
OCCUPANCE OF THE MORaine BORDER OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS

JOHN H. GARLAND

University of Illinois, Urbana

THE TERRAIN

Between the valleys of the Fox on the east and the Rock on the west lies the Moraine Border district of northern Illinois. North of the upper Illinois Valley, which forms the southern limit of the district, the crescentic recessional moraines of Wisconsin glaciation converge and give to the area a pleasing rolling surface which is quite in contrast to the flat terrain of the Grand Prairie south of the Illinois valley. The broad Valparaiso moraine enters the district from the east, the Bloomington moraine dominates the central portion, and the pre-Bloomington till extends westward toward the Rock Valley terminating in the White-Rock moraine (fig. 1).

Physiographically the northeastern portion of the district lies within the Wheaton Morainal country, the southeast is a part of the Kankakee Plain, the northwest is a part of the Rock River Hill country, and the remaining central and southwest is the northern portion of the Bloomington Ridged Plain into which extends an arm of the Green River Lowland.¹

Prairie, interrupted at intervals by prairie groves, originally dominated the southern and western portions of the area; whereas to the north and east it was covered by an extensive series of hard wood decid-

uous forests. Like the Grand Prairie the wooded areas occupied the better drained lands, especially those in the drainage basins of the streams. Poorly drained uplands and extensive swails and sloughs on the featureless ground moraine plains created a drainage problem in this district almost as great as that of the Grand Prairie. Drainage ditches and field tile have transformed most of the wet areas into productive farm land leaving only local names of sloughs and prairies as reminders of the early poorly drained countryside.

Although three major streams, the Rock, Fox, and Illinois, form three sides, the district consists of two drainage areas, the Northern and Southern sections (fig. 1). The Northern section is chiefly the irregular drainage basin of the north and south branches of the Kishwaukee, which flows westward into the Rock. The tributaries of the Fox are very short and, with the exceptions of the lake region in the northeast, are of no significance to the Northern section. The Southern section is tributary to the Illinois, the major feature of which is the lower Fox River.

CULTURAL PATTERNS

Upon the terrain has been developed a variety of occupancy patterns all of which are rural and agrarian. The variety and arrangement of the patterns are such, however, that the

¹ M. M. Leighton, Geo. E. Ekblaw, and Leland Horberg. "Physiographic Divisions of Illinois," *The Journal of Geology*, Vol. 56, No. 1, January, 1948.

