

Small Towns, Railroads, and Ethnicity

John Fraser Hart

My interest in small towns and villages was sparked initially by the first postwar Big Ten Geography Faculty Field Camp at Gull Lake, Michigan, in 1961.¹ Our first two eminent theoretical geographers had published a paper asserting that “small towns, villages, and hamlets will continue to fade away,”² but when I examined the results of the 1960 Census of Population in preparation for the field camp, I realized that many small towns and villages obviously had never heard of central-place theory; they obdurately refused to fade away, and many persisted in gaining population, admittedly erratically, throughout the twentieth century.³

Subsequently, I spent many happy hours exploring the small towns and villages of Indiana and neighboring states in my attempt to figure out why these small central places refused to die, and I continued my efforts after 1967, when I moved from Indiana to the area in Minnesota that was part of the Louisiana Purchase. No welcome signs greeted me when I entered the Purchase, and I have never noticed any sign marking it. (The official marker is many miles to the south in the Louisiana Purchase State Park near Blackton, Arkansas.) Less than half of the eastern Minnesota state line follows the boundary of the Purchase, which actually bisects the main campus of the University of Minnesota. We walk across the boundary every day, but I wonder how many students, faculty members, or contemporary residents of the area can even tell you where it is. We simply take it for granted.

The very invisibility of the eastern boundary of the Louisiana Purchase in the Upper Midwest might actually be its greatest significance. The purchase had been accepted as part of the national domain for half a century before settlers began to move into the area. As late as 1851, the report of the Commissioner of the General Land Office on the progress of land survey classified the west bank of the Mississippi River, where Minneapolis was spawned at the Falls of St. Anthony, as “Indian Country” (Figure 1), but it was unquestionably part of the United States. No international boundary checked the seamless westward flow of the Ameri-

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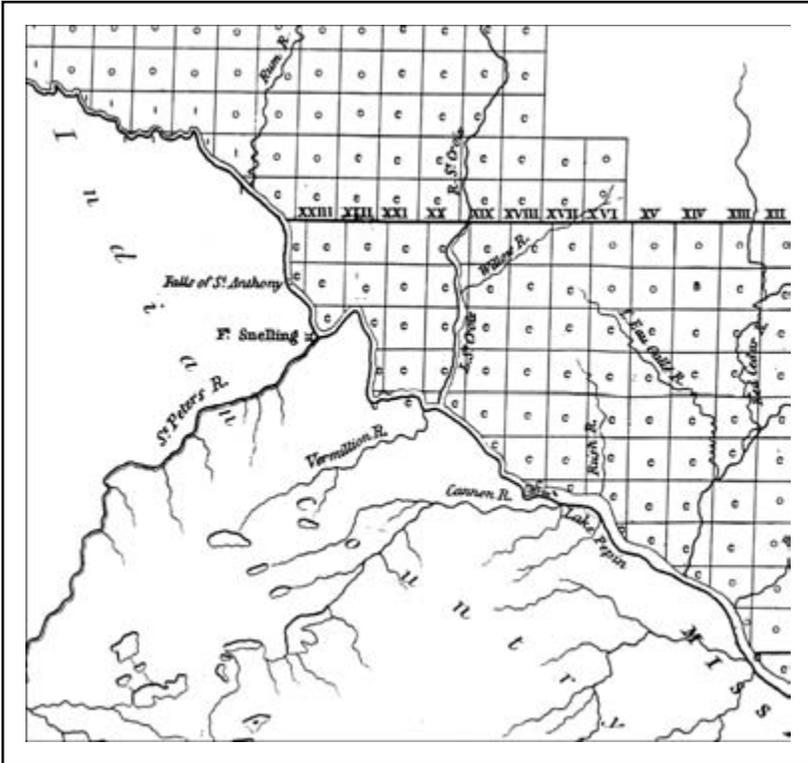


Figure 1. Excerpt from "A Sketch of the Public Surveys in Wisconsin and Territory of Minnesota," folded map dated 24 October 1851, in the *Report of the Commissioner of the General Land Office*, 26 November 1851, Thirty-Second Congress, First Session, Executive Document No. 1, 2 December 1851.

can people. The western Midwest differs because it was settled in a different technological era, not because it was part of the Louisiana Purchase. Think how much different it might have been if it had been on the far side of an international boundary.

