

Colfax—A Corn Belt Village Trading Center

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AN ABSTRACT

Villages are essential and dynamic parts of the cash-grain section of the Illinois Corn Belt. They serve definite needs of the agricultural communities—each village acting as the center of a farming community. The activities of the villages show that farmers and villagers live and work in a close functional association. In recent times, with the development of highway transportation and other modern facilities, this functional association has been modified notably. The study from which this paper is derived is concerned fundamentally with the functional pattern of a group of villages in a selected area of the Corn Belt. This paper presents a portion of an intensive survey of one of the villages in the area designated in the study as the East McLean Area. This area is located in Central Illinois in the eastern part of McLean County, and is composed of seven townships, each including a small village with a population over 100 and less than 1000. The East McLean Area covers 236.17 square miles, has a total population of 7,044, of which 40 per cent are in the seven villages. The area is characterized by high land values and high crop yields and is indeed a highly productive section of Central Illinois. In this paper the results derived from an intensive survey of the largest of the seven villages are given as a portrayal of the functional pattern of a well rounded village trading center in the cash-grain section of the Illinois Corn Belt. The complete study consisted of a survey of a total of fifty-eight villages, of which twenty-three were given special study and seven were studied minutely. This village, Colfax by name, is one of the seven.

The setting of Colfax is that of a great agricultural region—the cash-grain section of the Illinois Corn Belt. The land lies broadly level but has long gentle slopes which emphasize its level qualities. In most places the country side appears to be under complete cultivation with about four farmsteads on each square mile. With their white frame houses and red barns the farmsteads seem to be as much an expression of cultivation as are the well tilled fields. Ribbons of highways, dotted about every two miles with white frame school houses, emphasize the rectangularity of the occupancy pattern. Small villages with their buildings and trees rise prominently out of the farmed areas which they serve. They are brought into alignment by the railroads along which they are spaced. Conspicuous grain elevators suggest the intimate relation of village and country. Every village has an elevator though every elevator siding has not become a village. The two elements, farms and villages, thus make up the landscape picture of this Middle Western and Corn Belt scene.

The village of Colfax, with a population in 1930 of 803 persons, is located twenty-six miles from Bloomington. It was platted and incorporated in 1880 during the building of the railroad, and was the terminus for a few years before extension was made to Bloomington. The incorporated village is

roughly a square, but the area utilized for village purposes has a very irregular boundary. The railroad extends through the village in a straight east-west direction and roughly bisects the village. The business district is localized near the center of the village with the main street parallel to and a half block from the railroad right of way. Wood, brick, and concrete blocks are utilized for the business district forms, whereas wood is the dominant construction material for residential forms. Of the 264 houses 98 per cent are wood. The percentage of good quality houses in the large house group is larger than the percentage found in medium or small sized groups. The medium and small size houses are largely poor or medium in quality. The activities of Colfax have the variety of a well rounded village trading center. There are thirty-one retail or wholesale distributing establishments, ten establishments collecting farm products, and twenty-eight personal service establishments. The last group are of great importance in attracting people to the village but are of little importance in attempting to accurately establish service areas for the village. In addition to these, public service establishments serve definitely and usually arbitrarily selected areas with little or no overlapping occurring with neighboring agencies. Village service areas vary in intensity of usage from the completely served high school district of approximately two townships to the variable and irregular area served by the local physician. Transportation services of Colfax show a decline in railway activities with a suggested increase of highway utilization as a probable causation factor. At least the use of trucks and automobiles has increased to the extent that improvements for all roads are the latest projects. In general Colfax, a corn belt village, serves a community of approximately two townships with a wide variety of functions. The service areas range in size from the village proper of a quarter section to the medical territories which include several neighboring villages. The community high school district is primarily important in establishing a trade territory. It serves as a definite link between the farms and the village. Colfax is indeed more than a township center and is of importance as a village trading center of the East McLean Area. It is probably not greatly unlike other village trading centers distributed over the tributary areas of Central Illinois cities which in turn focus upon metropolitan regional centers.