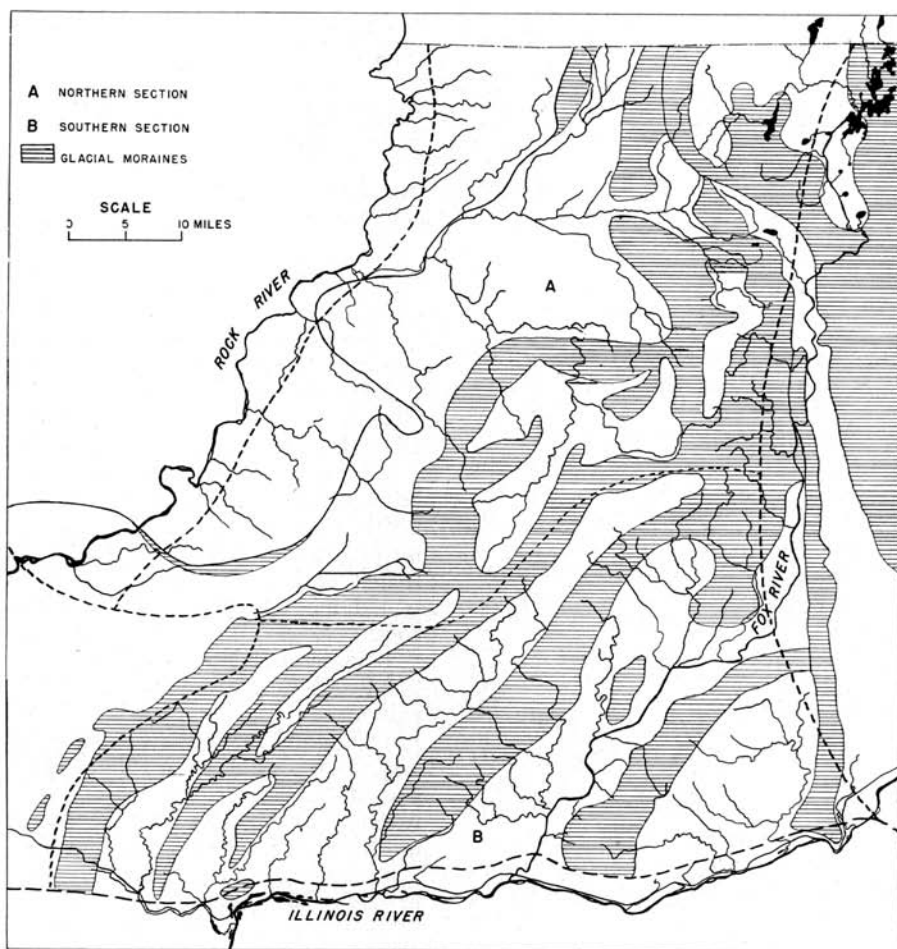


FIG. 1.—Physical patterns of the Moraine Border district.

section is actually a land of transition.

SETTLEMENTS

Although the bordering valleys are zones of urbanization, the Moraine Border district is a land of towns and villages and evenly spread farmsteads. There are only 140 incorporated towns and cities in the entire district which includes parts of 12 counties (fig. 2). Of that number there are only ten large

enough to be within the city classification of 2,500. Seven of these are in the Northern section and three in the Southern. Of the ten the two largest are DeKalb and Belvidere. In the Census of 1940 their respective populations were 9,146 and 8,094 although recent estimates place them at 12,150 and 10,051. Four of the ten cities, Belvidere, Woodstock, Sycamore, and Princeton, are county seats. With the exception of DeKalb and Sycamore,

