

# THE URBANIZATION OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS AND ITS RELATION TO NATIONAL DEFENSE

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The growing crescendo of national defense is being felt more and more in the everyday life of the people of Southern Illinois, but probably to an even greater degree than in most other portions of the United States. There have been whisperings in the wind that new defense industries may enter the area. These may be only whisperings, but they are producing new hopes for thousands of Southern Illinois residents. These people need a new source of regional income, and need it desperately. This portion of the state is due for some kind of pronounced change in its general welfare. Whether or not this change will be to the good, remains to be seen, but to geographers, any change in the economy of an area should be of special interest, and therefore a brief summary of present conditions is presented here.

A glance at a map showing the distribution of urban agglomerations in Illinois reveals a compact cluster of urban aggregates in the southern part of the state exceeded only in the Chicago and East St. Louis metropolitan areas. (See Fig. 1.) The population center of this "scattered big city" is located a short distance northeast of Herrin, and approximately 200,000 people live within a radius of 25 miles of this center.<sup>1</sup> An unusual feature of this area is the small size of its cities. West Frankfort is the largest of them, and has a population only slightly more than 12,000. Most of the towns have between 1,000 and 5,000 residents. A closer view of this area shows that the pattern of these towns and cities has an even texture, only the small agglomerations showing a tendency toward grouping. (See Fig. 2.)

Mining is the basic economy of this urbanized area, and most of the agglomerations are, or were, mining towns. The saxeicultural function however, is most dominant in the smaller centers. They have a much lower percentage of com-

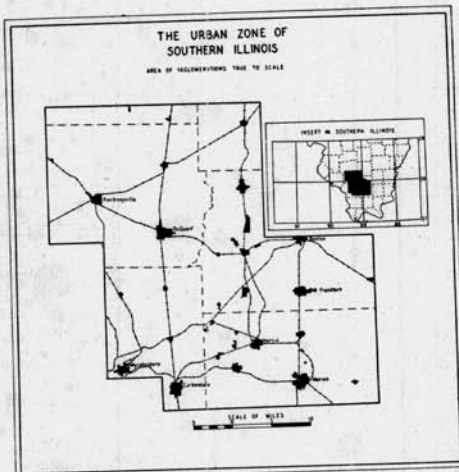


Fig. 2.

mercial establishments to total population than the larger towns, and this percentage has steadily declined with the advent of paved roads and the automobile. To a stranger, these small towns seem much smaller than they actually are because their business districts are so undeveloped. West Frankfort, Herrin, Marion, and others are important regional marketing and residential centers, and many of them have large coal mines near their borders. The most remarkable fact concerning these urban centers is their lack of manufacturing, other than the local type such as bakeries and ice plants. The regional service function is closely linked with mining, since it serves the small mining towns and the rural population, a large proportion of whom are part-time miners when employment is possible.

The inter-urban areas show a density of population much higher than in most other portions of the state. Many of the farms are part-time in character, and are small in size. In a survey made of three townships in the center of the area under discussion, it was found that 40

<sup>1</sup> Parrish, John; "Labor Supply in the Southern Illinois Industrial Area"; Report prepared for the Construction Division of the National Defense Commission; 1941.

