

SUBURBANIZATION OF A RURAL TRADING CENTER

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The great variability of urban life in time and space is ample evidence that the kinds of cities we live in depend on many determinants, of which *function* is by no means the least important one. All urban settlements exist to serve one or more purposes. These may be economic, political, cultural, recreational, residential, or a combination of two or more of these.

Dormitory cities, essentially suburbs, are one of these distinct types. Their principal function is to provide living quarters, and they are located relatively near, in space or time, to the central city to which they are functionally related. The prestige and character of a particular residential suburb is dependent, generally, upon the political, economic, and social characteristics of its inhabitants.

Of late, small urban settlements, previously serving as rural service centers and located outside of standard metropolitan areas but relatively near large cities, have attracted the attention of geographers interested in urban phenomena. Generally, it has been assumed that the residents of these small rural service-centers work within the settlement or on farms immediately outside of it or that they are retired farmers or busi-

nessmen. For one reason or another, these former rural service-centers are becoming dormitory towns, and a large proportion of their population is no longer earning a livelihood within the center, but is commuting to work in nearby industrial cities. Such a settlement is Platteville in the unglaciated area of southwestern Wisconsin. This study was undertaken to discover reasons for the change in the primary function of this city from that of a rural service center to one of a residential suburb.

METHOD

Data on which the findings have been based were gathered by means of a stratified random sample drawn systematically, supplemented through personal interviews.

From field observations, it was judged reasonable that a 20% sample of the dwelling units of the entire city of Platteville would provide the necessary information. Dwelling units were selected as the best places at which to interview those residents of Platteville who make up the labor force. The sample was taken on August 15 and 29, 1955, and included 244 homes. On a randomly determined basis, the occupants of

every fifth dwelling unit were selected to be interviewed, beginning with the first dwelling unit on the southwest corner of a block and then going on to the sixth, eleventh and so on in counterclockwise manner around the block. If there were no response from the fifth dwelling unit, then it was arbitrarily decided that dwelling unit four would be taken. If there were still no response, then dwelling six would be included in the sample. The sample, therefore, was stratified to ensure coverage of the entire city and to include all laborers. It remained randomized to give adequate data for estimation of the parameter. In all, 230 employed persons were interviewed. Seven per cent of the total interviews were recorded as unsuccessful, no recalls being made.

Each interviewer was assigned to a particular segment of Platteville, and the following questions were asked: 1) where does each employed member of the dwelling unit work?; 2) what is the type of employment providing he or she works outside Platteville?; and 3) are there any retired people living in this dwelling unit providing no one living in the dwelling unit is working? Further questions included why people worked out of town, if they did, and how recently they had moved to Platteville, if they had not lived there all their life.

Personal interviews with businessmen of Platteville were also obtained.

RESULTS

From the data tabulated it has been estimated that 31.7% of the labor force of Platteville commutes

to work in Dubuque, Belmont, Cuba City, Dodgeville, Ellenboro, Lancaster, Tennyson, Waupam, or in Grant County generally. Those commuting to Dubuque form the largest group. Fifteen and eight-tenths per cent of the total who commute to work are travelling salesmen, and 9.7% are government workers.

It was also found that retired people lived in 17.6% of the dwelling units sampled. Considering the percentage who commute and those who are retired, the dormitory function of Platteville appears to involve approximately 50% of the adult population of the town.

The factors which account for the development of the dormitory function of Platteville were found to be four-fold: 1) transportation facilities; 2) job opportunities elsewhere; 3) tradition and family ties; and 4) other social conditions.

The recent development of all-year highways between Platteville and Dubuque and other towns and the increase in car ownership in Platteville were also found to be important factors in the decision to commute. Both decrease commuting time. In addition, several factories within Dubuque, in particular the John Deere Dubuque Tractor Works, now employ residents of Platteville.

Many commuters have lived in Platteville most of their lives. Their families are here and, because family living may be, or may be thought to be, more advantageous in a small community, many families continue to reside in one. Familism, the investment in the familial system of the society, was given by many as a reason why they lived in Platteville and commuted to work.

In addition, other social factors were found to be determinants in a worker's decision to live in Platteville. These include the small-town atmosphere, the personal contacts in contrast to the impersonal anonymity of living in a large industrial town, and the advantages of owning one's home. Entertainment in the form of television, radio, and easy access to the facilities in nearby larger cities were also indicated as being important. The isolation of the rural community the size of Platteville is no longer true. As a result, it has become attractive to those who do not care to live in the more crowded conditions in the larger industrial center of Dubuque.

CONCLUSIONS

This study showed that commuters

form approximately three-tenths of the total labor force in Platteville, Wisconsin. It may be assumed that the main reason for seeking employment outside of the town is the scarcity of jobs in Platteville itself. If new opportunities for employment arise in Platteville, part of the commuting population would be locally employed. But a goodly share of the workers would still commute. Rural service-centers, located relatively near large industrial centers, are proving attractive to the industrial worker who can afford to travel by automobile each day to work. Thus, it appears that commuters will continue to comprise a sizable proportion of the labor force of Platteville, and the present trend toward a dormitory residential function will change the character of a once small rural service-center.