

Cities with a Population Decline in Southwestern Indiana 1940-1950

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Fifteen Indiana cities experienced a decline in population during the decade of 1940-1950. Eleven of these 15 are located in southwestern Indiana within a 70-mile radius of Vincennes. Of the 17 cities showing a growth of less than five per cent during the past decade, nine are located in the same general area. Although there is something exhilarating about rapidly growing cities and something depressing about declining ones, whether permanent or for a brief decade, both types offer challenging research problems. The core of this paper is confined to a discussion of "Cities with a Population Decline in Southwestern Indiana." The writer hopes to continue this small study based on library research and brief reconnaissance field work later by extensive field research.

Amount of Decline

The amount of population decline in the 10 cities of southwestern Indiana varies from 1.3 per cent in Petersburg to over 14 per cent in Jasonville or one-seventh of the latter's population. The following table shows the percentage of decline for each city (See Table I).

The decrease in population of French Lick, a resort city in Orange County, was large enough to take it out of the city class. Since it no longer has a population of 2,000, it will be excluded from further detailed treatment in this paper.

TABLE I

Loss of Population in Ten Southwestern Indiana Cities*

<i>City</i>	<i>Loss in Numbers</i>	<i>Decline in Per Cent</i>
Petersburg	40	1.3
Princeton	113	1.5
Mitchell	148	4.4
Linton	290	4.6
French Lick	96	4.7
Bloomfield	184	8.1
Clinton	630	8.9
Cannelton	213	9.5
West Terre Haute	373	9.9
Bicknell	538	10.5
Jasonville	481	14.1

* Statistics in this table taken from mimeographed manuscript of the Indiana Economic Council entitled "Comparative Rate of Growth of Small, Medium-sized and Larger Cities in Indiana."

Since more and more people employed in the city live in individual and apartment dwellings in the country, we should consider the population trend of the townships in which the cities are located. Six of the 10 cities in Table I are in townships which show a population decline each decade for the last 30 years. Three of the remaining four, Cannelton, Princeton and West Terre Haute, are located in townships which continue to show increases in population decade by decade. Cannelton is in Troy Township in which two other urban areas are located. Although Princeton had a population decrease of 113 people, Patoka Township, in which Princeton is located, gained 90 people. Sugar Creek Township, in which West Terre Haute is located, gained in population every decade except the 1920's. Although West Terre Haute lost 372 people, Sugar Creek Township gained 491, resulting in a net gain for the city and township of 119 people. Marion Township in which Mitchell is located gained in population until the last decade.

But it is obvious that the city to country movement cannot account for the population decline of our cities in the southwestern part of the state.

The ten cities under consideration here are primary trading areas within their counties; consequently one should consider the population trend of the eight counties in which they are located.

During the 1940's six of these eight counties showed a population loss. Three of the cities, Bloomfield, Jasonville and Linton, are in Greene County. Greene County's population declined from 31,330 to 27,886—a loss of nearly 11 per cent. Pike County in which Petersburg is situated showed a decline of 12 per cent. During this same decade Vermillion County, in which Clinton is found, declined over nine per cent and Perry County with the city of Cannelton declined two per cent. Lawrence County with the city of Mitchell and Knox County with Bicknell had minor losses of less than two per cent.

Moreover, the county population loss exceeded that of the declining cities in each of the six counties, namely Greene, Pike, Vermillion, Perry,

TABLE II
Population Trends in Eight Counties

<i>County</i>	<i>1950</i>	<i>1940</i>	<i>Change in Number</i>	<i>Change in Per Cent</i>
Pike	14,995	17,045	—2,050	—12
Greene	27,886	31,330	—3,444	—11
Vermillion	19,723	21,787	—2,064	—9
Perry	17,367	17,770	—403	—2
Lawrence	34,346	35,045	—699	less than 2 loss
Knox	43,415	43,973	—558	less than 2 loss
Gibson	30,720	30,709	11	nil
Vigo	105,160	99,709	5,451	+5

Lawrence and Knox (See Table II). Of the eight counties under consideration only two showed population increases, and in one of these two the increase was practically nil. Gibson County in which Princeton is located had an increase of only 11 people. Vigo County in which West Terre Haute is located increased five per cent (See Table II). However, we must remember that Terre Haute is the primary city in Vigo County.