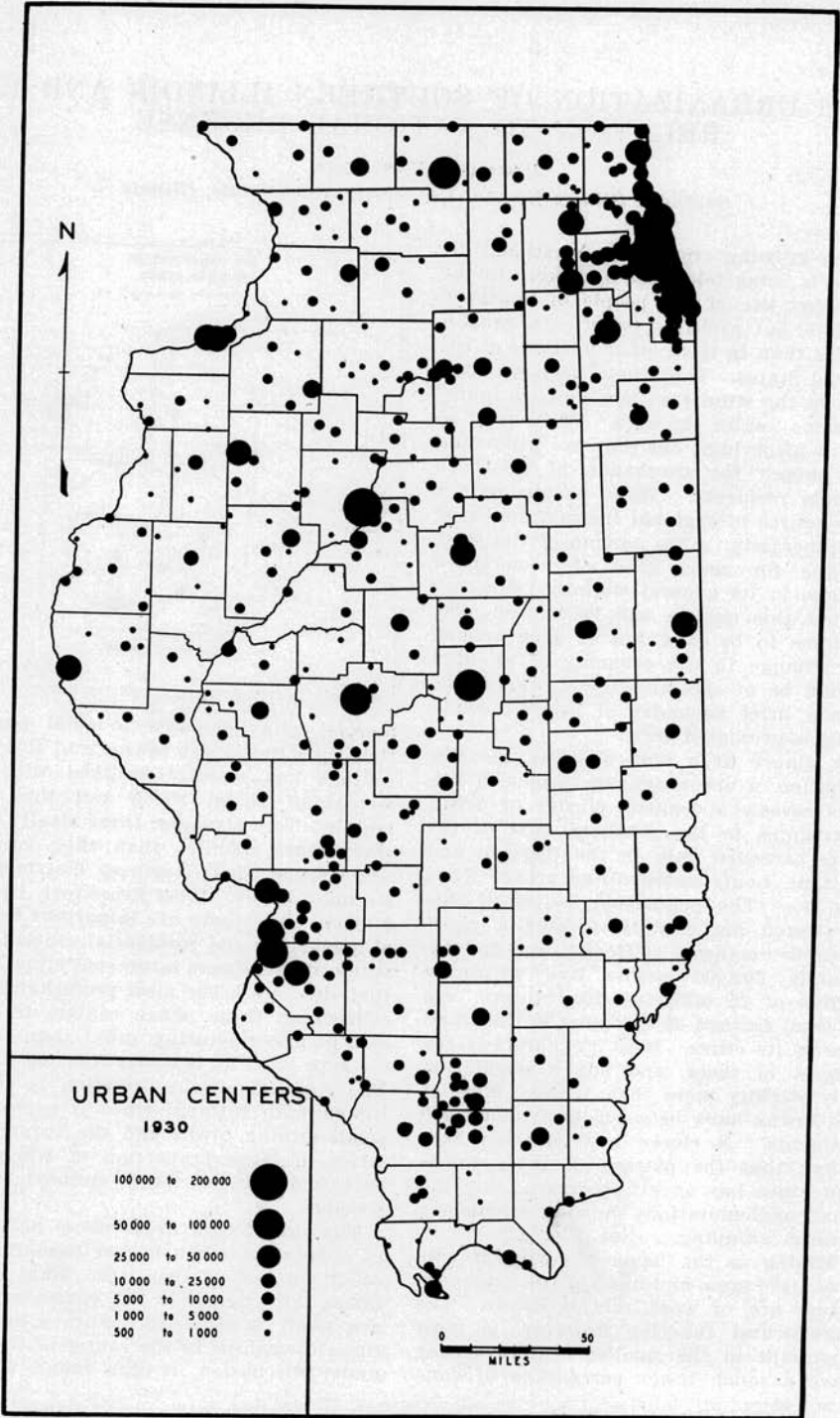


Fig. 1.

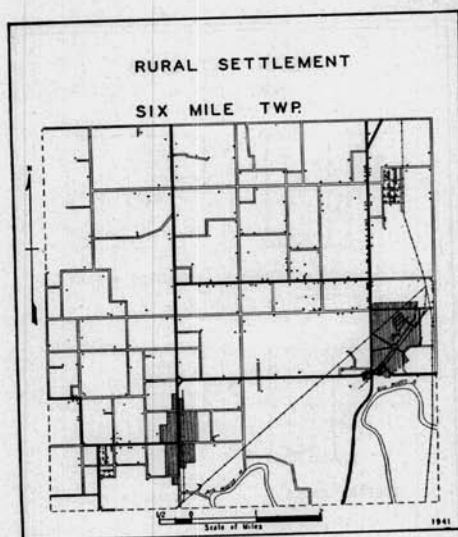


Fig. 3.

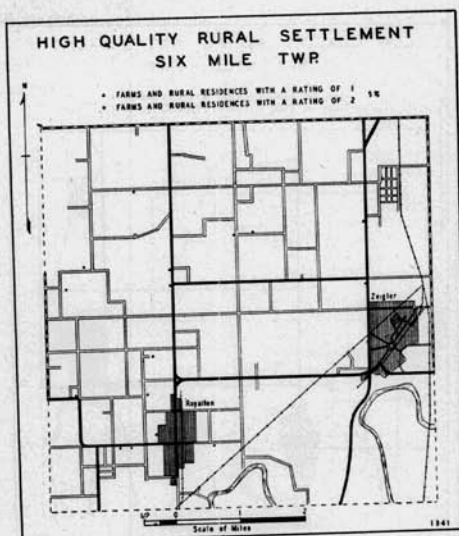


Fig. 4.

to 60 acres is approximately the average size of farms. Fig. 3 shows the rural settlement pattern of one of these townships. In this example, a fairly dense pattern is observed, particularly along the paved roads, although this township is the one having the least number of rural residences of the three. Most of the urban agglomerations have well developed urban-rural ecotones spread along the paved roads near their borders.

Any area so wholly dominated by one type of occupation must exhibit uniform qualities in its entire social and economic position. This fact is strikingly illustrated in this mining district. Unfortunately this uniformity conforms to a very low economic level. One of the best indicators of this regional poverty at the present time is the incidence of welfare relief. Williamson and Franklin counties are the two most important coal mining counties in Illinois. According to the January, 1941 report of the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, 44.4% of the people in Williamson County, and 35% of those in Franklin County were dependent upon welfare relief of some kind. The figure for Williamson County was the highest in the state.

In order to determine more precisely the distribution of low income families, and to make certain that this distribution was not concentrated in either the urban agglomerations or the rural districts, the writer undertook a quality

rating survey of the rural districts in three townships and one of the smaller urban communities. Each rural residence was plotted on a base map, and was given a quality rating of 1 to 5; 1 representing highly superior farms and residences, and 5 the lowest quality. The ratings were not based upon regional averages, but upon experience in such rating surveys made in widely separated areas in the United States. The average rating No. 3 therefore, is more of a national norm than a regional norm. It is not merely a housing survey, since many additional factors besides quality of houses are taken into consideration. Figs. 4 and 5 show the distribution of the quality ratings in Six Mile Township, Franklin County. The maps are self explanatory, and indicate the low standard of living in the rural areas. Fig. 6 shows a series of patterns in one of the smaller urban agglomerations. Note the correlation between welfare relief and the low quality ratings; also the extremely high incidence of relief, despite the fact that this small population center has an operating mine near its border. Most of these smaller centers today are not so fortunate. They are in pitiful economic condition for many reasons, among which are the following:

- (1) These centers had fewer mines, hence when many of the mines ceased operations, such towns were left with little or no income.

