

A Study of Areal Specialization in Sullivan County, Indiana

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There is no basis for presenting Sullivan County as a homogeneous regional entity, other than that of political definition. It is included, however, in numerous and diverse "regional" units, each of which contributes factors to the spatial arrangements and associations within the county. Location in the Wabash Lowland and Eastern Interior Coal Field has been of special significance to the development of Sullivan's predominating areal specializations—agriculture and mining. Other industry, commerce, and settlement have been affected by fluctuating conditions of the two principal industries.

Agriculture—The Major Land Use

Approximately 80 per cent of the county's total area is in farm land. The average farm size here, 110 acres, is slightly below the state average, yet relatively few Sullivan farms are near this mean. An increase of 30 acres in average farm size since 1935 may be attributed, in part, to the following factors:

1. Mechanization, increasing the number of acres that a farmer can operate efficiently.
2. Increased purchasing power of small farm operators through sales of oil, gas and coal mineral rights.
3. Savings from the wartime boom in coal mining employment.
4. A general farm prosperity in the area.

Commercial farming in Sullivan County is led by cash grain and livestock farms, both of which are more numerous than the "general" farm, which largely combines the two types. A once profitable fruit industry has declined, due to:

1. Early arrival in the market area of peaches and other fruit from southern states.
2. The late arrival of high quality apples from Michigan in a season more comfortable for home canning.
3. Inroads on the deciduous fruit market by citrus fruit through continuous advertisement.
4. Increased production costs, chiefly that of labor.

The significance of non-commercial farming here is reflected in a modal farm size for the county, in 1950, of less than 50 acres for over 900 farms. A large number of these are operated by coal miners in slack seasons. Too, employees of local gravel and sawmill companies rarely work full time, and usually supplement that income by farming. Many commuters to industrial employment outside the county utilize after-work hours and other free time in farming.

Poor farming practices accompany part-time farming in Sullivan. Most of the operators have little or no mechanized equipment to facilitate terrace building, accurate contour plowing, or farm pond construction—three especially suitable practices for the relatively poor land which

characterizes the part-time farm here. Indeed, county-wide improvement of farming methods and adoption of conservation practices is needed. Farm operations on relatively unproductive and highly erosive land, especially in the northeastern and east-central portions of the county, give rise to a need for rural zoning and other local stimulations to out-migration.

Coal and Sullivan County

Although a predominately agricultural county today, Sullivan's peak growth was attained by expansion of coal mining activity. Present status of the industry here is a depressed one. The largest of the underground mines are in direct competition with local strip mines for the same market—power plants in the Chicago-Milwaukee area. Seasonality of operations is partially imposed by an increasing power plant conversion to natural gas during the summer when domestic gas consumption is low. Actual depletion of workable veins of good quality has been a factor in the decline of underground mines, as has been the closing of unionized mines that reopened in states with less rigid labor laws. Stages of decline in the local coal industry have released more workers than other county industry could absorb.

Transportation and Trade

Although Sullivan has experienced little industrial development other than its long-depressed coal mining, it is situated near counties of industrial growth. An extensive transportation net has provided accessibility to plants outside the county for a large number of commuters. Terre Haute, Vincennes, Crane and Bloomington attract a heavy majority of these workers.

Virtually legislated into a central-place function, the county seat serves most of Sullivan. A radial pattern of townships around the county seat is similarly marked by a radial pattern of characteristically small urban settlements, each acting as limited commodity exchange and service centers for adjacent areas. Of all the urban settlements, only the city of Sullivan, the county seat, has maintained a population as great as that of 1910, the year of peak census tabulation for the county. This gain by the county seat has generally been little more than could be credited to natural increase.

Non-taxable Land

Of increasing concern to the county is the removal of large tracts of land from its tax rolls. By the donation of strip-mined areas to the state, some coal companies have shed themselves of a reforestation or reclamation burden as well as a continued county tax assessment. As legislation requiring full reclamation by the open-cut operators does not seem forthcoming, the county is faced with a continued loss of both the productive capacity of the farm land so mined and of the potential tax revenue. A workable arrangement might be made whereby the county shares the reclamation expense, and in turn receives the land which would otherwise be given to the state. Resale would help compensate the county, as would the permanent contribution in county taxes.

Summary

A geographic examination of Sullivan County reveals two predominating areal specializations, both with major problems. Facets of their relationships to the county have alternately encouraged and discouraged economic and physical growth.