BY MIKE MCNAMEE

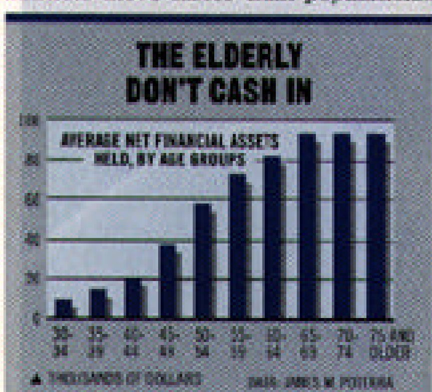
NO FIRE SALE ON BOOMER ASSETS

Overseas buyers will step in

Who will buy baby boomers' accumulated assets when they retire and need income? With the far smaller cohorts of the baby bust coming on their heels, some experts forecast little demand for boomers' houses, stocks, and bonds. "The words 'Sell? Sell to whom?' may haunt the baby boomers in the next century," warns Wharton School finance professor Jeremy J. Siegel, who predicts a gigantic fire sale.

But those fears are overblown, says economist James M. Poterba of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In a paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, Poterba finds no historical evidence that demographic shifts drive returns on financial assets. Age-related changes are so small and gradual that they're swamped by other factors, especially in the stock market.

One problem for the alarmists is that markets move faster than populations.



"The life cycle of the baby boom was clear by 1965," Poterba points out. "Forward-looking markets could adjust prices [upward] long before the boomers entered their savings years."

And if history is any guide, boomers won't consume all their assets. Poterba's calculations, based on Federal Reserve data, show the elderly hang on to more wealth than a life-cycle model of saving and spending would predict (chart). The uncertainty of old-age medical and nursing-home expenses holds down spending, as does a desire to leave bequests.

The baby boomers' ace in the hole may be overseas, as developing nations with young populations create wealth and demand financial assets. That might not protect boomers' home values: A prosperous entrepreneur in Delhi probably won't want a bungalow in Boston. But the globalization of markets, Poterba says, should put a floor under today's stock portfolios.

FRIEND OF BULL AND BEAR

Info tech has driven both markets

If demographics aren't moving the stock market, what is? Information technology, say Jeremy Greenwood of the University of Rochester and Boyan Jovanovic of New York University in an NBER paper. The economists shed light on how IT helps account for both the bear market of the 1970s and the bull market since then.

New technologies, such as computers, tend to be developed in small, privately held companies. These inventions don't add any value to the stock market until the small companies go public or are acquired. In fact, the prospect of new technology actually depresses stock prices, Greenwood and Jovanovic say, because investors fear that the equipment and techniques used by the economy's dominant companies may soon be obsolete. While the IT revolution was brewing in the 1970s in labs and garages, stocks fell: Total market capitalization dropped from 113% of gross domestic product in 1968 to 45% of GDP in 1974 and was no higher in 1981. Of course, IT wasn't the only depressant in the 1970s: Inflation and poor productivity growth played a part.

As IT developers started going public and growing in the 1980s, Wall Street surged. By 1996, the market's value was 132% of GDP. Older companies, those traded on major stock markets in 1968, accounted for less than a fifth of the 1981 to 1996 rise in market cap. Today's strong market reflects the belief that technology will continue to pay off for at least another decade, Jovanovic says.

MORE PEOPLE IN PEORIA

The Rust Belt's population is up

The Rust Belt isn't so rusty anymore. New figures from the Census Bureau show that many of the Midwest's traditional industrial centers are making strong comebacks in population as they diversify their economic base. Even with manufacturing suffering from a new onslaught of cheap Asian goods, the Midwest enjoys lower unemployment than the nation as a whole.

The biggest gainer: Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where population grew 7.7% from 1990 to 1997, after falling 0.6% during the 1980s (chart). Peoria's population rose 2% since 1990 after falling 7.3% in the '80s; the population of Kokomo, Ind., rose 3.1% after a 6.5% drop.

BIG REBOUNDS

POPULATION CHANGES IN "RUST BELT" METRO AREAS

	1980-90	1990-97
CEDAR RAPIDS	-0.6%	7.7%
SIOUX CITY	-2.1	5.1
DETROIT	-2.4	4.9
LOUISVILLE	-0.5	4.7
KOKOMO	-6.5	3.1
PEORIA	-7.3	2.0
DUBUQUE	-7.8	2.0
DAVENPORT	-8.8	1.8

DATA: CENSUS BUREAU

The rust remover isn't being spread evenly. Population is still falling in at least 10 of the region's metro areas, led by a neighboring pair of former steel towns, Steubenville, Ohio, and Weirton, W. Va. That area's population has fallen 4.1% in the 1990s, for a total drop of 16.7% since 1980.

TIPS TO PICK THE BEST EMPLOYEE

Don't rely on "life" stereotypes

You're choosing between two equally qualified job candidates: One single, the other married with kids. Which will be the more committed employee? One stereotype says parents are more settled and dependable; another says single employees have fewer distractions.

Both stereotypes are wrong, says workforce researcher Mary B. Young, an adjunct professor at Boston University. In a study she wrote for the Conference Board, Young concludes "life status" has little bearing on whether an employee is "committed by choice"—motivated by a positive attachment to the firm. One of the prime measures for this desirable type of commitment is the worker's general attitude.

What employers must watch out for, Young says, are workers who are "committed by necessity"—who soldier on because they fear changing jobs or being fired. These dutiful employees have worse attitudes and are less likely to help build the organization, Young finds.

Marital or parental status doesn't predict either type of dedication, Young says. Indeed, married workers with no children can rank highest in either type.