
A CROSS-SECTION OF THE CENTRAL DIVISION OF ILLINOIS

JOHN H. GARLAND

University of Illinois, Urbana

The Central Division of Illinois is that portion of the state which lies between an east-west line from the Mississippi below the mouth of the Rock River to the great bend of the Illinois River to the state of Indiana, and an east-west line from the Mississippi at the mouth of the Illinois River to the Shelbyville moraine to the Indiana state line. This area, which is dominantly agricultural, contains the best grain lands in the state as well as some of the best land of the entire region known as the corn belt, of which this district and other parts of the state are a part.

Approximately at the center of the division is the largest city of the state which can be thought of as indigenous rather than a regional or extra regional center. At fairly regular intervals of about 50 miles are other indigenous centers with populations of less than 100,000. Transportation patterns radiate from each in all directions through the evenly spaced villages tying the entire division into one large agrarian web.

Three districts, the Eastern, Southwestern, and Western, constitute the major segmentation of the division, each of which consists of several sections; The Grand prairie, the Kankakee lowland, the Upper Illinois valley, and the Middle Illinois valley are the sections of the Eastern District; the Sangamon plain and the Lower Illinois valley are the sections of the Southwestern District; whereas the Galesburg prairie, the Upland forest, and the

Mississippi border (central segment) are the sections of the Western district. The Shelbyville moraine, and the Illinois and Mississippi valleys form the limits of the districts. The predominance of physical nomenclature is obvious and indicates the undesirability or difficulty of using cultural delimitations in an area of as complete and homogeneous occupation as that of the Central Division of Illinois. Thus, the quality of occupation and the desirability or lack thereof of the above areal patterns might become apparent by means of an east-west cross-section through the division.

Innumerable traverse lines could be run, each of which would demonstrate its own individuality as well as revealing the general quality of the district. The line selected follows highway Illinois 10 from the state line through Danville, Champaign-Urbana, to Clinton; U. S. 54 through Springfield to Jacksonville; and state route 104 to Quincy on the Mississippi. The first 80 miles crosses the Eastern District, the next 105 miles the Southwestern, and the last 50 the Western.

EASTERN DISTRICT

Vermilion, Champaign, Piatt, and DeWitt counties are crossed in the first segment of the traverse, the Grand prairie section. Because the traverse crosses the southern portion of the Eastern District, only the Grand prairie section is included. This is the Cash Grain type of farming area (as expressed by Case and