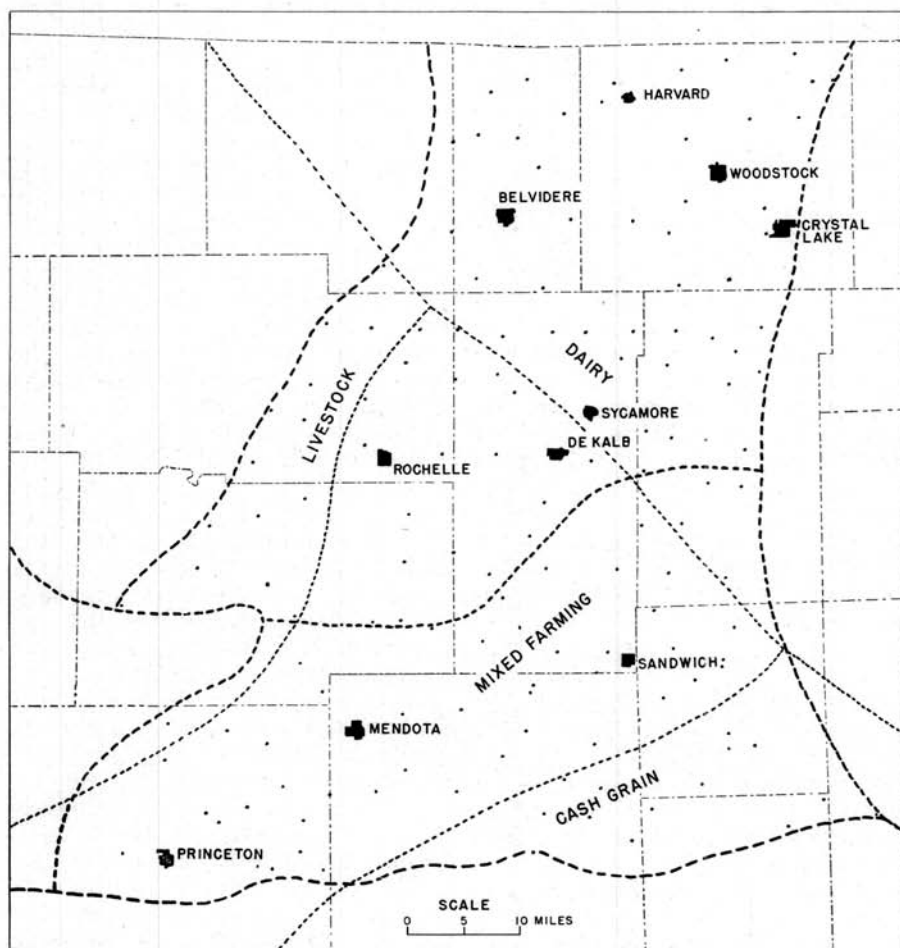


FIG. 2.—Occupance patterns of the Moraine Border district.

which are about seven miles apart, the cities are well spaced indicating a basic agrarian service center function. It is well to note that DeKalb, the largest city, is the most industrial of all. The fact that the county court house is in Sycamore and the Northern Illinois State College is in DeKalb, a short distance away, indicates some of the rivalry arising from urban spacing.

The towns and villages are aligned at five to eight mile intervals in a

general east-west orientation. This obviously is due to the railroad net which in general extends across the district as a series of lines radiating from the Chicago metropolitan district. Pre-railroad settlements reached by the railroads grew, whereas the rest disappeared with time as the post-railroad pattern of settlements crystallized. Only two railroads extend across the district in a north-south trend and they are small freight lines.

The original county and township survey gave to the district the traditional checkerboard of section-line roads. Right of travel altered some of them, and the lack of surfacing material obliterated many more. With the development of the automobile, the truck, and the bus, national and state hard-surfaced highways were projected through the district, both from east to west and south to north. Although local interests were desirous of perpetuating the pattern by routing the concrete highways through the small villages, the undesirability of routing fast traffic through villages has been demonstrated both as far as the traffic and the individual settlement is concerned. Thus patterns are being developed to by-pass villages by a short enough distance that neither the traffic nor the village is inconvenienced.

AGRICULTURAL PATTERNS

Although dominantly rural and agrarian, the Moraine Border district is a land of transition as far as farming types are concerned. Three critical farming type boundaries cross the district dividing it into four distinct areas.²

The first farm type boundary is the western limit of the dairy belt which divides the district from northwest to southeast. Within the northeastern part of the dairy landscape is outstanding. Modern dairy barns and silos, herds of Holstein cows, well-fenced pastures, and fields of fodder are the agrarian occupation features of the rolling moraine land. Dairy farms are large, well-painted, well-kept and imposing in appearance, and most exacting in requirements.

The towns and villages are collecting centers, in some of them are

dairy plants belonging to organizations located in the Chicago metropolitan district toward which the fresh milk moves daily. Collectors truck the raw milk in cans from the dairy farms to collecting stations from which glass-lined tank trucks and trains continue it citywards. The railroad is no longer as important as it once was when each of the several railroads radiating out through the milk producing region ran at least one slow express daily, known as the milk train, for the purpose of transporting milk to the metropolitan district.

Distance, no doubt, is an important factor in crystallizing this particular pattern of occupation. Natural environmental conditions, although advantageous within the dairy farming zone, do not change markedly at the dairy boundary which has remained constant for years. It is well to note that dairy farming, although the finest type of agrarian adjustment, is highly specialized, the equipment is enormous and expensive, and a fine dairy herd capable of demanding highest returns is not easy to build up. Thus the area has crystallized as a dominant occupation feature of the Moraine Border district.

Near the western edge of the district, approximately at the boundary of the Wisconsin drift, is the boundary of mixed livestock farming. Beef cattle, hog, and dairy farm, especially those selling to creameries, dominate the area. Although the crops in the fields are essentially the same over the entire Moraine Border district consisting of corn, small grain, hay and pasture, the commercial aspects are quite different. Distance from the Chicago metropolitan district is the significant factor. Loading chutes along the railroad in the villages and livestock trucks on the highway take the place of the daily milk truck.

