

ITAPACÍ, BRAZIL—A FRONTIER TOWN

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The town of Itapací, located near the heart of Brazil in the state of Goiás, is the product of an advancing agricultural frontier. At the time of the writer's field study,¹ the town had been in existence only 12 years, yet it contained more than 1,000 inhabitants and over 200 houses and other structures. The purpose of this paper is to describe the town on its site and the function of the town with reference to the region in which it is situated, in order to give an understanding of the conditions that have fostered its development and rapid growth.

European occupancy in southern Goiás has passed through two stages and is presently entering a third. The first, the mining period, was based on the exploitation of gold and diamonds. The second, the grazing period, was based on the raising of cattle for hides and meat. The latest phase is the rise of commercial agriculture, an activity which dominates grazing in some parts of the area but is only beginning to compete with it in other sections. With each stage of occupancy, new towns have developed and existing towns have disappeared, changed their functions, or adjusted to new ones, in order to survive.

The development and growth of Itapací is a response to the latest stage of occupancy—the rise of commercial agriculture. Before ex-

aming the region whose recent developments have made it possible for Itapací to become a town, let us examine the historical background of this new settlement. On September 11, 1934, two *fazendeiros* settled on the banks of the Rio Sao Patricinho, a small headwater stream of the great Rio Tocantins. As other settlers came to the area, the two farmers² sold lots and the town was developed in a small clearing located in the midst of a great forest called the Mato Grosso de Goiás. The clearing provided a site where buildings could be erected with a minimum of effort, yet the semideciduous forest and a stream providing an abundance of water were near at hand. The proximity of the forest was important as a source of building materials and firewood, but even more important, so far as most Brazilians are concerned, is the fact that the *mato* (forest) soils are considered more productive than *cerrado* (tree savanna) or *campo* (grassland) soils.³ The settlement grew rapidly; in 1939 it became a *distrito* (township) seat and in 1945 it was elevated to the political position of *município* seat⁴—the equivalent of our county seat.

Itapací became the political, commercial, and cultural center for the *município* at the expense of old Pilar,

² Augusto Alves Rego and Abdias da Silva.

³ Leo Waibel, "Vegetation and land use in the Planalto Central of Brazil," *Geographical Review*, vol. 38 (October 1948), p. 550.

⁴ Onildo de Castro, manager, Office of Instituto Brasileiro de Estatística, Itapací, prepared this and other material from the official records of his office.

¹ October 22-24, 1948.

a decadent gold mining town founded in 1741 during the mining period. The Papuan gold mines at Pilar permitted the town to flourish and support thousands of persons during the most productive period—the late part of the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth centuries.⁵ With the exhaustion of the mines, however, Pilar's population and importance shrank. Itacê, as it is called today, is virtually isolated and is only a tiny village where the ruins of deserted buildings are prominent. It can be reached from Itapací only by a four or five hour horse ride over a sometimes precipitous trail that will not accommodate even an oxcart.

Although Itapací is the most advanced town in the *município*, it is nevertheless a very primitive place. One enters the town after crossing a wobbly wooden bridge which spans the Rio Sao Patricinho. Beyond the bridge on the right bank of the stream, the road enters the principal street of the town—an open area 120 feet wide. This wide space has been left in anticipation of future growth, but little has been done to improve it, as is evidenced by the gullies and weeds there. Only one-story buildings are to be found and most of those on the main street are Colonial in style, made of brick covered with plaster and capped by tiled roofs. Many of the town's 200-odd houses, especially on the outskirts, are daub-and-wattle huts with thatch roofs. There is no electricity and no public water supply—only dug wells and the river. One area of the stream serves for washing clothes and another section is used by the male population for their baths. The pub-

lic bathing spot is about 150 yards south of the town's only lodging house; a small *pensao* containing six small bedrooms and no pretentious facilities. A single washpan, for example, is used by all the guests and ablutions are performed in the room that also serves as the dining room and lounge.

