CHAPTER I

WHAT MAKES A COMMUNITY?

Bureau and LaSalle counties sit side by side in North Central Illinois 100 miles west of Chicago and fifty miles east of the Mississippi River. There was a sequence to the arrival of people who emerged on the prairie beginning in the 1820’s. Very simply put, Americans from eastern states arrived with Old Immigrants for the purpose of obtaining land with which to farm. The rural landscape changed as farmers made way for New Immigrants who arrived in the 1880’s ready to work under the ground; subsequently, coal and mineral mines fostered communities. In addition, railroad companies like the Illinois Central decided the location of a new town. Another entity, the Illinois River, provided commercial interests and reason to remain in LaSalle County. Labor, Ethnicity, and the Family in Bureau and LaSalle Counties, 1900 explores these changes by focusing on the following questions: How did the Illinois counties of Bureau and LaSalle change from frontier outpost in the 1820’s to Midwest’s heart of the Corn Belt by 1900? Why did some communities survive and others become ghost towns? Most important, who were the people? How did families and bachelor men labor and survive? How did their ethnicity affect their lives?

To assess these changes, three specific communities were investigated: two coal towns from Bureau County, Seatonville and Ladd, and the railroad town, Mendota, located in northern LaSalle County. Informed by studies of immigrant communities elsewhere, local history sources, and the manuscript census of 1900, these three towns
revealed much in terms of piecing together the factors that define a community. In 1880, Seatonville and Ladd in Bureau County were company towns of coal mining, a subsidiary of the Spring Valley mines. In LaSalle County, Mendota’s origins began in 1853 when the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy and the Illinois Central Railroad ran a line connecting Mendota to the city of LaSalle.⁵

John Mack Faragher was one of the first historians to focus on central Illinois in his study *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie*. Located about 200 miles south of Bureau and LaSalle Counties, Sugar Creek illustrates how a farming community transitioned from self-sufficient and individually owned farms to commercial agriculture. Faragher traced the life histories of seven families in order to depict rural life, especially how men and women negotiated farm duties.⁶ This source explained the elements of the farming community; the roles of men and women on the farm; and the transition from self-sufficient farming to commercial agriculture. However, the technique of focusing on a family’s history as part of an historical narrative was too narrow. How could a few families represent an entire culture when only a selected few had a voice? *Sugar Creek*, however, coincided with LaSalle and Bureau County’s description of a community; that is, the family, the neighborhood, their work, and their churches were prime factors that encompassed the nineteenth century rural culture.

An important source that illustrated the changes in Illinois farming from sustenance farming, independent ownership of land, to agrarian capitalism was explained in Susan Rugh’s *Our Common Country: Family Farming, Culture, and the Community in*
the Nineteenth-Century Midwest. Rugh claimed that the family size diminished as mechanized farm equipment flourished and hired hands replaced child labor. Because of a lessening interest by sons and daughters to stay on the farm, the farm climate altered as land was rented out. By 1880, women drew away from domestic production toward household management and the nurturing of children. Rugh argued that cultural identities mattered; her work provided the impetus to the theory that ethnic regionalism were an important factor in the life of a rural community.7

Ethnic regionalism as the flagstone component to the fortitudinous life of a rural town was demonstrated in a neighboring county within Mike Light’s thesis, Swedish Immigrants to Rock Island County, Illinois. Roughly forty miles west of Bureau County, Rock Island County supported two cities saturated with Swedish immigrants. Light’s work presented election results disclosing Swedish citizens voted for office holders of the same ethnicity, because they wanted their decision makers to replicate their values and habits. Political identity was part of the distinctiveness of a community fostered by ethnicity, ergo ethnic regionalism.8

Owning land and commercial interests may have been the motive for immigrants and eastern Americans to travel to Illinois, but it did not explain why one community would thrive and another would not reach maturation. The difference between the two became apparent. The successful ones exhibited ethnic regionalism; it was the key expedient. Ethnic regionalism was the social glue produced when ethnic groups gathered together and formed kinships thus creating social cohesion or solidarity. For example,
Polish families shopped at Polish merchants, attended Polish churches, socialized with other Polish families, and married other Poles.⁹

A community thrived depending on the array of institutions established, and one could predict the longevity of a burgeoning town’s lifespan based upon the desire for a community to be rooted. In 1900, the heart of a community pumped in two places: the church and the saloon. The most important institution was the ethnic church which molded and reconfirmed ethnic identity.¹⁰ It was the principal source of contact for newly arrived immigrants who craved familiarity in an unfamiliar environment. The ethnic church was instrumental for establishing kinship networks. It was after the service when families organized, fed, placed out, assisted, and supported the newly arrived from either an eastern state or straight from their native soil. Another institution whose purpose provided an environment for immigrant bonding was the saloon. For instance, the Sanborn Maps of Ladd, Seatonville and Mendota note in 1900 sixteen saloons for 1272 people, suggesting saloons were necessary for men and their families’ socialization.¹¹ In addition, other social institutions provided a sense of permanence to a community such as schools, police and fire stations, post offices, city halls, hospitals, fraternal clubs, libraries, factories, and merchants.