The differences that I noted when I moved from Indiana to Minnesota were products of time and technology, not of an international boundary that had been erased half a century before the first settlers arrived. I discovered that I had to pay much greater attention to railroads and to ethnicity in Minnesota than in Indiana, because both were far more important. The railroad came as an afterthought to the small towns in Indiana, and generally in areas that were occupied before 1850. The railroad ran past the edge of town, not through it. The area along the tracks was the rough part of town, with bars, flophouses, and other unseemly establishments. That's where the police cars converged on Saturday night, to break up the brawl that was about to begin, if it had not already started.

The tough strip along the railroad tracks was known as "the levee," because that was the name of the rough area in riverfront towns. This

name was not as odd as it might seem, because the early settlers in the eastern Midwest were familiar with riverfront towns. They, or their forebears, had crossed the Ohio River on their trek westward; some, perhaps many, of them had traveled on the river for a considerable distance, and their principal contacts with the cities of the East were through the river towns.

The center of town in the eastern Midwest was “the square,” rather than Main Street. Even places too small to be able to claim the county courthouse had central squares, perhaps just in case.⁴ The square was a public park, often graced with a bandstand or a gazebo. Across the street on at least one side, and more in larger places, were the principal business establishments, with professional offices on the floors above, where merchants liked to play on words by boasting that they were “on the square.”

The compact towns founded in Michigan and Wisconsin by settlers from New England and New York were more likely to focus on a main street rather than on a central square. The hard-eyed Yankees and Yorkers saw their towns as business ventures, where they could make money by selling plots of land, and they were reluctant to lay out plots they could not sell, especially near the center of town, where they expected to charge the highest prices. They considered the church and the school just as important as the courthouse, and they relegated all three to peripheral plots that would be hard to sell.

The people who settled the eastern Midwest were native-born Americans of British or German ancestry, and foreign-born people were rare.⁵ I calculated the percentage of foreign-born people in the total population of each county at each census between 1850 and 1930, and mapped the greatest percentage of foreign-born people ever recorded in each county (Figure 2). Remarkably few counties in the southern Midwest ever had significant percentages of foreign-born people at any time. The principal exceptions were the gateway cities and the major river valleys, and even these areas rarely had as many as one in four.

In the southern Midwest, native-born Americans slowly pushed the frontier westward. In pre-railroad days travel overland was slow and arduous, river travel was less arduous but equally slow, and settlers moved no farther than they had to. The children of one frontier, when they came of age, leapfrogged to the new frontier that was two to three decades and 200 to 300 miles to the west. The children of Ohio, for example, settled Illinois, and the children of Illinois settled Kansas and Nebraska.

I mapped the westward movement of the frontier and the spread of settlement by mapping the census year in which each county first attained a minimum population density.⁶ Two persons per square mile, which Turner used, is much too low. I postulate that an area was not effectively occupied agriculturally until it had a density of sixteen persons per square mile, which is another way of saying that it had four 160-acre farms with a family of four persons on each farm.

I have singled out the areas that were occupied between 1850 and 1860 for two reasons (Figure 3). First, large-scale railroad construction

