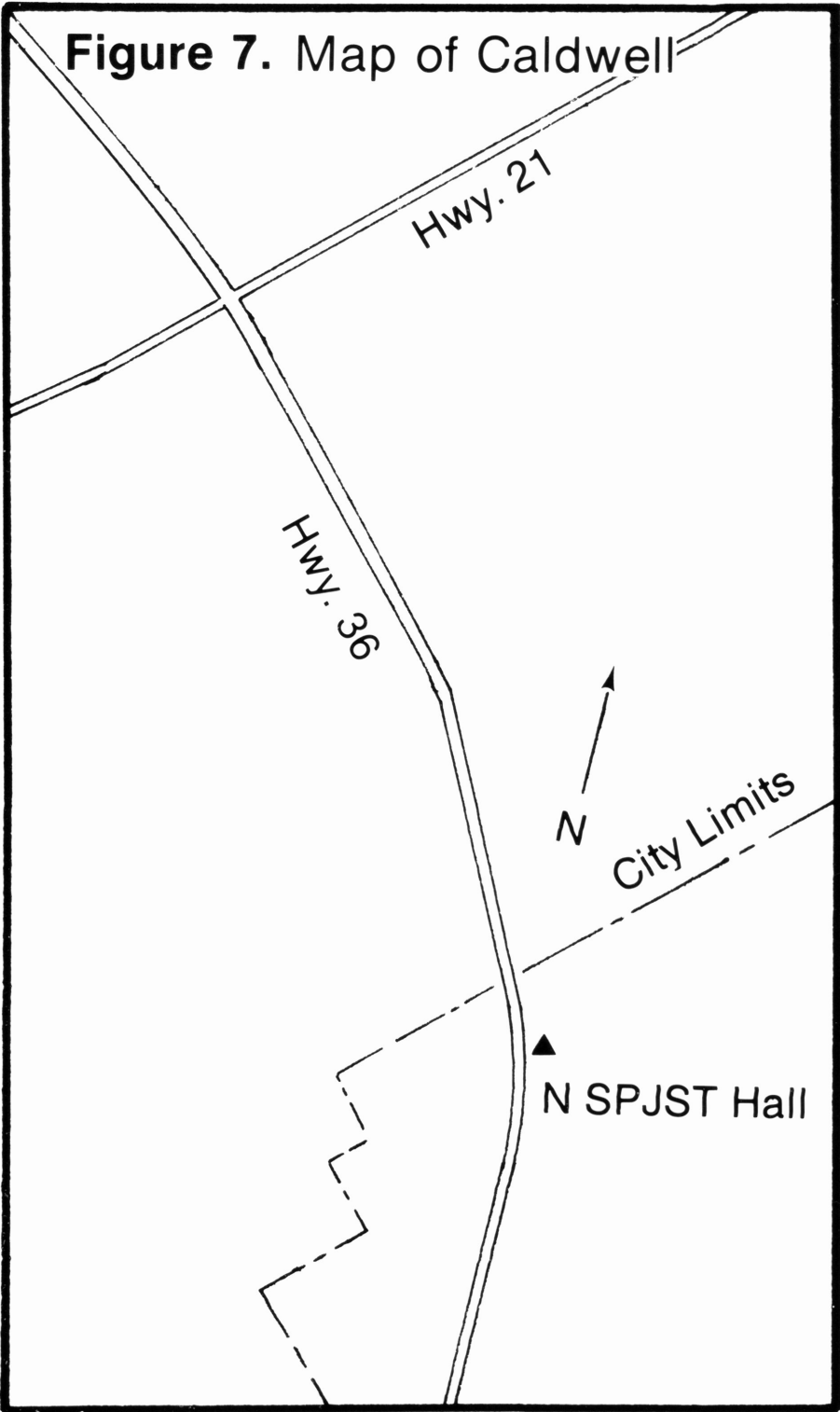
were common, as were the pickup trucks and midsized American cars that conveyed the teens. It is likely that this beach area attracts teenagers from outside of Rockport, but this was not directly observed.