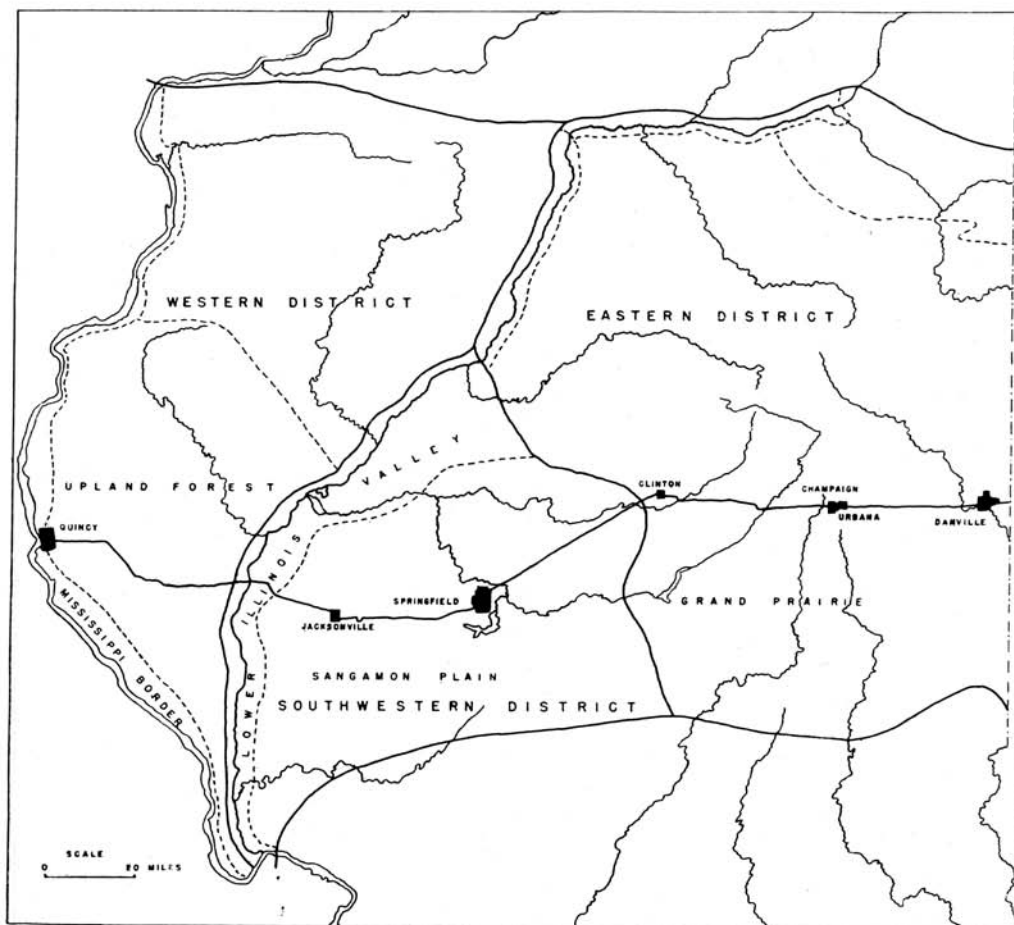


FIG. 1.—The Central Division of Illinois.

Meyers) which is associated with the prairie area of most recent glaciation—the area within the Shelbyville moraine. Farms here are large, ranging in size, according to the last census, from averages of 154 acres in Vermilion county to 210 in Piatt. As far as the eye can see, the cultivated fields of corn and small grains extend over the gently rolling surface of the deep black prairie soil. From Danville to Clinton the only natural interruption to the repetitious pattern of tilled fields and

well-spaced farmsteads is the wooded valley of the streams which flow outward from the approximate center of the Grand prairie. At Danville, the old strip mines and the valley of Middle Fork, the valley of Salt Fork at St. Joseph, the Sangamon valley near Lodge and the valley of Salt Creek near Clinton afford the major interruptions. That this is a wealthy area of commercial grain farming is apparent on all sides. Well-built farm houses, many of them of the square hip roofed

variety designed several decades ago to fit the continuousness of the prairie; a large barn (small, however, in comparison with those of the dairy zones) many of which are red in color; a king-size corn crib; and an enclosing border of trees reappear at regular intervals. Motorized equipment of all varieties is in evidence everywhere, monuments to the high standard of rural living, the ever-enlarging farm, the declining rural population, increasing farm mortgages and farm tenancy. It must be kept in mind that it requires rich land to support large mortgages and two families—the owner and tenant. With the exception of hogs and a few dairy cows on each farm, animals are notable by their absence. Champaign and Piatt counties have the highest crop values per acre on the entire traverse, whereas livestock values are lowest, being approximately one-quarter of the crops. Dairy values are insignificant.

Three of the four county seats (including Champaign and Urbana as a unit for general discussion only), and incidentally the largest urban centers in the four counties crossed, lie on the route of this traverse. Despite the inclusion of such incongruous features as coal mines and the state university, the largest urban centers are examples of major service centers of a productive agrarian countryside. Stripped to the absolute essentials are the little villages, each a prototype of the cash grain producing Grand prairie village. Each village possesses at least one grain elevator and cobb burner (a sign of waste or perhaps the extensive type of occupancy of this portion of the country,) a stack of grain doors for railway box cars, innumerable bins of the ever normal granary of pre-war depression days, and insignificant or lacking facilities for han-

dling livestock. Aside from the usual stores, farm implements, and automotive supplies point steadily at a community interest of extensive, mechanized, commercial grain farming—the present occupancy of the fertile Grand prairie.

SOUTHWESTERN DISTRICT

Crossing the Shelbyville moraine beyond Clinton (the moraine is here an inconspicuous feature of the landscape), the traverse continues for another 105 miles through Springfield and Jacksonville to the village of Chambersburg near the west bluffs of the lower Illinois Valley. This segment of the traverse, which crosses Logan, Sangamon, and Morgan counties passes through the Southwestern district which consists of two sections, the Sangamon plain and the Lower Illinois valley.