As figure 1 shows, the street pattern of Itapací is quite simple. In addition to the aforementioned wide main street there are seven streets crossing at right angles to it. None of the streets are paved, but the main street and some of the side streets are improved by a gravelly earth mixture. The map is generalized to such an extent that it fails to reveal the irregularity of the street edges and the somewhat haphazard appearance of the building distribution. South of the main street there is a parallel street not shown on the map. It appears more like a cart trail than a street. There are some fifty houses along this street and a few more are to be found in the fields south of it. The latter are reached by footpaths only.

In addition to the houses there are 20 commercial establishments, 3 dentists, 3 lawyers, 2 barbers, a post office, a jail, a Catholic church and school, and a small roofing tile factory. At the time of the field survey an Evangelical missionary and his wife were completing another school. Compared to Anápolis, a railhead city of 16,000 population located 250 kilometers to the south, the standards and degree of complexity of all services and commercial enterprises are greatly inferior in Itapací. Practically all Itapací residents involved in business or the services devote

⁵ *Ibid.*

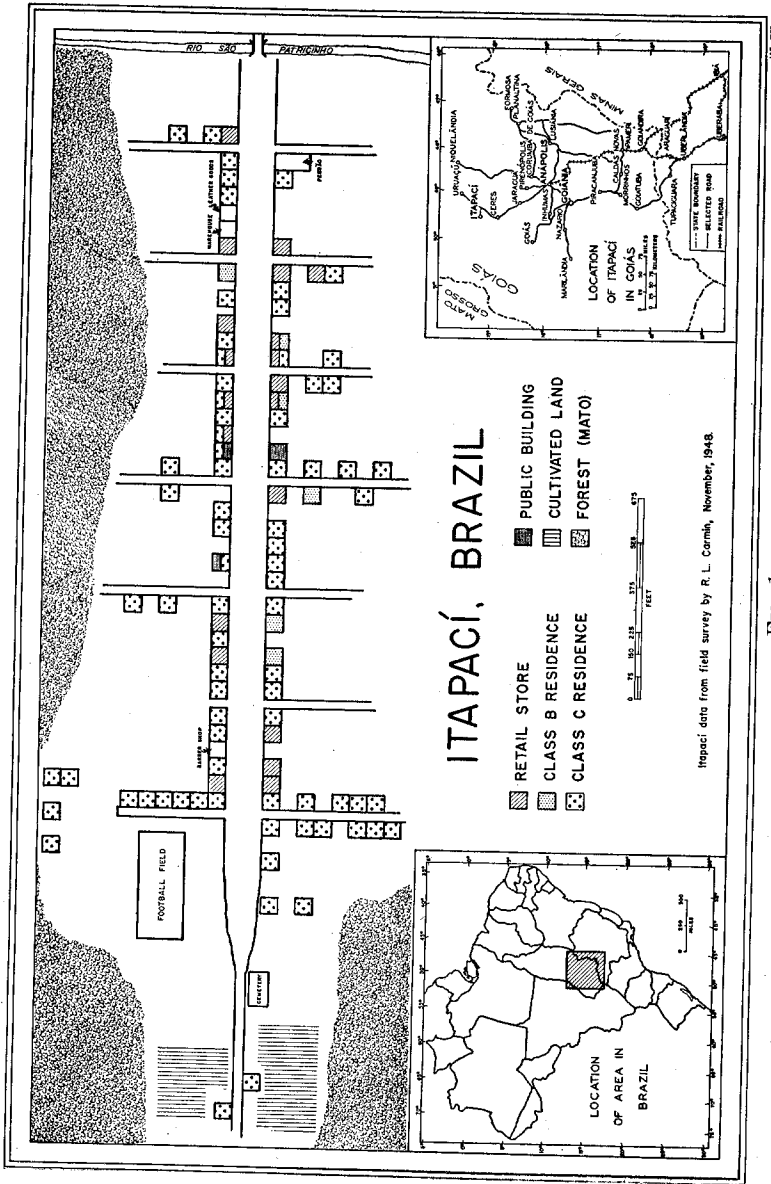


FIG. 1.