The teenagers in Hearne center their activities on a dark parking lot between the 7-11 convenience store and the Pizza Hut. The parking lot opens onto Brown Street, a main thoroughfare delimited by Dairy Queen and Sonic hamburger stands and two convenience stores (Fig. 6). There is a not strictly organized cruising pattern along Brown Street. Those who do cruise, however, consistently stop at the Pizza Hut parking lot to talk. At the east end of the street the cruisers appeared to make an arbitrary u-turn before reaching Highway 6. The largest group of teenagers in the parking lot were all white and mostly male. A group of black teenagers was hanging out on the other side of the parking lot, but they never mixed with the white group. Because there was no light in the area, some people left their car headlights on to brighten the parking lot. The dominate vehicle types were American pickup trucks, Ford Mustangs, Chevrolet Camaros, Pontiac Trans-Ams and Buick Monte Carlos. The black and the white groups each had similar types of vehicles, although those driven by the blacks were in better condition. Dating couples were not observed loitering in the parking lot or cruising Brown Street. Driving into the country in an apparently random fashion was a popular activity. In Hearne, the most popular activity is standing next to, leaning against and sitting



in vehicles in the Pizza Hut parking lot. Driving along Brown Street and into the country also hold much interest for the teenagers.

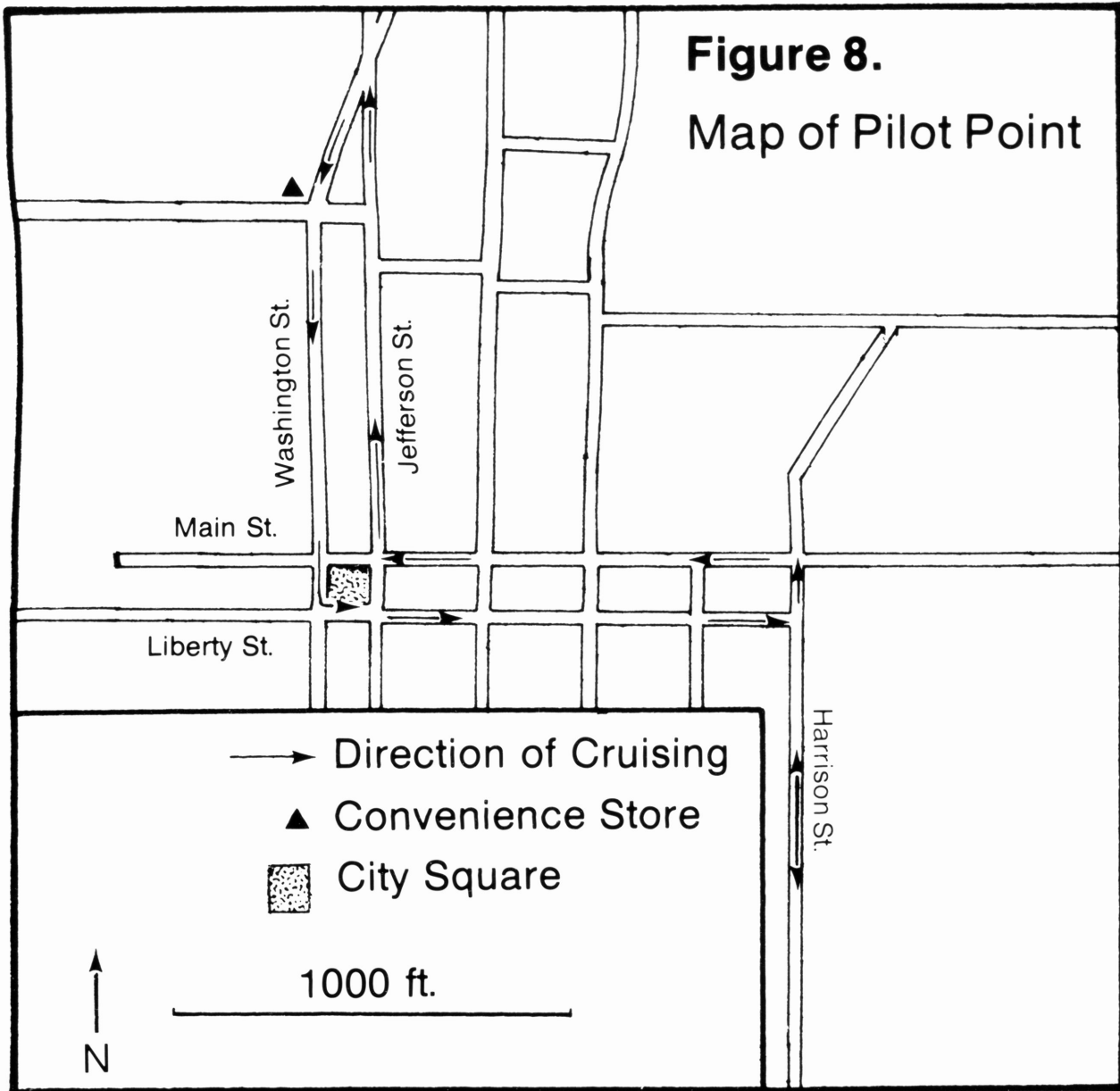
The SPJST Hall in Caldwell holds a dance every Saturday night for its teenagers (Fig. 7). A local police officer who was interviewed said that most of the high school students attend these weekly dances and that the parking lot in front of the hall has become the main gathering place. The officer also mentioned that many of the local youths drive through this parking lot while cruising a stretch of Highway 36 between the hall and Highway 21. This section of the highway is lined by fast food and convenience stores. Teenagers were observed congregating in parking lots along this road and driving throughout the town in an apparently random fashion. The driving on Highway 36 appeared to be a means of observing who was parked at the various fast food and convenience store parking lots. Although these cruising activities were practiced, their popularity did not nearly match that of hanging out in the gravel parking lot of the SPJST Hall. The lot was fairly brightly lighted and was congested with scores of pickups, Camaros, Ford Mustangs and sedans. Tire spinning, loud talking and vehicle admiration were the most common pastimes in the parking lot. Country and Western music from the dance was audible, and western wear was the dominate fashion in clothing. As many females as males were observed, but no minority groups were present. The abundance of females can be explained best by the dance. In no other town studied were females so well



