

SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRAIRIE PROVINCE OF ILLINOIS

BY

E. MURIEL POGGI

University of Illinois, Urbana.

INTRODUCTION

The Prairie Province as here used signifies approximately the area of early Wisconsin glaciation in Illinois (fig. 1). It was the early French settlers' "Grande Prairie," in which the native vegetation was mainly grass; forests covered less than 16 per cent of the area [1] (fig 2). In this paper the settlement of the area is discussed in four periods:

1. The period before the railroads, 1818-1850.
2. The period of the railroads and the Civil War, 1850-1870.
3. The transitional period, 1870-1893.
4. Recent changes and trends in the period, 1893-1930.

PERIOD BEFORE RAILROADS, 1818-1850

By 1820 Illinois had a population of more than 55,000, practically all within the forested areas where running water, fuel, and shelter were available. Owing to the lack of these necessities the prairies were looked upon as unfit for settlement. It was also common belief then that soil which supported trees must be superior to grassland.

About 1830 emigration set in from the northeastern states to Illinois. The opening of the Erie Canal gave impetus to this movement via the Great Lakes. The Illinois-Michigan Canal was not opened until 1848, but its influence was felt much earlier as towns were laid out along its course during construction. The population map for 1840 (fig. 3) shows that the sparsely settled Grande Prairie was encircled by denser population along the water courses. The discovery that prairie was good crop land aided immigration and by 1840 less than one twenty-fifth remained unsettled, the finest black soil of Champaign and Ford counties being the last to be opened up. Local supplies of timber largely controlled the settlement of these grasslands which

could not be sold unless several acres of forest land were included. The relative value of prairie and forest per acre was about one to seven [1].

In 1849 there was a rush of population away from the Wabash River settlements towards the center of the State which was to be traversed by the Illinois Central railroad. McLean County, owing to the abundance of undulatory timber land and its nearness to the older settlements of the Illinois Valley, was now rapidly taken up. The names Dry Grove, Blooming Grove (later Bloomington), and Funk's Grove

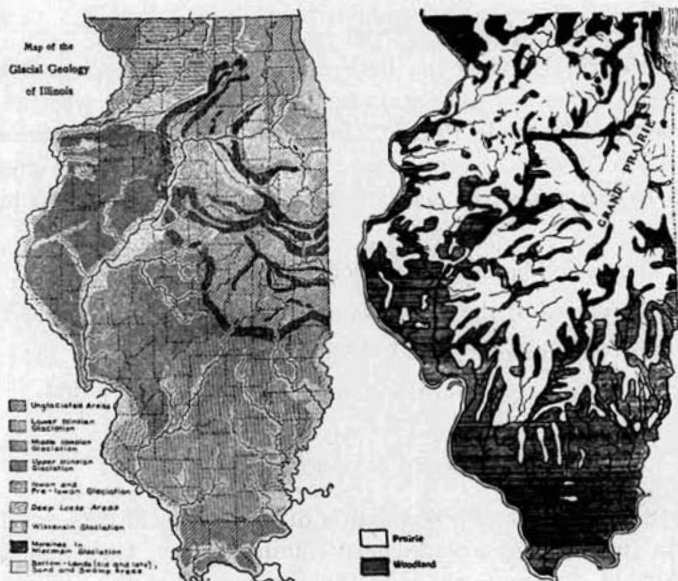


FIG. 1. (Left) Map of the glacial geology of Illinois according to Leverett. (After Sampson, H. C. An ecological survey of the prairie vegetation of Illinois, vol. 13, Ill. State Nat. Hist. Survey Bull. Art. 16, p. 530, 1921.)

FIG. 2 (Right) Original prairie and forest area in Illinois. (After Brendel & Barrows, vol. 13, Ill. State Nat. Hist. Survey Bull. Art. 16, p. 526, 1921.)

are significant. Few settlers ventured away from the timber before 1850 (fig. 3). Champaign County owing to its location in the heart of the prairie and consequent lack of timber did not attract settlers. Decatur, a mere hamlet in 1836, began to grow rapidly in the next decade due to the belief that a railroad was soon to be built through the town [2]. By 1850 the prairie section had become a dominantly rural area in which the great requirement was a market. Inland towns such as Bloomington could not furnish one because there were no lines

of transportation whereby the accumulated produce could be transferred to another large market for distribution. Not until the railroads from Chicago tapped this region was its future assured.

