

BLOOMINGTON: AN URBAN COMMUNITY

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SETTLEMENT AND GROWTH OF POPULATION

To the earliest permanent settlement, the prairie was an enemy. Hence the most suitable regions for settlement, and those which were actually first taken into possession in central Illinois, lay chiefly along the groves where they border on the open prairie. The advantages of a grove location, together with a focus of trails drawing men together, offered a site for the present city of Bloomington.

The idea of establishing a town apparently originated with a young farmer who came here in 1829 in search of good farm land. The following year he donated 22½ acres of land on the north edge of Blooming Grove settlement to be used as the site for the county seat of McLean County. He saw that the north and south line of travel between the Galena lead mines and the settled parts of southern Illinois crossed the main east and west emigrant road between the French trading posts on Wabash River and Peoria, near Blooming Grove. The trail from Lake Michigan to St. Louis was also in the vicinity, and the young farmer foresaw that lines of stage and emigrant travel could easily be induced to pass through this point. It is interesting to note that three lines of railway and parallel roads of concrete follow these old lines of travel, and all cross at Bloomington.

Although founded in 1830, the settlement was not incorporated as a village until 1843. By that date the population numbered approximately 800. Reports of the fine agricultural land and opportunities for trade drifted back to the older settlements to the east and south and soon newcomers began to arrive to make their homes and set up small businesses. With the extension of the Illinois Central and Alton railroads into McLean County in the early fifties and the campaign for improved dirt roads and bridges, population increased rapidly, until in 1860 it was 8000, an increase of 343.9 per cent over that of 1850. The beginning of the industrial development in Bloomington in 1867, with the establishment of the Alton Railroad shops, brought a decided increase and in 1870 the population was 13,000. From 1880 until 1920 the increase has been comparatively steady. The census of 1930 shows a population of 30,883. The small gain of 7.7 per cent since 1920 is explained in part by the suspension of work at the coal mine, once one of the leading industries of the city, the loss of several minor industries, and the reduced forces of the Alton Railroad shops.

COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL AREAS

The commercial core of the city, which has for its purpose the service of the urban community and approximately one hundred surrounding towns and villages, is centered around the County Court House. It is characterized by buildings three and four stories in height. The expansion of the retail district has been most pronounced along a north-south axis, following the earliest paved highways which assist merchants materially by permitting the operation of both freight and passenger motor lines.

Situated in the heart of a rich agricultural region, Bloomington is primarily a distributing center rather than a manufacturing center. However a review of the list of industrial establishments reveals a total of ap-

proximately fifty factories. Their nature testifies to the fact that the manufacturing interests of the city are diversified, no special line being carried on to the exclusion of others. This may be further explained by the fact that the early settlers had to depend largely upon their own efforts for the utensils with which they conducted their household, farming, and mercantile management. There were no railroads; the rivers were not direct and were a slow means of transportation; the country roads were usually in poor condition and for months at a time were almost impassable.

The present manufacturing interests are centered largely in the repair and machine shops of the Alton Railroad. Chiefly because of the accessibility to direct railroad connections and cheap land, the heavy industries of the city are located in small areas close to the railroad yards. Three foundry and furnace companies manufacture stoves, hot air furnaces, and special heating and ventilating apparatus for public buildings. Electric washing machines, farm scales, grain elevators and iron castings are made by the Meadows Manufacturing Company. The latest enterprise of importance is the Williams Oil-O-Matic Heating Corporation, manufacturers of oil burners.

THE RESIDENCE DISTRICTS

Of the total area of Bloomington, approximately 75 per cent is occupied by residences. In general the new superior class of residences with their large lots and nicely landscaped gardens occupy the east side of town where there is relative seclusion from industrial and commercial areas, and where the views are more pleasing. Many of the old homes of frame and brick construction, the mansions of yesterday, have been converted into apartment houses, fraternity and sorority houses, and funeral homes. Along the western fringe of the city in the neighborhood of the abandoned mine and railroad yards are the poor residence districts, chiefly occupied by negroes and foreigners who make up about 13 per cent of the total population.

Beyond the corporation limit, attracted by the cheaper land outside and by the lower taxes beyond the city limits, are residences similar to the ordinary type of residence within the city limits. Excepting for the inclusion of vacant land in the southeast, Bloomington is relatively compact, the few vacant areas within the main body of the city being made up of undesirable land close to the railroads.

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