represented and involved in the activities.

The town square in Pilot Point is the core for the weekend night activities of its youth. The square is an open parking lot surrounding a circular grassy area. Main, Liberty, Jefferson and Washington Streets feed into the parking lot which serves the surrounding shops during the day (Fig. 8). At night, all of the businesses are closed leaving the well lighted parking area open for the use of the local teenagers. Their stationary activities center in the square where they gather in clusters of pickup trucks and family sedans, but their dynamic activities extend beyond this small area into the nearby parts of town. When driving through the parking area, the teenagers drive in every possible direction; whichever will get them most quickly to the street they want to drive on next. Two cruising cells were observed, and both were equally popular. The first to be discovered was a path traveling east on Liberty Street until it ends in Harrison Street. A right turn is taken on Harrison and it is followed until McKinney Street is reached. A u-turn is made to return north. A left turn is taken on Main Street which leads back to the square. The second path discovered leaves the square heading north on Jefferson Street which is followed until it intersects Washington Street. Two miles from the square Washington street is then taken back to the square with a stop for refreshments and a restroom break at the convenience store on the corner of Brood and Washington. The stationary as well as the dynamic activities are participated in by both males and

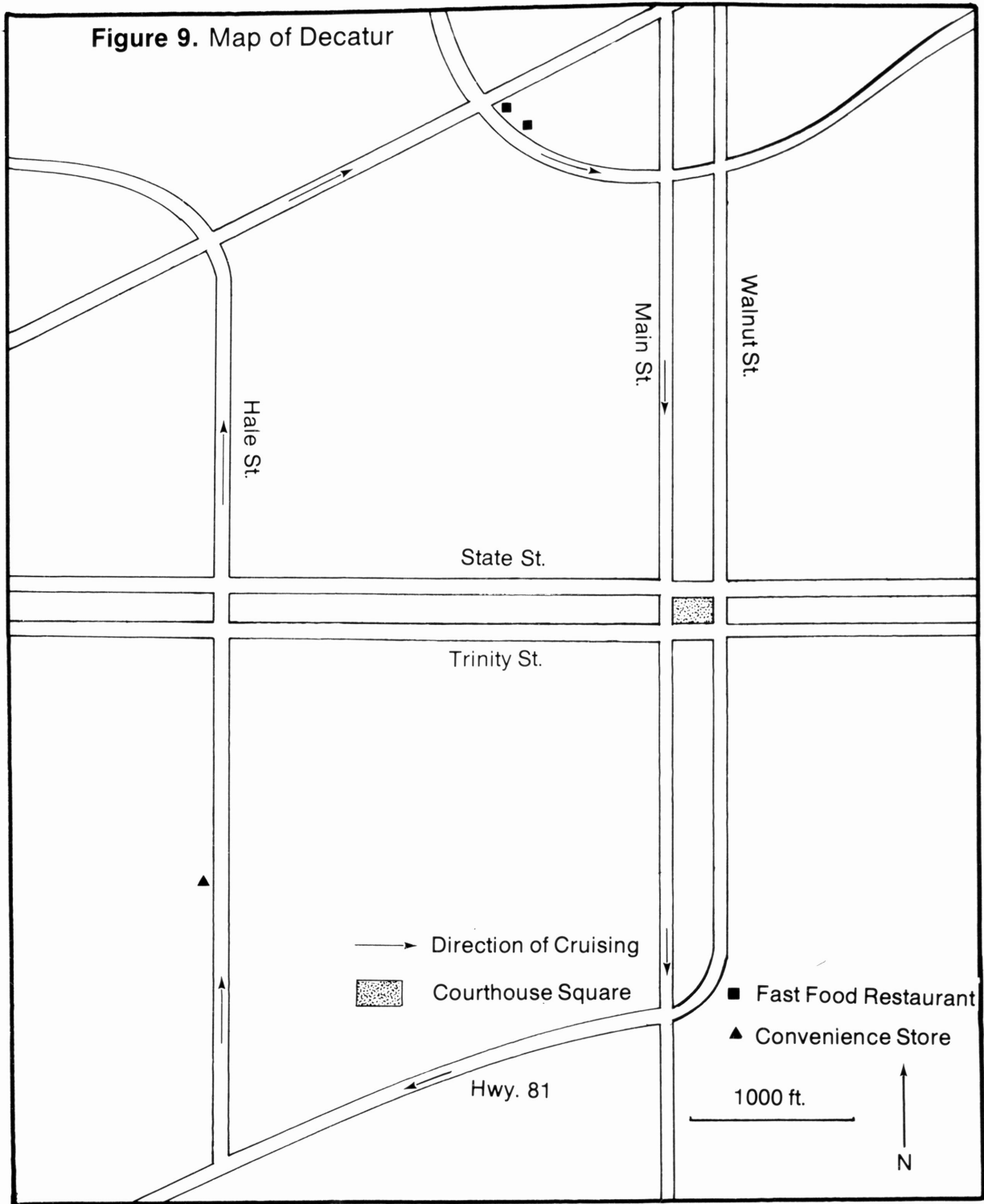