Previous to 1850 only beginnings of settlement were made in the Prairie Province. For several reasons the region was unattractive. First there was the lack of timber, secondly much of the land was swampy and required draining, third, although there were no trees to clear there was sod to break which was extremely tough and which

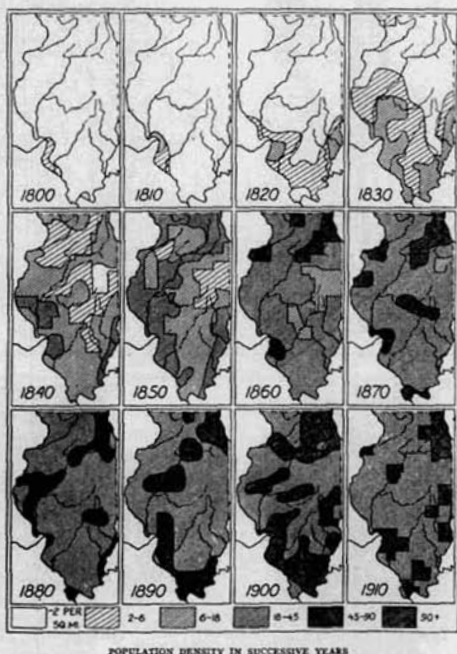


FIG. 3. Series of maps showing the steady and rapid growth of Illinois in population for more than a century. (After Ridgely, Douglas C., *Geography of Illinois*, p. 146, 1921.)

yielded but slowly to the plough. The greatest drawback, however, to settlement and development up to this time was the inaccessibility of the country owing to absence of navigable rivers and of roads, and consequent lack of markets [3].

PERIOD OF THE RAILROADS AND THE CIVIL WAR, 1850-1870

In 1850 Congress granted 2,500,000 acres of land to the State of Illinois, the proceeds to be used in the construction of a north-south transportation route across the State. This was the original Illinois

Central railroad. The main line traversed the western part of the prairie belt. The Chicago Branch gave direct connection between that city and the mouth of Ohio River, crossing the prairies on the divide between the Wabash and the Illinois. Thus the Illinois Central as completed in 1856, contributed two lines of communication across this

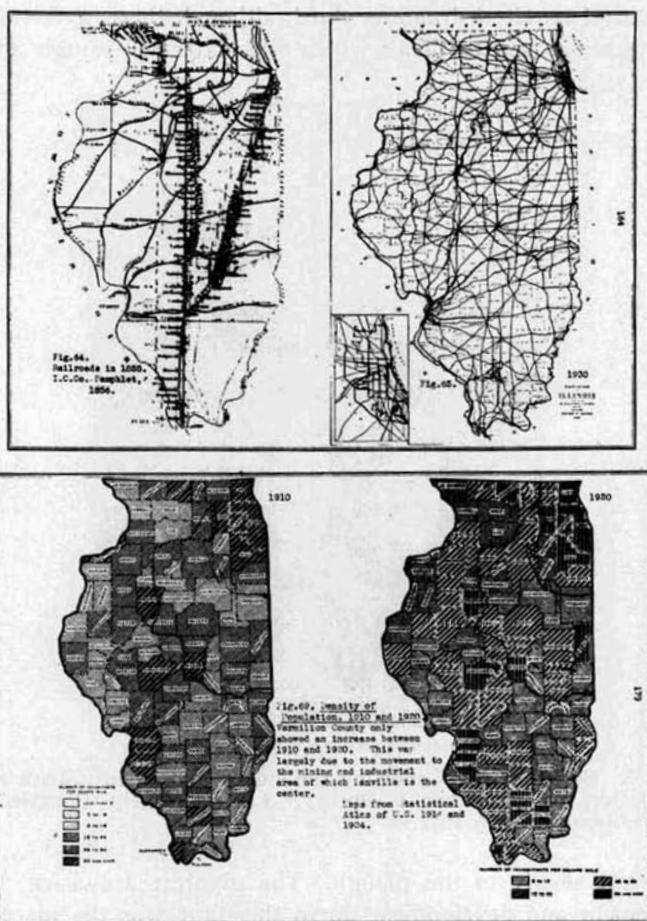


FIG. 4. (Above) Railroads in Illinois in 1855 and 1930.
 FIG. 5. (Below) Density of population in 1910 and 1920.

section of the State. The Chicago and Alton, the Wabash, St. Louis and Pacific were also built at this time. Besides the railroads, the Illinois and Michigan Canal was completed in 1848 which provided another route. A transportation system with a primary commercial center at Chicago was thus established (fig. 4).

The Illinois Central did everything in its power to encourage immigration and the purchase of land. In 1855 the prices ranged from \$5.00 to \$25.00 an acre, "according to the location, quality and distance from the station." This was land which the United States government had offered for years without purchasers at from 62½ cents to \$1.25 per acre [4]. Although of great fertility it had been practically valueless owing to lack of transportation facilities.