The larger the ethnic confluence, the greater the chances a village would turn into a town and a town would evolve into a city. Rapid growth could be predicted if a few ethnicities gathered in a community producing their own ethnic institutions. However, if multiple ethnicities tried to establish themselves, a fracturing of the community resulted.
The city of Spring Valley in Bureau County was an example. Considered to be the “melting pot” of the area, over thirty nationalities resided in this coal town in 1900. That kind of population mix instigated a fissure into the social fabric giving the town a wild and violent reputation. One example of disharmony in the community was the Race Riot of 1895.12

Large communities could appear “ghostly” if too many immigrant groups competed for labor or too many varying ethnic institutions could not match the ethnic population within the physicality of an area. Therefore, the word “successful” should not be confused with a community’s size. A village could be successful as well as a town or city. Success, then, was defined as a community whose residents actively supported many institutions. Generally speaking, a community of families offered success for a community. That does not mean single or non-traditional families did not participate in community institutions, but many individuals were not accepted into the mainstream functions performed through ethnic networks, often experiencing marginalization. Moreover, the dark side of ethnic regionalism was ethnocentrism. For example, a community made up of Polish and Italians would be reluctant to accept Russians or African Americans into their established institutions.13

It was easy to locate the histories of founding families and community leaders, but what of other members who contributed to the economic life of a town? It was difficult to give voice to those who participated in the constant flow of migration such as African Americans, boarders, laborers, and orphan train riders. The Twelfth Census of 1900
provided limited representation since many people were not recognized as community members. African Americans were not wanted in white communities and were nudged or shoved to keep moving as they migrated from the south to Chicago. In 1900, boarders and manual laborers were a nebulous group whose rootless existence left little evidence. Of the thousands of orphan train riders who were displaced to Illinois from the 1850’s until the 1920’s, only limited documentation exists of those who arrived to Bureau and LaSalle County. All of them, these invisibles, filtered through churches, filled the local saloons, and worked for the prominent families. Consequently, they were just as much a part of the answer to the question, “What makes a community?”

Frank Higbie’s 2000 dissertation entitled *Indispensable Outcasts: Seasonal Laborers and Community in the Upper Midwest, 1880-1930*, explored transient sub-culture including the connotations of the terms: hobos, tramps, and bums. These elusive seasonal workers included tenant farmers, day laborers, miners, and railroad workers. Higbie selected individual accounts as a glimpse of migration patterns and stressed the dangers and harsh realities of those bachelor men who utilized the railroad as a means of free transportation. For example, he argued between 1888-1905, 430,000 men were killed as “trespassers” for stealing a ride on the railroad. Applying his work to this thesis, a dangerous life was in store for transient laborers in the railroad town of Mendota accentuated in accident reports and newspaper obituaries.

In Gunther Peck’s *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930*, analyzes the culture of immigrant transient
workers, specifically, their mobility in and out of towns, and how ethnic workers created solidarity and were able to dismantle the power of padrones and labor corporations. Peck claimed that these ethnic groups had limited success, because they were unwilling to combine their forces with other ethnic groups suffering the same injustices. This was helpful when considering the merging of immigrant men in Seatonville and Ladd who arrived to work in the coal mines. The exclusivity of ethnic groups, that is to say, Italian boarders stayed with Italian families who lived in Italian neighborhoods who patronized Italian businesses, was important in understanding the argument that rural communities survived or failed due to ethnic regionalism.¹⁶

Ethnicity, age, and gender decided one’s labor options. Old Immigrants were the professionals and skilled workers of communities while New Immigrants worked for them as unskilled laborers. Young men and boys, depending on their ethnicity, apprenticed themselves as artisans or worked in the coal mines. All females, regardless of age, were limited to domestic or personal service jobs such as laundresses. Obviously, the fewer institutions established the fewer job choices available in a community. In Seatonville, there was little to do but work in the mines, and Ladd provided slightly more options for earning wages. Travelers to Mendota on the other hand, could find a plethora of jobs that included professional, skilled, and unskilled work. Two major ethnicities, German and Irish, controlled the small city.

In order to set the stage for 1900, Chapter Two provides an understanding of the cultural and commercial interests in these two counties. Highlighting the arrival of
frontier families beginning in the 1820’s through the 1880’s, this chapter stresses the importance of their labor roles and provides a history from sustenance survival to an agrarian economy, emphasizing how agriculture changed. The rural landscape altered as the emergence of mines produced the arrival of new immigrants ready to work in the 1880’s. In addition to the mines, Old and New immigrants were drawn from the east to make the Illinois-Michigan Canal. Consequently, industries along the banks of the Illinois River sprouted, providing a constant source of labor. Finally, corporate members from Railroad lines like the Illinois Central decided the development of the Illinois prairie by creating towns with which to support their lines.