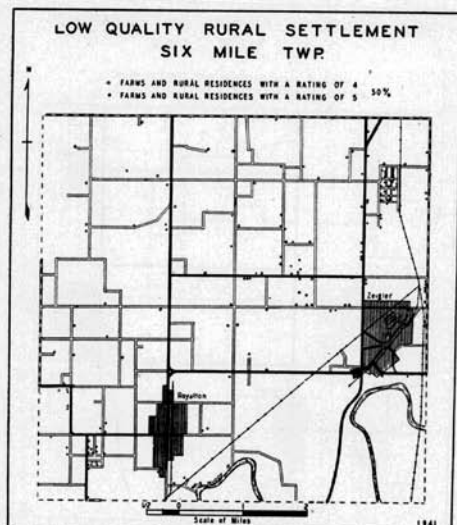


Fig. 5.

- (2) Economic opportunities are less varied than in the larger centers.
- (3) Welfare relief has tended to prevent migration.
- (4) While the labor supply in this area is highly mobile, the residence of labor is extremely stable. In other words, while the miner is willing to drive as much as 20 to 30 miles to work he is hesitant to move his family from the home community. (This may be the result of mixed blood lines, or a characteristic communal feeling.)

The low standard of living over the area is almost entirely the result of economic conditions in the coal mining industry. The increased use of machinery in mining operations, the competition of other producing areas, the bad reputation of local labor organizations (in turn the result of prejudiced newspaper propaganda), and strip mine operations are among many factors contributing to the local industrial depression. Scattered throughout the area are the skeletons of mining enterprises: giant smokestacks rising solemnly from the rubble of crumbled surface buildings, or merely the insidious march of weeds up the flanks of an old rockpile.

The mines that are operating are either very large, or very small, and few of the larger mines are still in operation. It is a significant fact that each evening, local radio broadcasting stations in a

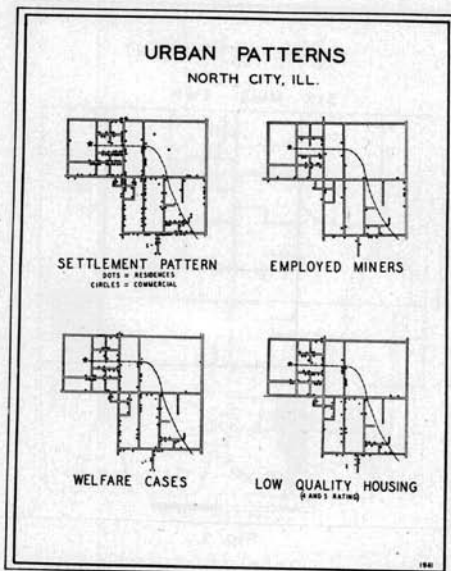


Fig. 6.

half minute or so between commercial programs announce the 10 or 12 Franklin County mines that will be operating the following day. The small 'scavenger' mines are newcomers to this area, as in other large coal mining regions. They cater mostly to local consumption, and represent the pitifully futile attempts of the region to pull itself out of a hole by its own bootstraps.

This is only a brief summary of the needs of the area for a new regional income; the evidence is conclusive. Now let us examine the possibilities for such new income. While agricultural practices and marketing in the area can be greatly improved, the region will never become another Corn Belt, and the urban clusters will still remain. Manufacturing seems to be the principal hope. What then can the area offer in the way of manufacturing advantages? Most assuredly, they are many and varied, and most of them can be summarized as follows:

- (1) A large supply of semi-skilled labor.
- (2) Cheap power—cheap enough to compete with any industrial area in the Middle West.
- (3) A central location with respect to Mid-West markets.
- (4) A wholly adequate network of transportation lines.
- (5) An adequate water supply, now

that the Federal Government Crab Orchard project is nearing completion.

The industries best suited for the area probably belong to the chemical group, such as coal distillates, and cellulose derivatives. Powder plants for the national defense program fall under this category, and in recognition of this fact, the U. S. Army has placed the area in a first priority grouping in the program for future plant establishment. In peacetime these munitions plants could be fairly easily altered to produce such products as plastics or synthetic fibers.

The reputation received as the result

of the Herrin strikes has been one of the most insidious factors preventing the influx of industry. The labor groups in Southern Illinois only want the chance to correct that reputation, and since that opportunity has not been offered by private industry, they are clamouring for Federal intervention.

Geographic factors of site and situation indicate that the abject poverty of the region is entirely unwarranted. The people of the area are praying that perhaps in a new type of service for their country, they may find a better and a happier future.