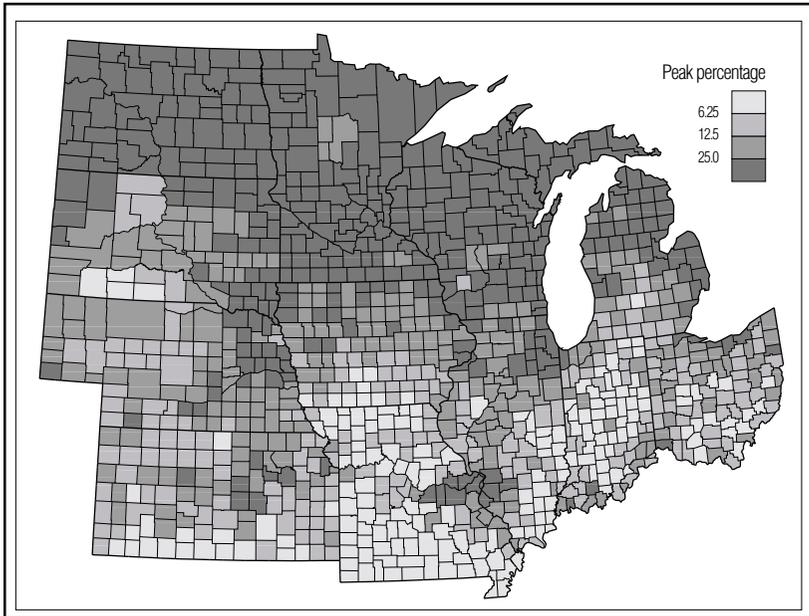


Figure 2. The greatest percentage of foreign-born people ever recorded in each Midwestern county at any census between 1850 and 1930. Foreign-born people have been far more important in the northern and western parts of the Midwest than in the eastern and southern parts.

was just starting to gain momentum in the 1850s, and the railroads were beginning to play a major role in the nature and spread of settlement. They were built after the settlement of the areas that were fully occupied by 1850; they might have influenced the settlement of some of the areas that were occupied between 1850 and 1860; and they definitely preceded, directed, and even determined the settlement of the areas that had not been fully occupied by 1860.

Second, the occupation line of 1860 probably was the eastern edge of the area where land was available for free homesteading under the provision of the Homestead Act of 1862, because settlers had already purchased most of the land in the fully occupied areas east of this line. It is little more than a historical curiosity that the area of fully effective occupation had barely surged across the Mississippi River by the time of the Civil War, and the Louisiana Purchase lands west of the river were the only part of the Middle West that was opened up by railroads and by homesteaders.

Minnesota and most of western Iowa were products of the railroads because railroad construction made these areas available for settlement and railroad companies founded the towns. Unlike the towns farther east, which were planned and developed by individuals, the towns in these new areas were laid out at regular intervals along their lines by the railroad companies, which needed towns to generate traffic. They claimed the rights and rewards of platting and selling lots in their towns.

The tracks were the focus of the railroad town. The orthogonal grid of streets was oriented to the tracks rather than to the compass, and the principal businesses were either on the street that faced the tracks or on Main Street, which ran at right angles to them. The idea of a “Main Street running east and west, a business thoroughfare aligned with the axis of national development . . . between the frontier to the west and the cosmopolitan seaports to the east”⁷⁷ is one of those fine romantic figures of speech that withers under close scrutiny. For example, “the original Main Street” in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, which was canonized in the eponymous novel by Sinclair Lewis, actually runs straight north and south, at right angles to the east-west railroad tracks.

Some of the least valuable plots of land, at the far end of Main Street from the tracks, and at the corners of the town, were earmarked for public buildings, such as the courthouse, the schoolhouse, and churches. The intervening lots were sold for residences. If the town grew beyond its original plat, the new sections often were laid out according to the compass, with some awkward street intersections where the two plats met.

The part of town “on the other side of the tracks,” if it developed at all, was isolated physically as well as socially. Today the tracks are rusting and overgrown with weeds. It is difficult for anyone bumping across them