Consequently we may safely make the generalization that not only are the ten cities declining in population but that the townships and counties in which they are located are also losing population or remaining nearly stagnant.

Function of Cities

The question of why these cities have decline still remains unanswered. It is a truism that cities grow as they perform services for people. A historical geographic perspective should prove useful in an evaluation of the present situation.

Cities in southwestern Indiana developed as trade, mining, political, manufacturing and transportation centers. The first two functions, trade for an agricultural area and furnishing supplies for the needs of miners and quarry workers have been major factors in the growth of cities in this part of the state. The agricultural and mining employment and prosperity of this area is reflected in its cities. The mining industry is the more unstable of these two.

Relative Location to Coal

All of the ten cities under consideration are located within the boundaries of the coal fields in southwestern Indiana. All of them have benefited either directly or indirectly by the coal mining industry and some are known as coal mining cities although none are restricted to a single function of providing the needs for miners.

Not only are these cities located within the coal fields but some are within or on the edge of the concentrated areas of strip mining. For example, Jasonville, Linton, Bicknell, Clinton and Petersburg are surrounded by strip mines.

During recent decades the employment of coal miners in southwestern Indiana has decreased. The industry pays better wages but fewer miners are needed. Within this general area some miners have had to turn to other forms of employment. Others commute long distances daily as much as 100 miles a day or more. Naturally some move closer to their new place of employment. Mining villages have lost half of their population in recent decades.

This decreased employment has its influence on both the villages and cities where miners live and upon the principal trade center of the county. For example, the decline of population in Jasonville and Linton does influence the prosperity of Bloomfield, the county seat and primary trade center of the county.

Cities and Villages in Greene and Sullivan Counties

One of the largest areas of strip mining concentration is astride the Greene-Sullivan County boundary. Within these two counties there are four cities and nine villages (A village refers to incorporated settlements

with less than 2,000 inhabitants.) for which census statistics are available. Detailed information may be obtained by studying Table III. Several significant generalizations may be made from the statistical information in this table.

With the exception of Sullivan, the county seat, and Farmersburg the population trend is downward for cities, villages and counties. Population has been declining in Greene and Sullivan counties for the last forty years. Nine of these 14 cities and villages reached their peak in 1910 or 1920. Consequently a population decline has been characteristic of these settlements for the last 30 years (See Table III).

TABLE III

Consecutive Decades of Population Decline of Cities, Villages
and the County in Greene and Sullivan Counties

County City or Village	Population Lost During Decade of					Decade of Highest Population
	1940	1930	1920	1910	1900	
Greene County.....	X	X	X	X		1910
Bloomfield.....	X	X				1930
Jasonville.....	X	X	X			1920
Linton.....	X					1940
Worthington.....	X					1920
Newberry.....	X	X	X	*		1920
Switz City.....	X	X	*			1930
Lyons.....	X	X	X	X	*	1910
Sullivan County.....	X	X	X	X		1910
Dugger.....	X		X		*	1920
Farmersburg.....			X			1920
Hymera.....	X		X		*	1920
Shelburn.....	X		X	X		1910
Sullivan.....		X				1950
Merom.....	X		X	X		1910
Carlisle.....	X		X			1920

* Indicates unavailable data

Agricultural Trade Areas

With the possible exception of Princeton all of these cities are located in rather poor agricultural areas. Yields are below average for the state and the farm population has been decreasing.

For example, the eastern half of Bloomfield's trade territory is on the Crawford Upland. From the standpoint of cultivated agriculture, the Crawford Upland is the most rugged and one of the least desirable physiographic regions in southern Indiana. The western half of Bloomfield's trade territory is on the Wabash Lowland. In this area strip mining has been carried on extensively, taking large areas out of cultivation.