Figure 8.
Map of Pilot Point



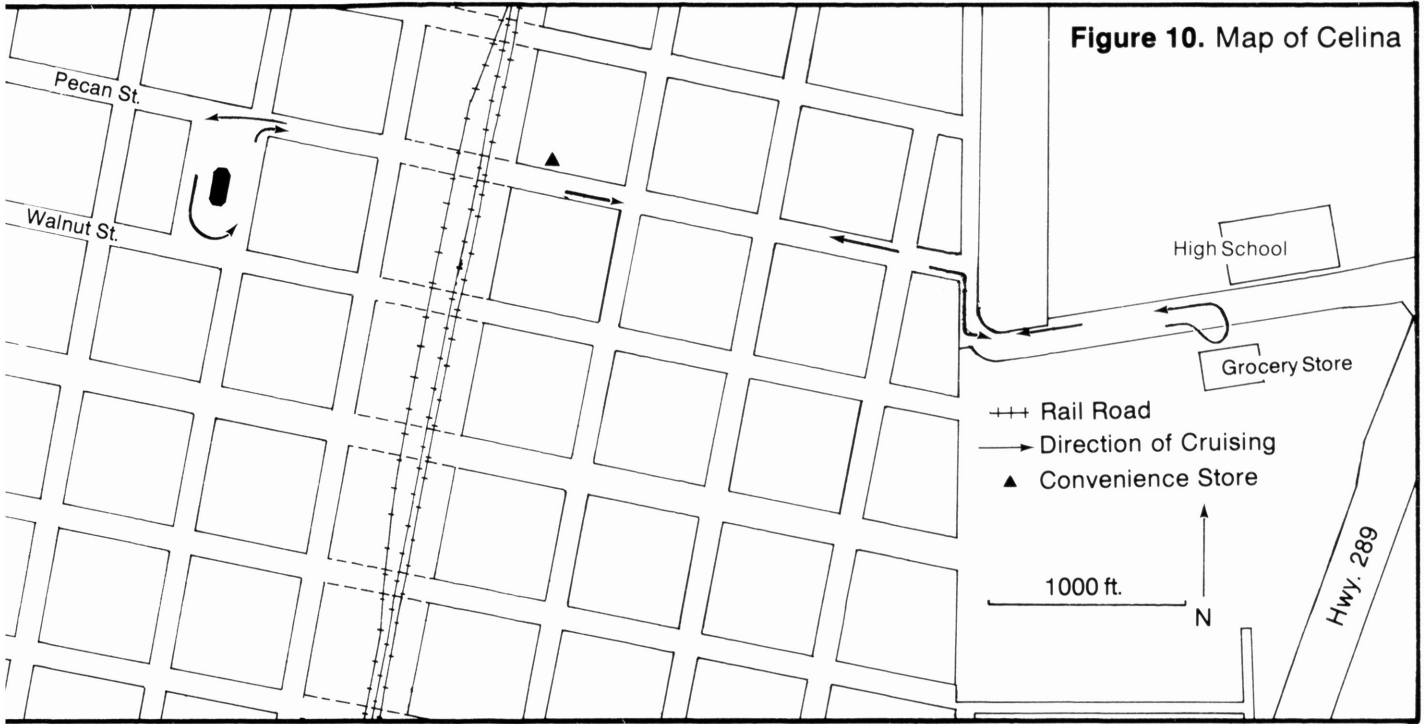
females, although the male to female ratio is 3:1. In the parking lot beer drinking and conversing is common. Interactions between teens of the opposite sex took place when groups of females approached usually larger groups of males. As with the previously mentioned towns, with the exception of Caldwell, dating couples were conspicuous by their absence.

In Decatur, the local teenagers center their activities on the courthouse square. Like Pilot Point, the square contains a parking area and is surrounded by various businesses which are closed at night. Unlike Pilot Point, the square is built around a courthouse, and one of the roads, Walnut Street, is a major highway. Interestingly, the teenagers avoided this road while cruising. The other roads that make up the square are Trinity, Church and Main Streets. Of these, Main street is the most important (Fig. 9). This was the longest cruising circuit observed, and it was not without its convenience and fast food stores at which the teenagers stopped. A small store remains open late into the evening on Hale Avenue, and a few fast food establishments are located along the major highway west of town. The courthouse square parking area was used as a gathering place by the predominately male teenagers involved in the cruising activity. They parked in groups on Main and State Streets next to the courthouse, but the majority of their time was spent driving. Again, American made pickup trucks, Chevrolet Camaros and Pontiac Trans-Ams outnumbered all other vehicle types. No minorities or females were observed.