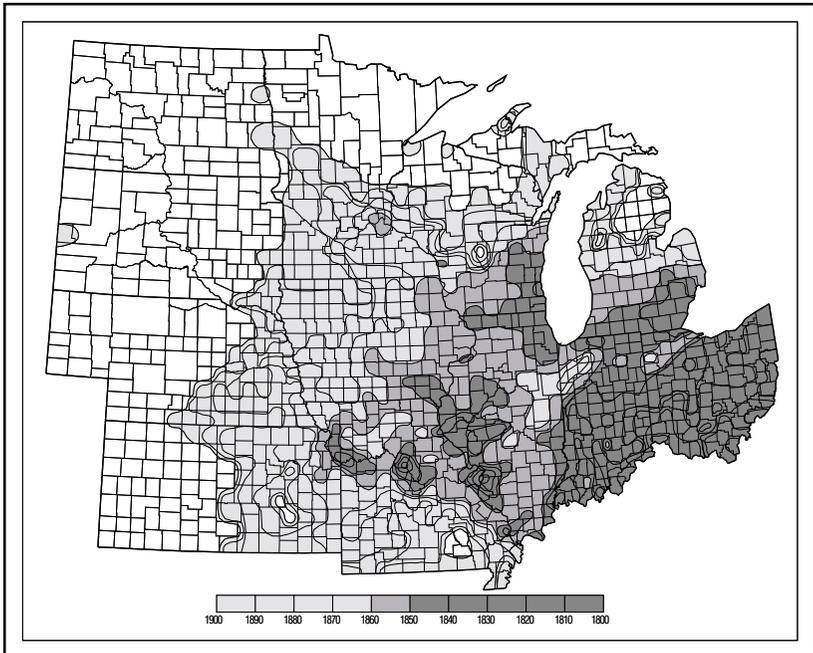


Figure 3. Date of occupancy, as measured by population density of sixteen persons or more per square mile. The areas occupied after 1860 were strongly influenced by the railroad, the areas occupied between 1850 and 1860 might have been influenced by the railroad, and the areas occupied before 1850 were in the pre-railroad days.

now to conceive of the heavy volume of traffic they once carried, and what an effective barrier they were between the two sides of town.

The newly constructed railroads spared intending settlers the struggle of leapfrogging slowly westward, because now they could travel directly from their homes in Europe to the U.S. and then to the North American frontier. Before the railroad era, the trek to the frontier had been long and slow—by water or by wagon on roads that ranged from inferior to nonexistent—and before 1860 most of the settlers on the frontier were native-born Americans.

After 1860, the new railroads in Europe enabled emigrants to travel easily to the port of departure, and in the U.S. the railroads enabled immigrants to travel quickly and directly from the port of entry to the frontier. The railroads actively encouraged and recruited immigrants in order to sell the large grants of land they had been given by the federal government to encourage construction.

At some census between 1850 and 1930, at least one-fourth of the population of nearly every county in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin was foreign-born, in sharp contrast to Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio (Figure 2). In a handful of counties, foreign-born people actually comprised a majority of the population at least once. Many of these people were Canadians of American ancestry, part of the great migration stream of lumberjacks from the St. Lawrence Valley.⁸ Many of their settlements were no more than temporary encampments that they abandoned when the surrounding area had been logged off.

Most of the foreign-born people who migrated to the agricultural areas of the Upper Midwest were handicapped by their limited command of English, and they found jobs as farmers or laborers. These foreign-born immigrants settled much of the countryside, but the small towns were the domain of flinty Yankee traders, whose knowledge of the English language enabled them to make and maintain commercial ties with jobbers in eastern cities. They were a greedy and rapacious lot who had come west to make their fortunes, and the country people properly suspected many of them of sharp dealing. Small towns also had employment for prim spinster schoolmarms from New England, who did their best to drill proper Yankee values into the thick heads of their charges.

A social chasm of deep distrust separated the Yankees in the small town and the immigrants in the countryside. In time the children and grandchildren of immigrants moved into the towns and took over some of their businesses, but many farm youths headed directly for the metropolis rather than moving to the local small towns, and small towns still remain alien places for many countryside people.

Before World War I, immigrants were under great and necessary pressure to conform to American ways. The very survival of the young American republic as one nation was threatened by the enormous influx of people who spoke different languages, who worshipped at different churches,

who hailed from areas with different political and social traditions and institutions. The newcomers had to be subjected to the full weight of social pressure, including ridicule and scorn, to force them to integrate into society and to become “good Americans.” The young republic survived and became a single nation without divisive minority stresses largely because it was intolerant of differences and forced all immigrants to become good American citizens.