Cannelton is another city located near the edge of the Crawford Upland. It is an Ohio River city with its trade territory to the north and east, and confined chiefly to the Crawford Upland. Of course it is also handicapped by having to compete with Tell City only a few miles away.

Mitchell is located on the Mitchell Plain, a region of karst topography and poor cultivated agriculture.

All three of these cities—Bloomfield, Cannelton and Mitchell—are located in the unglaciated section of the state called the South Central General Farming region. This area can be characterized as one with 1. much of the land in slope, 2. poor soils highly leached and much eroded and 3. small unproductive farms. "No other area in Indiana has as large a proportion of self-sufficing farms." (3). During the pioneer period farmers practiced lumbering to help supplement their crop income. But forests as well as soil have been depleted by "mining" and conservation practices are not widespread or long practiced.

Much of the land can be more productively used for pasture and forests. However, pastures and forests are extensive uses of land and do not help support heavy rural population which may contribute to a prosperous trade area for the city. Unless the better land can be used more intensively such as for dairying, poultry and trucking and thus employ more people, the rural population of the city trade areas will continue to decline.

Bicknell, Clinton, Jasonville, Linton, Petersburg, Princeton and Shelby are located on the Wabash Lowland and in a type of farming called the Southwestern Corn, Wheat and Truck Area. The first four cities as treated under Relative Location to Coal are surrounded by strip coal mining areas. After stripping, the land is too rough for cultivation, and as yet no date has been predicted as to when lumber operations may start on the "reforested" spoil banks. Like the Crawford Upland, large areas of land could be more profitably used to grow trees, hay or pastures rather than cultivated crops.

Modern mechanized farming like modern mechanized mining reduces employment. For example, the farming area in the vicinity of Lyons, in Greene County, has a reputation of being good farm country. Yet, Washington Township in which Lyons is located reached a peak population of 2,404 in 1900 and has declined in population during every decade since that time. Today, a man with a tractor, combine and other modern machinery can cultivate as much land as four farmers could fifty years ago, and perhaps has only one or two children compared with 15 to 20 of the former four families. Yet in the early years the cities of agricultural areas grew in part by supplying the needs and wants of an expanding rural population.

County Seat Trade Centers

In recent decades most of the county seats of the less urbanized counties in Indiana have become the primary trade centers. In spite of this trend, three of the 10 cities with declining populations are the county seat and the largest city in the country. These three are Petersburg, Princeton and Bloomfield.

Manufacturing

Industrial employment is the major support of most cities in the United States today. Although there are some local industries in the cities covered in this paper, these cannot be characterized as industrial cities—they are rather farming and mining centers. The population of some cities in southwestern Indiana has been maintained or increased because of the establishment of new industry and/or the expansion of older factories. Bedford is an example in which the people are stressing the manufacturing function of a city and thereby maintaining its population.

Princeton and Petersburg in adjacent counties are a contrast in the importance of manufacturing. During the last decade both of these had a similar population decline. However, Patoka Township in which Princeton is located gained 90 people in the last decade, whereas Washington Township where Petersburg is situated reached its peak of population in 1940. New and expanding industries in Princeton provide more employment for workers than is true in Petersburg. More people commute to work in Evansville from Petersburg than they do from Princeton.

The important question is, "Will enough new factories be established and old ones expanded in order to provide sufficient employment so that the declining trend in population of these cities and their townships will be reversed during this and future decades?" (1).

Associated Cities

Associated with the 10 cities which we have under consideration are others having practically no growth in the last decade. Seventeen or over one-tenth of the cities in the state showed practically no growth (0-4.99 per cent increase) and this group might be characterized as stagnant (2). Eight of the 17 are in southwestern Indiana, namely Bedford, Brazil, Jasper, Loogootee, Rockport, Spencer, Terre Haute and Vincennes.

Literature Cited

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