

Relative Location and the Growth of Terre Haute

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A population graph of Terre Haute presents a challenging problem because it is the only large city in Indiana whose population declined for two decades and whose total estimated population in 1950 is less than its peak was in 1920. The city's most rapid growth took place between 1900 and 1910 when its population increased from 36,673 to 58,157. In 1920 its population reached a peak of 66,083 and then declined to 62,810 in 1930 and 62,693 in 1940. A preliminary release indicates that Terre Haute's numbers increased to 64,097 in 1950, a gain of only about 1,400.

These statistics stimulate one to ask questions. Why did the city grow so rapidly between 1900 and 1910? What factors contributed to the decline between 1920 and 1940? What are the future prospects? etc.

Perhaps in the past too many of those who have been both economically and academically interested in Terre Haute's growth have concentrated their attention upon the political city and have failed to give adequate consideration to its relative location and its neighbors.

There are many large and small cities near this Queen City of the Wabash. Approximately 170 miles to the north is Chicago and 100 miles to the south is Evansville. Seventy-three miles to the northeast is Indianapolis, capital of Indiana, while 130 miles to the northwest is Springfield, capital of Illinois. It is interesting to note that Terre Haute is almost equidistant from the metropolitan areas of Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. Lines connecting these metropolitan areas form a triangle enclosing Terre Haute. Although all these cities are only a few transportation hours from Terre Haute they are all larger and compete with it in many ways.

About an hour's drive or between 50 and 65 miles from Terre Haute are a number of small cities, which exert an important influence upon the flow of goods and people in the area surrounding this Queen City of the Wabash. Starting on the northwest Danville, Illinois, the largest of the encircling group is 59 miles away. Crawfordsville, Indiana, lies 62 miles to the northeast. Continuing in a clockwise direction around Terre Haute, we find Greencastle 40 miles to the east; Bloomington 59 miles to the southeast; Vincennes 58 miles to the south; Lawrenceville, Illinois, 66 miles to the southwest; and Mattoon, Illinois, 63 miles to the west southwest. In contrast to Terre Haute these cities have had substantial growth during the last few decades.

Historic Perspective

Terre Haute's early growth was due in part to its central location between the two great waterway systems of transportation that

flourished in the states carved from Northwest Territory during the first half of the nineteenth century, namely the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. It was to open up the comparatively inaccessible area between these two waterways that the federal government constructed the National Road. This road reached the Wabash city in 1838. Terre Haute and Richmond were important centers on this road. In part because of the impetus of this early start they are the west and east anchors of a semi-circular group of cities (population 25,000 or larger) which form an arc to the north around Indianapolis.

Terre Haute's early growth was also aided by the Wabash-Maumee Canal which reached it in 1849.

Although the founding fathers were unaware of the fact, they located this city in the northern edge of the Wabash Lowland. This physiographic province proved to be better equipped by nature for the development of agriculture than any of the other six physiographic provinces in southern Indiana. Today, after a century of machine agricultural development, Terre Haute finds itself in a southerly projection of the "Feed Grains and Livestock (Corn Belt)" type of farming region. This region is considered by many to be the agricultural heart of the United States and North America.

From the standpoint of minerals, Terre Haute is located in the northeastern edge of the Eastern Interior Coal field and the Illinois-Indiana petroleum field. This city's trade area has long been known for its coal industry, and its easily-mined comparatively low-priced coal is one of its greatest assets. In addition to the local petroleum supply, this city sits within one of the greatest concentration of national pipe lines in the world. (There remains the problem of adequately tapping these supplies.) Petroleum pumped to the Atlantic Coast from the Mid-continent field in Texas and Oklahoma passes through pipe lines laid across Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Besides petroleum pipe lines, there are good transportation facilities of other types. Two national highways, U.S. 40 and 41, cross here and railroad lines radiate out in all directions. The Trans World Airline and the Southern Airline Routes cross here.

These and other favorable factors of relative location are important geographic assets.

During the last half of the 19th century as the local resources of forest, soil and minerals were exploited the city had a substantial growth. And during the first decade of the 20th century, **industries** established here gave it its greatest increase in population—over 21,000.

Why the Decline?

With all these favorable factors in relative location and with such a good record of growth for sixty years between 1850 and 1910, why did the population decline between 1920-1940 and show a gain of less than 1,400 during the past decade?

The writer continues to study the problem but would like to list some possible factors for your consideration.

1. The rapid mechanization of agriculture and mines has greatly reduced the employment opportunities of these two industries.

2. Terre Haute's trade territory as a whole has passed through the lucrative exploitation stage. The forests and soils have been mined and the near-surface and easily stripped coals removed from comparatively large areas.

3. Much of the crop land has proven economically submarginal or marginal in character in competition with other cultivated land, for example, central Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. Although located in a southerly peninsula of the Corn Belt, much of the land is too wet, too sandy, too acid and/or infertile, and too often subjected to flood to be classed as good crop land. A large number of farms in Terre Haute's trade territory are classified as "self-sufficing" and "part-time" farms. Thousands of acres of land have been subjected to strip mining operations and removed from cultivation or held for future mining development.

4. Counties in the city's trade territory have had a low population increase or have declined. Only three Indiana counties lost population between 1940-1950 and two of these, Vermillion and Parke are in this city's trade area. Across the Wabash in Illinois, Clark and Edgar counties reached their peaks in population in 1900 and have since declined.

5. A large number of people who make their living here do not live within the political city. All-weather roads and the automobile make it possible for more and more people to live in the environs outside the city's political boundary. For example, the population of Vigo County, of which Terre Haute is the county seat increased from 99,709 to 104,931, an increase of over 5,000; yet the city had an increase of less than 1,400. Some of the people do not even live in Vigo county but drive daily from adjacent Indiana counties and many from Illinois cities such as Paris, Marshall and Martinsville.

6. There is a growing tendency of industrial companies to place their factories outside the political boundaries of cities and many workers wish to live near the factory.

7. Industry is moving from metropolitan areas to small cities. According to a National Industrial Conference Board report in May 1948, a survey indicated that "there was a large increase in the number of new plants placed in cities of 10,000 or fewer."

8. Present stagnation and in the past some recession in the political boundaries.

9. Some people have moved from within the city to its environs for a number of reasons, such as to secure larger settings for their homes, escape higher taxes, and avoid the winter smog.

10. Continued increase in the use of former residential land within the city for non-residential purposes.

These and other factors should be evaluated carefully in interpreting the past and considering the future of Terre Haute.