The “stubborn” Germans, who were one of the earliest immigrant groups, were also one of the last groups to lose their ethnic identity and become Americanized. The tensions between pro- and anti-German groups during World War I are legendary, and Professor Carl Sauer once told me that his decision to move from Ann Arbor to Berkeley was influenced by the persistent jingoistic attacks he had suffered from a member of the Michigan faculty. As late as 1941 I can remember Americans of German ancestry who argued vehemently that we should get into the war on Hitler’s side to fight the British, but the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor quickly put an end to that idea.

Today in the Upper Midwest, ethnicity has lost whatever perjorative connotations it might once have had, and it is little more than a convenient offhand descriptor of people, places, and things, such as “Oh, he’s a Norwegian,” or “That’s a German town.” People accept their ethnicity as a fact, and they are not belligerent or defensive about it. The mature republic can afford the luxury of cultural pluralism, and it can tolerate, even encourage, an upsurge of interest in ethnic heritage.

The first generation of immigrants was forced to conform. Their children were eager to conform, because conformity was the key to economic success. Later generations are now so well assimilated that they can be permitted and encouraged to seek out and savor the best of their roots in the old country.

The horizon does have a potential problem. Many counties in western Minnesota and the Dakotas are “enjoying” natural decrease of population because the number of deaths each year is greater than the number of births. If they wish to maintain their population, these counties will have to recruit new immigrants, just as they have done in years gone by. This time the immigrants hail from Latin America and Asia; their command of the English language is modest, and already there are signs that they may be testing the tolerance of the people of small towns in the Upper Midwest.¹⁰

Postscript

Some of the older immigrant groups are now secure enough to joke about their ethnicity. In the spring of 2001, Minnesota had a Republican House, a Democratic Senate, and an Independent governor, whose inability to agree on a budget threatened a shutdown of state government.

On June 21, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* published an article describing the similarities of the leaders of the House and Senate:

“With their similar backgrounds, they understand each other and can communicate, insofar as any Norwegian can communicate, which may be the problem,” said former House Speaker Dee Long, who is of Swedish descent.

Duane Benson, a former Republican Senate minority leader, said: “Ever watch a Norwegian build a fence? They will make that thing right, if it takes them forever.”

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Cf. Preston E. James and Cotton Mather, “The Role of Periodic Field Conferences in the Development of Geographical Ideas in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 67 (1977): 446-61.
2. Brian J.L. Berry and William L. Garrison, “Cities and Freeways,” *Landscape* 10:1 (1961): 20-24; quotation on page 24.
3. John Fraser Hart and Neil E. Salisbury, “Population Change in Middle Western Villages: A Statistical Approach,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55 (1965): 140-60.
4. Edward T. Price, “The Central Courthouse Square in the American County Seat,” *Geographical Review* 58 (1968): 29-60.
5. John C. Hudson, “Yankeeland in the Middle West,” *Journal of Geography* 85 (1986): 195-200; idem, “North American Origins of Middlewestern Frontier Populations,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78 (1988): 395-413.
6. John Fraser Hart, “The Spread of the Frontier and the Growth of Population,” in H.J. Walker and W.G. Haag, eds., *Man and Cultural Heritage: Papers in Honor of Fred B. Kniffen*, Geoscience and Man 5 (Baton Rouge: Geoscience Publications, Louisiana State University Department of Geography and Anthropology, 1974): 73-81; idem, “Facets of the Geography of Population in the Midwest,” *Journal of Geography* 85 (1986): 201-11.
7. D.W. Meinig, “Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealizations of American Communities,” in D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 164-92; quotation on page 167.
8. John C. Hudson, “Cultural Geography and the Upper Great Lakes Region,” *Cultural Geography* 5 (1984): 19-32.
9. In this day and age, everyone knows that even mildly critical comments about the members of any other group are socially unacceptable, but once I had gained their confidence, many of my quiet conversations with people in small towns have revealed their deep ambivalence about their newcomer neighbors. Some opposition to new large-scale livestock operations is tinged with more than a whiff of racism; Chris Mayda, “Passion on the Plains: Pigs on the Panhandle,” unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1998. Some of the problems of Hmong immigrants in a small town in southwestern Minnesota are described in Chao Xiong, “In Walnut Grove: A Little Diversity on the Prairie,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), 28 July 2002: A1 and A16.