By 1860 Illinois had become the center of the agricultural life of the nation. During the Civil War the demand for food-stuffs for the Union armies, together with poor European harvests in that period served to stimulate prices. There was a withdrawal of a quarter of a million workers mainly from the farms of the State to join the Union forces. Men were a rare sight in the fields, women, children and negro "contraband" doing the work [5]. The use of farm machinery increased greatly. Because of the level topography, the prairie counties especially, came to be exploited by machinery. In Champaign County the value of farm machinery increased from \$25,000 in 1850 to more than \$600,000 in 1870. With the aid of this machinery the Illinois farmer in spite of large enlistments during the Civil War, increased his production of food sufficiently to meet the enormous demands of the eastern states during the decade 1860-1870.

The period from 1850-1870 was remarkable for the advance made in settlement and development in the Prairie Province. As a result of the railroads being built across the region the entire prairie, very sparsely settled in 1850, became in a decade a highly cultivated and productive part of the State. The year 1855 marked the close of steamboat supremacy in the Illinois valley. The early settler faced the river, from now on he faced the railroad. Timberland became relatively less important, while the open prairie came to be appreciated at its real value. The problem of the prairie had been solved, and almost every acre of what had hitherto been considered a useless section of the State was now utilized.

THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD, 1870 TO 1893

During this period the population continued to increase, but at a slower rate. In the decade 1850 to 1860 the rate of increase was 101.1 per cent. During the twenty years 1870 to 1890 it was only 22.7 per cent [6]. By 1870 the Prairie Province everywhere had a population density of more than 18 to the square mile, except in the undrained marshland of the northeast. (Fig. 3.)

In 1860 the transition in this section, from the "self sufficing" stage, where the farmer produced practically everything he needed, to commercial agriculture where he specialized on a money crop, and bought his supplies, had been accomplished [7].

Until 1870 Illinois was primarily an agricultural State. Trade and manufactures were so dependent upon agriculture that their growth only served to accentuate its importance. In the period 1870 to 1890 the State rose to a high place of productivity in the fields of mining and manufacture in addition to agriculture. The importance of the latter cannot be gauged by the number of persons engaged in it, as the figures would lead to the conclusion that it was a declining rather than an expanding industry. The explanation lies in the fact that there was a transference during this period from the household to the factory.

The chief cereal crops in 1875 were corn, wheat, oats, and barley, in the order given. By 1890 the order was corn, oats, wheat, and barley. The wheat crop showed the greatest loss and was largely replaced by oats which were well fitted for production in a rapidly developing region. These two crops were utilized on the spot in feeding livestock, or in the production of prepared foods. The distribution of corn throughout the State during this period shows that the Province contributed the bulk of the supply. Sangamon County was the center of the Corn Belt in 1869, by 1879 it had shifted to McLean and by 1894 Champaign was the leading county, and the tendency to concentrate upon corn production in this section was very evident.

The early failure to utilize the mineral resources was due to the geologic structure and to the lack of transportation. In the central portion of the State the Coal Measures lie in a shallow syncline thickly covered with drift. Transportation of a bulky commodity like coal, over any great distance was impossible except by water, hence the most important mines and their markets were confined to the vicinity of streams during the pre-railroad period [8].

Coal was first mined on a commercial basis in the Prairie Province in Vermilion County in 1866. In the decade 1860-1870, the greatest growth among the 12 chief cities was made by Danville, 191.1 per cent, which illustrates the importance of this development. Vermilion was among the 5 leading counties for coal production in 1880, and has been among the first ten ever since. This county, however, is the only one in the Prairie Province in which mining is a major industry.

The changes during this period, though not as spectacular as those of the previous one, were none the less lasting in their influence. Increased agricultural efficiency, the beginnings of the manufacture of agricultural products and the rise of mining centers make it apparent

that this was a transitional period during which adjustments were being made preparatory to the State's great advance in industrialism which materially affected the population trends in the Prairie Province.

