

Dubois County, an Exception to the General Trend

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Introduction

Southwestern Indiana has been described at various times in the past as a depressed area, a region of population decline, and an area of economic stagnation. All these statements are, in part at least, true. Such statements are, however, much too inclusive, for, in the heart of this area, Dubois County provides an outstanding exception to them.

Major Differences Between Dubois and Surrounding Counties

(1) Dubois County has gained in population every decade since 1910. Total gain during the 1910-1960 period was 7,620 or 38.4%. Except for Vanderburgh County, no other southwestern Indiana county has shown such consistent growth (1). Vanderburgh County, containing the city of Evansville, is the only metropolitan area in southwestern Indiana and, as such, is not strictly comparable to its more rural neighbors.

(2) The peak population of Dubois County (27,463) was reached in 1960. The only other counties of the area having a 1960 peak were Vanderburgh, Warrick, and Lawrence. In the case of Warrick recent growth has been confined to the western townships, all within easy commuting distance of Evansville and undoubtedly was due chiefly to the influence of Evansville. Lawrence County, in turn, has been influenced by nearby growth in Bloomington, though perhaps to a lesser degree. In Dubois County, nine of the twelve townships gained during the 1950-1960 decade, and growth was definitely not caused by external influences.

(3) Population growth within Dubois County has been due to economic factors within that county rather than in adjoining areas. This is shown by the fact that, in 1960, only 4.6% of the working population of this county was employed outside its boundaries. Only five counties in the state had a lower percentage. Other percentages in southwestern Indiana ranged from 39.7% in Warrick to 4.7% in Vanderburgh with the majority of them exceeding 20%.

(4) According to the Indiana State Board of Health (2), Dubois County had one of the lowest net estimated emigration totals of the southwestern Indiana counties. Coupled with the fact that, at least over the past fourteen years, it has had a considerably higher birth rate than any of its neighbors (3), this figure also shows the comparative stability of its population. Emigration losses were somewhat lower in Warrick, Orange, and Washington Counties and Vanderburgh County showed a gain. In no case was the birth rate as high.

(5) Dubois County had a high percentage of industrial employment. In 1960, over 72% of the total labor force was engaged in manufacturing. Although nearby Perry County exceeded this with 81%, a total of only eight counties in the entire state ranked higher (4).

(6) Manufactural employment and value added by manufacturing have shown steady gains in Dubois County since well before World War II. Practically all other southwestern Indiana counties have shown considerable fluctuation during this period (5).

(7) Mean annual individual income, although lower than that of numerous central and northern Indiana counties, has consistently ranked higher than that in most of the surrounding area. In 1960, Dubois County, with an average of \$3,089 was outranked within the area only by a Vanderburgh and Knox Counties with figures of \$3,575 and \$3,115 respectively.

The above facts definitely show that, in contrast to most of southwestern Indiana, Dubois County has been an area of steady population and industrial growth and of relative prosperity.

There are, of course, definite reasons for the continued growth and prosperity of this county just as there are reasons for the decline within the surrounding area.

Although it is not the purpose here to discuss at length reasons for population losses in most of southwestern Indiana, it is obvious that such factors as farm mechanization, consolidation, and abandonment, as well as increased mechanization of coal mining and a shift from deep to strip mining have played major roles. Dubois County never faced the problem of loss of mining employment, since this industry was never of major importance here. It has, however, undergone the same agricultural problems as the rest of the area.

Since physical conditions, except for mineral resources, are roughly similar over the area, something other than these must be responsible for Dubois County's exceptional qualities. This factor has been industrial development and success.

Characteristics of Dubois County Industry

Before further attempting to discuss the reasons for the exceptional industrial growth of this area, it will be of value to mention certain characteristics of Dubois County industry. The more obvious of these include:

(1) A heavy concentration of manufactural employment is found in the furniture and wood products industries. Although eleven categories of manufacturing are represented in the county, over 62% (2,694) (4) of all manufactural workers are employed in the thirty-two furniture factories. This group also includes the largest establishments. The associated and somewhat similar wood products industry is also very important in the employment picture and is represented by twenty-five establishments including two important veneer and plywood mills.

(2) Manufacturing is represented by numerous small plants rather than by one or two large ones. Although there are a total of ninety-seven factories in the county, the two largest are only in the 250-499 range.

(3) Manufacturing is not exclusively concentrated in the county seat. Although Jasper is the leading industrial center, factories of some size are also found in Huntingburg, Ferdinand, Holland, and Dubois, and small operations are carried on in other towns.

(4) The great majority of the manufacturing establishments have been developed under local ownership and by local initiative. This process has progressed to such a degree that local organizations have expanded outside the county and factories as far away as Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania have been founded with the use of "know how" and capital from Jasper and Huntingburg. It should be stated here, however, that local interests have not opposed the entrance of outside industry, as has been true in some Indiana cities, but have actively worked for the location of new factories within the county.

(5) Manufacturers rely heavily on truck transport. According to local spokesmen, railroad service has been, at best, only adequate, and manufacturing companies have, as a result, developed their own truck lines or have encouraged their development by others.

(6) Manufacturing in the area began as a non-union and fairly low wage operation. Associated with this, however, in most instances was a definite feeling of responsibility toward the work force and a reasonable stability of employment. At present most plants are organized, but labor troubles have been held to a minimum.

Conclusion

The development and growth of manufactural industry has been the dominant factor in the relative prosperity and economic progress of Dubois County. Physical factors, such as the original wealth of hardwood timber, agricultural products suitable for processing, a large labor pool, and nearby low-cost fuel have proved to be definitely advantageous. These advantages, however, were not confined to this county alone and, therefore, cannot be given as the reason for the county's exceptional growth as compared to its neighbors. The most important reasons for industrial growth here are human. In most cases manufactural development has been directly due to an individual or group who had the ideas, initiative, ability, and drive to start with a small shop and build it into an important industry.

Literature Cited

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