Figure 9. Map of Decatur



Yet another town square is the center of teen activity in Celina. This square has an oval shaped grassy park in the center (Fig. 10). The broad brick paved parking area is surrounded by mostly abandoned and decaying store fronts. The few businesses that are still in operation close early in the evening leaving the parking area unoccupied for the use of the local youth. They spend their weekend nights both parked in the square and driving in a strictly defined pattern around the oval and through town. Both ends of the square are quite dark because of the shade provided by large trees growing there. Celina's stationary activities take place in the parking lot beneath these trees. The teenagers gather at both ends of the oval. The group was made up of blacks and whites of both sexes, but white males were best represented. The teenagers parked in the square appeared to be merely taking a break from their primary activity, cruising. Traffic was constantly circling the parking area in a counter-clockwise direction and turning right onto Pecan Street. A small convenience store is located on this street a few blocks from the square. The cruisers take a left on North Street which passes by the high school football field. They make a u-turn in the grocery store parking lot and drive back to the square by the same route. A few vehicles were gathered in the high school parking lot across the street from the grocery store. Again, pickup trucks, and medium sized American cars predominated, and long drives into the country were quite popular.



From information provided by the 1980 U.S. census, the towns studied are shown to differ only slightly in all of their relevant population characteristics save one, their number of inhabitants (Table). A wealth of information related to the teenagers and their activities is available for the towns of more than 2500 in population. The percent of the town's population between 15 and 19 years of age, the percent of this age group which is male or female, the percent of the town's total population younger than 18 year and the number of persons per private vehicle are published for these towns and for the state as a whole. For towns of less than 2500, only the percent under 18 is published. These statistics are considered relevant because the majority of the people participating in these activities fall into the 15 to 19 and the under 18 age categories. The private vehicle is consistently in the center of the phenomena being studied.

From the table it can be seen that the towns are quite homogeneous in the age group categories. These numbers vary from 7.1% 15 to 19 year olds in Decatur to 9.5% in Rockport with a mean of 8.6 and a standard deviation of 0.87. The percent of the state's population which falls into the 15 to 19 age group does not differ significantly from that of the towns in question. When the state's percent 15 to 19 year olds is included, the mean rises to 8.8% and the standard deviation becomes 0.95%. The percent male remains quite close to 50% in this age category for both the towns and the state. There is also little variation in

Table

Place	Population	%15-19 yrs. old			% Under 18 yrs. old
		Both Sexes	Male	Female	
State	14229191	10.0	51.0	49.0	30.3
Aransas Pass	7173	9.2	47.4	52.6	32.2
Celina	1520	*	*	*	26.8
Caldwell	2953	8.2	51.5	48.5	26.1
Decatur	4104	7.1	49.5	50.5	27.1
Hearne	5418	8.7	48.7	51.3	32.8
Ingleside	5436	9.0	49.3	50.7	35.7
Pilot Point	2211	*	*	*	28.2
Rockport	3686	9.5	49.4	50.6	28.8
Town Average	4063	8.6	49.3	50.7	29.7

* This information is not published for towns of less than 2500 in population.

the number of persons per private vehicle among the towns. By contrast the number of inhabitants in the towns varies somewhat. These towns range from 1520 to 7173 in population with a mean of 4063 and a standard deviation of 1877 people.

The census data are useful in discussing the similarities between the towns and in speculating about teen activities beyond the small sample of this study. The closeness of the relevant population characteristics for the towns in question to those for the state as a whole suggest little difference between small town populations and the rest of Texas. Although no direct correlation can be drawn between population characteristics and teen activities, there is nothing in the state averages to suggest that similar activities are not possible throughout the state. While the activities of each town are quite similar, their number of inhabitants varies somewhat. This indicates that the teenagers' choice of activities does not depend on the number of people who live in their town.