only part of their time to their principal activity. One man makes shoes, saddles, and other leather goods; he also sells these products and represents the Federal government as the local tax collector. Another man operates a small retail store and as a sideline buys rice, beans, and corn on a wholesale basis and sells them to an Anápolis trucker that makes semiweekly trips to the town. In all cases the retail stores are similar to the "general store" of the United States in that they sell a broad variety of merchandise. In a typical Itapací store the following items are offered for sale in a one-room establishment containing a single counter some 15 feet long: hoes, flashlight batteries and bulbs, men's hats, dry goods, needles and thread, bottled beer, cigarettes, matches, soap, cakes, coffee (sold by the cup), knives, saddles, spurs, and many other items.

The professional services also are offered on a part-time basis. The leaders of the two religious faiths represented in the town teach school in addition to fulfilling their regular church duties. The lawyers have positions in the *município* offices and handle what appear to be very limited law practices. In short, the 1,000 or so persons in the town and the sparsity of population in Itapací's trade area (in 1946 the entire *município* of 18,179 square kilometers contained only 9,159 persons)⁶ inhibits specialization in service or trade activities.

Itapací is, as we see from the foregoing, a primitive form of urban settlement. One can stand on the main street and see a wall of virgin forest

at the end of side streets. At the western edge of town there are newly cleared fields in which corn, beans, manioc, and rice are growing in the midst of half-burned logs and stumps. With this setting in mind one may well ask what conditions have caused the town's inhabitants to settle here. What promise of reward has been offered in exchange for the primitive, pioneer way of life lived by the people of Itapací and its trade area? To discover the answer one must examine a broad region of which Itapací is an outpost of urban settlement.

A combination of many factors—including a growing national population with a resultant greater demand for farm products, a drop in production on depleted land in old settled areas, and a focus of attention on south central Goiás as an area of promising agricultural value—all have given rise to a rapid increase in the acreage devoted to crops in Goiás.⁷ Much of Brazil's central plateau is covered by *campo cerrado* (savanna) vegetation, but some parts contain *mato*, a semideciduous forest cover.⁸ In general, Brazilians consider the *mato* soils excellent for crops such as coffee, corn, upland rice, cotton, and beans, but they feel that the *cerrado* soils can be used only as pasture land or at best be devoted to less exacting plants such as pineapples.⁹ Thus, to oversimplify the situation, places such as Itapací, which lie within the Mato Grosso de Goiás, have in recent years attracted growing numbers of pio-

⁶ Boletim Estatístico, vol. 2, no. 19 (Goiânia, Goiás, 1946), p. 3.

⁷ Robert L. Carmin, Anapolis, Brazil—regional capital of an agricultural frontier (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Chicago), chapter 3.

⁸ Waibel, *op. cit.*

⁹ Carmin, *op. cit.*

neers who clear the forest and plant crops. The extension of the Goiás Railroad (Estrado de Ferro de Goiás) to Anápolis in 1935 aided the movement of people and supplies into south Goiás and provided a means of transporting farm produce to markets nearer the coast.

In 1941 the Federal government created an agricultural colony (the Colônia Agrícola Nacional de Goiás), 140 kilometers north of Anápolis. In effect, the establishment of a colony within the Mato Grosso de Goiás served as a federal stamp of approval on the forest-covered lands. In addition to the attraction of "government approved" land, the improved transportation facilities that went hand in hand in the form of an all-weather highway to the Colônia from the railhead at Anápolis, stimulated an influx of settlement around and beyond the Colônia. At the time of the Itapaci field study the federal road had been completed through the Colônia and some 70 kilometers beyond it. Thus a combination of factors caused the forested lands around Itapaci to attract settlers, and an improvement in transport facilities made settlement there feasible. However, accessibility is still a handicap to Itapaci's growth because the only road to the town is a very poor single-lane route that turns westward from the federal road a few kilometers north of the Colônia. The rutted narrow road which bridges gullies by two hewn logs—one for each wheel—usually forces the bus and truck to go less than 5 miles per hour when they make their semiweekly run from Anápolis. During the dry season when the road is at its best these

vehicles require about 10 hours of uncomfortable travel to make the 250 kilometer trip. Although the road to Itapaci is poor, only oxcart and horse trails extend beyond the town, truly the end of the road for automotive vehicles.

