

## GROWTH OF ROBINSON, ILLINOIS

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Robinson is only one of the many small cities of southern Illinois that has experienced a somewhat uniform growth over a period of years. Although located on the undulating terrain of the Illinois till plain and only a few miles from the fertile alluvial lands of the Wabash River, it is not essentially an agricultural community. More so, it is a community whose economy has resulted from a combination of manufacturing, agriculture, transportation, and human initiative.

**EARLY DEVELOPMENT.**—Palestine, six miles east of Robinson, was the first settlement in this section of the state and became the county seat of Crawford County when the latter was organized in 1818. As new communities developed in the western portions of the county the necessity of removing the county seat to a more central and convenient location became more and more apparent. In 1843 the present site was chosen by popular vote, although Hebron and Hutsonville were also contestants for the honor and offers of land were received from many other points.

Early growth was slow, the estimated population in 1865 being placed at 400 persons. Prior to the Civil War, there was little money in circulation. Many of the merchants sold goods on a year's credit and were paid in crops or livestock during the summer and fall. In some cases they fattened this livestock on their own farms, owned packing houses on the Wabash River, the principal commercial artery, and shipped pork, beef, and grain to New Orleans. These conditions remained relatively unchanged until the Paris and Danville Narrow-gage Railroad was extended to Robinson in 1875. The railroad gave Robinson a decided advantage over its competitors on the Wabash, namely, Palestine and Hutsonville, these two having more-or-less overshadowed their upland neighbor prior to that date. Five years later an east-west line (Springfield, Effingham, and Southwestern) gave the village added commercial advantages and helped to place the trade

on a firmer basis. Manufacturing came gradually: saw mills and grist mills first, then an ice plant, and finally a glass factory.

**DEVELOPMENT AS AN OIL CENTER.**—The discovery of petroleum in southeastern Illinois caused Robinson to experience a rapid growth in population and all lines of activity, the development in Crawford county reaching a peak about 1907. By this time the two railroads had become a part of the Big Four and Illinois Central Systems respectively and machine shops, tank factories and a small refinery were attracted by 1908.

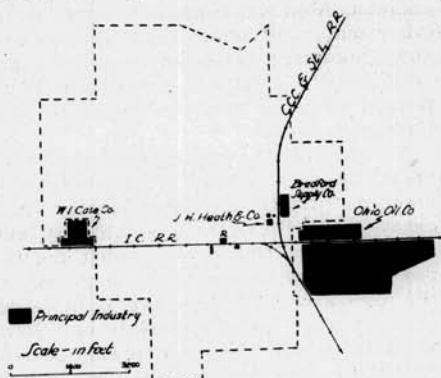


Fig. 1.—Robinson's industries are located along the railroads and the principal ones are on the urban periphery. (R indicates Robinson Casket Company.)

Since that time the growth of the community has been closely associated with the petroleum industry. The population increased 100 per cent between 1900 and 1910, then declined slightly, but has increased again within the last fifteen years. This can be attributed in part to the growth of the refinery.

The locally owned refinery was purchased by the Ohio Oil company in 1924 and the plant capacity was increased more than 500 per cent within a period of about two years, and subsequently enlarged on two other occasions. This plant is handicapped by the absence of a nearby metropolitan market, so most of the

products are marketed within the local area. Only lubricating oils, road oils, and fuel oils offering competition in Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati markets.

#### **MORE RECENT INDUSTRIAL GROWTH.—**

The second important manufacturing plant is W. I. Case and Company locally called the "pottery", which manufactures a complete line of bathroom fixtures. It had its origin about 20 years ago and in 1924 was manufacturing only three items. Other products have been added to meet competition and the company now serves a national market, and has a small export business to South America. This plant, employing 300 persons during the peak season, has not grown because of any natural advantages of the region, although adequate labor and transportation facilities have permitted it to develop unhampered. Forty per cent of the clay is imported from England and the rest comes from Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee, while other materials arrive from Illinois and the Dakotas. Local oil products are used, but their price is based upon Tulsa freight rates so this results in no locational advantage.

A combination dairy-candy-beverage plant, has also added to the industrial diversity within the last quarter of a century. It began in a small way and supplementary items were added and the plant capacity increased at intervals as the need arose. It, however, is more dependent upon local materials and local markets, as only the candy is sold beyond a limited area in southeastern Illinois and adjacent Indiana.

Other types of manufacturing are a casket factory and two oil well supply concerns. The origin of the latter dates to the previous oil development, but their present status is indicative of the recent growth of the industry in southern Illinois.

**THE RECENT OIL BOOM IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS.**—In February, 1937 Pure Oil's test well at Clay City, about 50 miles southwest of Robinson, ushered in a new era of oil speculation and development in southern Illinois. Although this new ac-

tivity has been almost entirely outside the limits of the earlier oil field, the older cities to the east, Robinson and Lawrenceville especially, have been the indirect recipients of renewed growth and increased prosperity. The refineries have expanded their capacity and are connected by both rail and pipe line with many of the new fields. The drilling and oil well supply companies, as already mentioned, have experienced a suddenly increased demand for their products and services. In fact, the Bradford Supply Company moved its main offices from West Virginia to Robinson early in 1938.

**CONCLUSION.**—In conclusion, Robinson's development has undergone many changes. Settlement was retarded until the present century because the village was only one of several small market centers that served the agricultural population of the nearby countryside. Then the discovery of oil caused an immediate increase in population, which was accentuated by the construction of the Wabash Refinery in 1915. The refinery has remained the major supporting industry, but other manufacturing establishments were built by local men or were attracted by the cheap land, low taxes, convenient transportation facilities, or the abundance of labor. The labor supply can be attributed to at least two factors. (1) Many families moved to Robinson during the oil boom and then remained after peak production had been reached. (2) The greater mechanization of agricultural practices produced a surplus of farm labor that was eager to accept other types of employment.

Residential expansion has progressed consistently, but not rapidly. At present there is a shortage of housing facilities and rents are abnormally high. This can be attributed to the greater demands of the last few years which have paralleled the current industrial expansion. In brief, Robinson no longer has the character of a one industry town. Manufacturing is sufficiently diversified that the community life and prosperity are only partially dependent upon the petroleum industry.