RECENT CHANGES AND TRENDS, 1893-1930

The most striking change in the distribution of population during the last 40 years has been the growth of the urban centers, which have absorbed most of the new comers and caused a decrease in the rural population in some counties (figs. 5 and 6). Statistics show, however, that during the decades 1890-1910, the apparently urbanization of the population proceeded rather from the extraordinary growth of

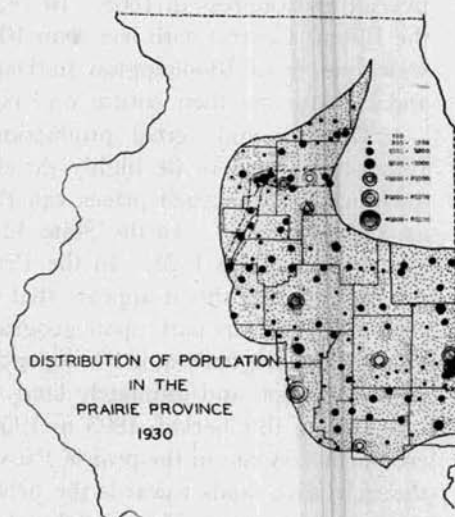
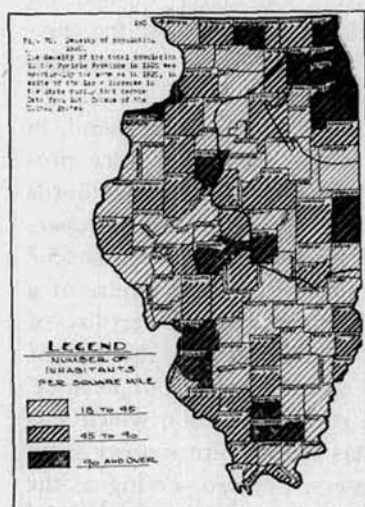


FIG. 6. (Left) Density of population in Illinois in 1930. (Compiled from figures in 15th Census of the United States, 1930.)

FIG. 7. (Right) Distribution of population in Illinois' Prairie Province in 1930.

Chicago than from a movement from the farms to the cities of the State as a whole. This was not the case in the latter decades, as the 1930 statistics show a marked increase in most of the urban centers. In the State there has been an increase in the average density per square mile, from 115.7 in 1920 to 136.2 in 1930. The increase in the Prairie Province has been much smaller, from 52.8 to 54. Even this is misleading as the only counties that show an increase in this section contain one or more cities which only emphasizes the fact that the urban centers have recently been drawing the population [9].

The map of the 1930 distribution of population in the Prairie Province (fig. 7) shows the rural type of settlement in this area. Apart from the towns of the Illinois Valley, which do not belong strictly to the Prairie Province and which have been treated elsewhere¹, there are only six urban centers with a population of over 10,000. Of these Decatur and Bloomington were on the original main line of the Illinois Central and later became important as railroad centers. Streator² and Mattoon developed as junctions on the east-west lines (fig. 4).

Danville's growth results largely from the coal and clay deposits. The importance of Champaign and Urbana is due to the location of the State University in the latter town, the site having been donated by Act of Congress in 1865. In 1854 Urbana was merely a depot on the Illinois Central with less than 100 dwellings [10]. Later the east-west line from Bloomington to Danville passed through Champaign and Urbana and their future was assured.

Tenancy and cereal production seem to go hand in hand in Illinois and tend to be highly developed where the soil is very productive. Only in such places can the soil support absentee landlords as well as farmers. In the State 42 per cent of the farms were operated by tenants in 1925. In the Prairie Province the figure was 55.7 per cent. From this it appears that the nature of the land tenure of a region depends in part upon geographical conditions—the fertility of the soil and the nature of the topography—which influence the type of land utilization and ultimately land values and the amount of tenancy.

During this period, 1893 to 1930, the rural population which was established so late in the prairie Province has begun to turn away from the rich farm lands towards the urban centers, Chicago serving as the greatest "magnet". Human labor has been supplanted by mechanical power which enables the individual farmer to work a larger farm, increase his output and dispense with many workers. This man power set free gravitates to the cities where it is absorbed by expanding manufactures.

In less than 100 years this area has developed from a region considered unfit for settlement into one where agriculture is extensively yet scientifically carried on, and where industries based upon agriculture are already well established. With sufficient power and excellent transportation available it seems likely that the Province, while using increasing amounts of its own agricultural products, will still have a

¹ Barrows, H. H., *Geography of the Middle Illinois Valley*. State Geological Survey, Bull. 15, Urbana, Illinois. 1910.

² Glass making at Streator is of comparatively recent importance. It is an extension up the Illinois-Vermillion Valley of the Ottawa industry which is based upon the presence of St. Peter sandstone.

surplus for sale outside the State. Agriculture will not decrease in importance but it will not stand alone as it has done heretofore. Judging from the recent population changes and trends in industrial development, Chicago will probably continue to take both the produce and excess population of the Province but increased industrial development may be looked for in the cities within the area such as Decatur, Danville, and Bloomington, which, owing to favorable geographic conditions, had an early start along industrial lines.

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