I was impressed by the poor quality and small variety of food served at the only *pensao* in Itapaci. Inquiries led me to conclude that many of the farms in the area are too new to provide much more than subsistence crops for the owners. It requires time to clear the land of the heavy forest growth, and until enough area is available to produce a surplus above and beyond the needs of the inhabitants, there is little to sell. Once a week the town has a market day when some farmers come to sell fruits, vegetables, eggs, and a few chickens, but the amount sold is not great.

Itapaci lies within the trade area of Anápolis. In many respects the natural environment (climate, soils, vegetative cover, etc.) of Anápolis *Município* and Itapaci *Município* are very similar. However, Anápolis with its railroad and all-weather highway is better favored with respect to transportation. Also, for a variety of reasons, the recent era of commercial planting came earlier to Anápolis; hence more time has been available for clearing the forest and planting crops there. Statistics reflect the space-time differential between these two *municípios*. In 1946 the rural population density of Itapaci *Município* was less than half a person per square kilometer whereas it stood at 13 for Anápolis *Município*.¹⁰ Assuming the proportion of

¹⁰ Boletim Estatístico, *op. cit.*

arable land to total area is equal in the same two *municípios*, we find that 13 percent (30,010 hectares) of Anápolis *Município's* total land area is devoted to the nine crops which account for most of the state's farm production, whereas only a fraction of 1 percent (711 hectares) of the total area of Itapací *Município* is so used. The 1947 values of the nine crops in Anápolis and Itapací *Municípios* are Cr\$ 88,437,650 and Cr\$ 894,500, respectively. The per hectare value of the crops produced is Cr\$ 2,944 for Anápolis and only Cr\$ 1,258 for Itapací.¹¹ It is clear that the latter *município* is "backward," considering the proportion of land utilized for crops as well as the productivity per land unit.

By comparing the rural population with the value of farm crops for each *município*, a fair estimate of the agricultural productivity per person can be made. In 1947 the per capita production of the principal farm crops was Cr\$ 2,846 in Anápolis *Município* but only Cr\$ 112 in Itapací.

The pastures of Anápolis *Município* contained 90,500 head of cattle in 1945, but Itapací could count only

35,000, in spite of the fact that the latter has 8 times the area of the former.¹² At Cr\$ 670 per head,¹³ Itapací's cattle are worth nearly 26 times the 1947 harvest of principal farm crops. Thus, although grazing is of relatively great importance compared with crop production in Itapací *Município*, even cattle production is low because it had only 2 head per square kilometer compared to 39 for Anápolis. On the basis of value, the farm crops of Anápolis were worth about 1 3/10 times the value of its cattle.

In conclusion, therefore, all evidence points to the fact that the town of Itapací became within a dozen years a political, commercial, and cultural center of over 1,000 population, as a response to a rapidly expanding agricultural frontier. The fact that Itapací and its vicinal area is on the very outer fringe of this zone of pioneer settlement places space-time limitations on its growth and prosperity. An improvement in transportation facilities will give rise to a new concept of distance from market and source of supply. With time for development and improvement, Itapací and its trade area should continue to grow and prosper.

¹¹ Maria da Gloria Fleury, Head of Secção de Estatística Militar do Departamento Estadual de Estatística, Goiânia, Goiás, provided the author with agricultural production data, May 4, 1948.

¹² Boletim Estatístico, vol. III, no. 24 (Goiânia, 1947), p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. II, no. 22, p. 1.