Although this district, like its neighbor to the east, is an important farming area with from 85-95 per cent of the total area in farms which range in average size from 158 to 191 acres, a distinctive personality prevails which clearly sets the district out. This area lies within both the Cash Grain and General Farming (*Types of Farming* by Case and Meyers). The eastern portion of the traverse, the 45 miles from Clinton to Springfield, passes through the Cash Grain area. There the farms are about as large and production per acre is about as high as it is in the Grand prairie. Despite the fact, however, that the village of Cornland is encountered half way between the old county seat of Mount Pulaski and Springfield, small grains, especially wheat, is much more important as well as pasture and livestock. In fact, live stock values have risen from one-quarter to one-third of the grain values per acre.

Beyond Springfield the average size of the farm decreases, the farmsteads appear to be much older than those on the Grand prairie, house types similar to those found in Ohio (there locally known as a Pennsylvania house) appear, and everywhere except in the wide alluvial trough of the Illinois River, livestock is more numerous. The value of total production per acre has fallen but live stock values have risen to about 50 per cent of the value of crops. As on the Grand prairie, dairying is unimportant except as a local service to the towns and villages. Forests are more numerous in this district, the entire western portion was originally forested as well as the Sangamon bottoms in this portion, and the black prairie soil of the recent Wisconsin drift has given way to the browns and yellows of the forest soil on the older Illinoian till, with here and there evidence of loess deposits. As in the Danville area of the Grand prairie, coal mines, here shaft mines, add an incongruous note to the agrarian scene.

Although dominantly agricultural, the political function (with its historical tradition as well as its agrarian service center nature) of Springfield leaves its stamp upon its locale—the Sangamon plain. Situated just east of the center of the Sangamon plain the State capitol is the focal point of one of the best developed radials of highways and railroads in the state.

In contrast to the rolling surfaces of the Sangamon plain is the funnel shape Lower Illinois valley; a great alluvial trough about 150 feet lower than the upland and eight miles wide at the point where the traverse crosses the valley. It is several times this width at the upper end and about half as wide where it approaches the Mississippi. Dikes and

drainage ditches and unused wet alluvial land are ample evidence of the flooding of the inner valley, whereas the roads, villages, farmsteads, and tilled fields occupy the well-drained alluvium of the slightly higher terraces. The highway from Meredosia (Marais d'osiers, the basket reed swamp) to Chambersburg crosses the inner valley and the river on an extremely high bridge.

THE WESTERN DISTRICT

From the west bluff of the Illinois valley above Chambersburg the traverse extends for 50 miles across the Western District to Quincy on the Mississippi River through Pike and Adams counties. Although this is an area of general farming, the farms are smaller here than in either of the other two districts and the returns are lowest, being only two-thirds of the per acre returns on the Grand prairie. Likewise, the returns from livestock have risen until it is almost as great as the returns from crops.

The first of the two sections of the Western District to be encountered and the one over which most of the traverse extends is the Upland Forest. Stream erosion to an extent of about 100 feet by the minor tributaries of both the Illinois and Mississippi have turned both the eastern and western facing slopes into rolling terrain separated by a flat undissected upland. Originally forested, much of the area is still in timber with extensive areas of apparently recently abandoned crop land (probably taken out of cultivation in the early days of A. A. A. crop control program) in brush, and thicket. Brown forest soil is in evidence in the cultivated fields with thick mantles of loess sharply exposed on west facing slopes.

The highway wanders up the Illinois tributary slope across the flat

divide and over into area dissected by the Mississippi tributaries through such widely spaced little villages as Fishhook, Fairweather, and Liberty. The widely spaced railroad pattern in this portion of the district gives the impression of isolation to the villages not served by them.

At the end of the traverse is Quincy, occupying that point on the upland that most closely approaches the Mississippi. The alluvial lands of the Mississippi border are very

narrow there although they widen to segments ten miles or more in width above and below the city. Both the highway and railroad bridges cross the river here at one of its narrowest points. Most of the rejuvenated industries as well as the railroad occupy the narrow flood-plain where once the activities of a thriving river town were centered, whereas the city itself is spread out upon the upland.

Thus terminates a traverse designed to highlight a cross-section of five sections of the three districts of the Central Division of Illinois.