The personal motorized vehicle, whether it be a pickup truck or a car, is at the center of the activity in each town. Without them, the activities described above would not be possible. The automobile provides the youths with transportation to the core, a self-contained unit in which they can participate, independence from the constraints of home life, and an object which gives them something in common with their peers. So, in addition to its traditional position as a mode of transportation, the

automobile functions as a liberator and a conversation piece for these teenagers. The role of the automobile in the teen activities of the towns studied is evidenced by the observation that in no town, with the exception of Rockport, were any teenagers present who were not associated with a car or a pickup truck. Two boys were observed sitting on the steps of an old store on Celina's square. They spent the entire evening watching the other youths cruising around the square without attempting to join even the stationary activities. Combining mobility and privacy, the private vehicle gives the teenagers more independence than they would have otherwise. It enables them to remove themselves from their homes in a short period of time, while blocking them from the view of casual onlookers. This, combined with the frequently observed random drives away from the crowded parking lot, demonstrates the teenagers' need for privacy and independence. The predominance of just a few types of cars and trucks shows that the vehicle has the possibility to open many avenues of conversation. Five young men who each own a Ford pickup can begin their evening discussing the similarities and differences of their vehicles. It was observed that a substantial amount of time during stationary activities involved the inspection and discussion of private vehicles.

In order for teenagers to have an activity, they must choose a place in which to do it. It is important to note that the places chosen are strikingly similar considering the possibilities offered by each town. The amount of light at each

core was stressed throughout the descriptions of the towns because it is an ingredient in the total character of each. A brightly lighted area was chosen in every town save Hearne and Celina. In Hearne, car headlights were used to brighten the dark Pizza Hut parking lot. In Celina, the teenagers gathered in the only darkened area of a well lighted square making themselves the exception. It is necessary to see ones friends in order to converse comfortably. If one desires the privacy of darkness, the country is only a few blocks away. A large, barrier free parking lot is another constant ingredient in the landscape of teen activities. The large, flat area allows the youths to gather their vehicles into any form they choose and allows some room for the wreckless driving which was observed in every town. It was noted that if the parking lot chosen were that of an open eating establishment, the teenagers' activities tended to be more stationary than dynamic, although the activities of each town have some dynamic characteristics. If no open business with a parking lot large enough to accommodate the crowd of vehicles exists in the town, the concentration of the activity turns to cruising, and the path of travel invariably passes by at least one open convenience store. The Rockport beach drive is an exception here because the amenities of the beachside parking lot outweigh those of any other parking lot in town. It is interesting to note here that the teenagers in Rockport still chose a parking lot that is no more than two blocks from both a grocery and a convenience store. The most organized cruising

systems existed in towns in which no open business offered a suitable parking lot. Celina and Pilot Point are examples of this, and the more sedentary activities in the parking lot of an open eating establishment are exemplified by Hearne and Aransas Pass. The convenience store is obviously an important ingredient in the place chosen by teenagers for their weekend night activities. They are consistently used as a place to buy food and drinks and to use the restrooms.

The above mentioned core, corridor and sphere of the teen activities can be used to model the spatial variations in these phenomena within a town. These areas are differentiated by the types of activities which take place within their boundaries. The core is the parking lot in which static activities occur. It is a meeting place in which the teenagers spend most of their time conversing. The crusing routes, or corridors consistently connect the core to a nearby convenience store, and are, therefore, the center of the dynamic activity. All of the vehicles in the corridor regions are moving. The sphere contains the undocumented activities which take place beyond the core and corridor(s), namely the common drives into the country in random directions. The core and the sphere are connected by the corridor(s) and other roads.

To the major constants of vehicular orientation and similarities of place, other common elements mentioned in the above town descriptions may be added. Together the similarities

describe fundamentally identical teen activities which are taking place in very widely separated towns. This suggests that local traditions and personalities did not create these activities but only fit a prescribed activity to the possibilities offered by the local situation.

Appendix

A search was made in order to discover previous studies in this area. It was unsuccessful in that nothing was found.