²H. C. M. Case and K. H. Meyer, *Types of Farming in Illinois*, Univ. of Ill. Agr. Exp. Sta., Bull. 403, June 1934.

The infrequency with which stock beef cattle, fat hogs, or even cans of cream are marketed is a vital factor. On the other hand the rolling terrain is a significant pasture land.

The southeastern part of the district, especially the area between the Fox and Illinois rivers is a land of cash grain farming similar to the Grand Prairie south of the Illinois Valley. The deep black soil of the Kankakee plain is utilized as only the richest of soil can be for commercial grain farming. There the grain elevators are large, the barns are small, and grain is trucked to market.

Between the livestock farming on the northwest and the cash grain farming on the southeast is a broad transition zone of both livestock and grain farming extending southwestward from the dairy boundary. In the same manner trend the recessional moraines of Wisconsin glaciation, the Bloomington, Cropsey, and Farm Ridge moraines, separated by extensive elongated areas of poorly drained ground moraine. Thus, beyond the limits of profitable dairy marketing, the morainal ridges and interspersed plains are the sites of both livestock and cash grain farming.

Here both stock loading pens and grain elevators line the railroads in the little agricultural villages and livestock trucks traverse the highways. Although this portion of the Moraine Border district is too far from the Chicago metropolitan district for the daily shipment of fresh milk, it is the nearest area to the world's largest stock yards for the periodic delivery of live hogs, sheep, and cattle. The extent to which portions of the district have been used to fatten cattle and western sheep is notable. The large sheep feeding yards are no longer as important as they once were and some have disap-

peared entirely. It was within this portion of the district that a part of the government-sponsored wartime hemp growing was centered.

INDUSTRIAL PATTERNS

In an agrarian structure such as that of the Moraine Border district, industry is of little significance. Here the major features are in keeping with the agricultural background which the towns and villages serve. Canning factories account for the most widespread manufacturing activity of the district. Corn, peas, lima beans, tomatoes, pumpkins, and asparagus are among the vegetables packed by the canning companies which are most important in the Northern section especially in the larger towns. Belvidere, Marengo, Sycamore, and Rochelle are the significant canning factory towns. Although the canning activities are limited to the summer season, causing a marked labor problem, vegetable growing is carried on chiefly on farms owned outright or leased for terms of years by the canning companies.

Among the industries of the district designed to use or to prepare perishable agricultural produce for market are the dairies and creameries in the towns and villages, especially in the dairy farming portion of the district. Similarly the hemp mills of the war period were constructed to process hemp fibers. Government mills were constructed near Earlville, Shabbona, and Kirkland.³ Since the close of the war, these factories have been closed, offered for sale, and at least one has been converted to other industrial purposes.

At an early date small shops and factories making farm machinery

³ John H. Garland, "Hemp—A Minor American Fiber Crop," *Economic Geography*, Vol. 22, No. 2, April, 1946.

and other equipment for the agricultural countryside were widespread. Today most of these have disappeared as farm machinery manufacturing has become standardized and centralized in a few large companies. A few agricultural service manufacturers as well as those depending on a general market have developed in the large towns and cities. Notable among these are the manufacture of milking machines and dairy farm equipment at Harvard and Deisel engines at Rochelle, whereas machine shops that make parts for farm machinery are widespread. The invention of barbed wire at DeKalb and the development and operation of the American Steel and Wire Company there for a number of years gave to the largest city of the district the most industrial atmosphere. In a like manner the manufacture of sewing machines is outstanding in Belvidere, the second

largest city. DeKalb was selected during the war for the site of an airplane factory.

Many other items such as telephone parts, electrical switches, cardboard boxes, dry cleaning machinery, furniture, barber's tools, yarn, typewriters, and the like are made in small factories in many of the towns and cities. The manufacture of nationally advertised pianos at DeKalb is one of the industries in which central position within the national market is significant.

Although there are shreds of evidence that light industries are interested in and are actually moving towards the towns and villages of the countryside which lies between the Rock River, Fox and Illinois valley industrial districts, the dominant note of the Moraine Border district is one of agricultural transition which occupies a rolling terrain of variable glacial features.