Chapter Three looks at two coal towns in Bureau County, Seatonville and Ladd, examining in detail the lives of laborers and boarders. Even though these two villages represented the majority of coal mines that popped up over the state, little historical analysis exists, perhaps because many mine areas turned into ghost towns when the mine closed. Seatonville represents a ghost town, yet Ladd did not follow this path, developing instead into a healthy, successful community due to ethnic regionalism.

The small city of Mendota analyzed in Chapter Four, was a perfect example of ethnic regionalism. The family and their labor professions are investigated in detail. As a railroad hub for the Illinois Central Railroad, this small city flourished. \(^\text{17}\) I also assess the impact of the small African American migration through the region.

Chapter Five concludes the study by assessing the transformation from a rural to industrialized world. The rudiments of a community were many. If one imagined a
community as a body, then the institutions would be the parts and connecting the parts together would be the spine. To extend the metaphor, the success of community was dependent upon the spine (ethnic regionalism); if ethnic groups did not actively institute or utilize their institutions then a fracturing, paralysis, and death occurred to the community.
NOTES

1 The term Old Immigrants was used to illustrate the first wave of immigrants who arrived to the United States from northern and western Europe and were predominantly Protestant. Those from eastern and southern Europe who not only arrived in large numbers after the 1880s, but who were mainly Roman Catholic, Jewish, or various sects of Orthodox or Uniate Christian faiths were designated as New Immigrants. For basic background knowledge of facts and terms separating “old” and “new” immigrants, Dennis Wepman’s concise history was helpful in Immigration: From the Founding of Virginia to the Closing of Ellis Island. (New York: Fact on File, Inc., 2002).


8 Mike Light, “Swedish Immigrants to Rock Island County, Illinois” (M. A. diss., Illinois State University, 1993).

James Olson, Catholic Immigrants in America (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1987); Chapter 7, "The Nationality Church" explained how people attended the church that matched their ethnicity.


African Americans were marginalized. The Act of 1853 in the State of Illinois forbade any person of color into the state, and after the Civil War, especially in the southern counties of Illinois, racial discrimination persisted. By 1900, blacks were still suffering from gross inequalities: children were denied an education; adults were offered limited work choices; their constitutional rights were violated; they were the recipients of riots and lynching; and they were relegated to the periphery of towns as outcasts. In this climate, African Americans migrated north to cities where there was work and the chance to congregate with each other as a free people. Although stopping points along the Underground Railroad were present throughout Illinois, including Bureau and LaSalle Counties, discrimination and intolerance existed as well. Escape Betwixt Two Suns: A True Tale of the Underground Railroad in Illinois, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2000) by Carol Pirtle recounted the State Supreme Court case of abolitionist William Hayes who harbored the slave Sukey and her three children in 1843 and lost against slave owner Andrew Borders. Her work was influential to this thesis through her creation of the mindset of Illinoisan politicians and civilians who subjugated Blacks. By 1900, freed blacks remained, for the most part, invisible citizens. Additionally, for background information regarding the fight for African Americans to have the right to an education consult, The Black Struggle for Public Schooling in Nineteenth-Century

14 There were four main displacing agencies for orphans who were sent west from New York and Boston: New England Home for Little Wanderers, New York Foundling Hospital; Children’s Aid Society; and the New York Juvenile Asylum. Documentation from these agencies was limited. The New York Juvenile Asylum kept the best records of individuals who were sent to Illinois citing their case histories and keeping correspondence of progress reports. Still, the difficulty lay after they arrived to Illinois. Frequently their names were changed; they were shuffled from one farm or family; and their whereabouts became unclear. The success or failure of the social program to displace children is open to conjecture. Current scholarship includes, Clark Kidder, Orphan Trains & Their Precious Cargo (Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc, 2001); Linda Gordon, The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Stephen O’Connor Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace And The Children He Saved and Failed (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001). For a comparative British perspective, read Joy Parr’s Labouring Children (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1980) illustrating the British policy of displacing poor or orphaned children from the city slums of England to work for Agricultural families in Canada.

15 Frank Higbie’s 2000 dissertation entitled Indispensable Outcasts: Seasonal Laborers and Community in the Upper Midwest, 1880-1930, explored transient sub-culture including the connotations of the terms: hobos, tramps, and bums. These elusive seasonal workers included tenant farmers, day laborers, miners, and railroad workers. Higbie selected individual accounts as a glimpse of migration patterns and stressed the dangers and harsh realities of those bachelor men who utilized the railroad as a means of free transportation. For example, he asserted between 1888-1905, 430,000 men were killed as “trespassers” for stealing a ride on the railroad. Applying his work to this thesis, a dangerous life was in store for transient laborers in the railroad town of Mendota evidenced in accident reports and newspaper obituaries.


17 Sarah H. Gordon’s Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929 (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) was influential in explaining how railroads positively and negatively affected river towns, rural communities, cities, and regions in America.
CHAPTER II

EARLY SETTLEMENT: LASALLE AND BUREAU COUNTIES

Credit the cultural and commercial interests as well as the geographical position of LaSalle and Bureau County for reasons why this is a noteworthy region in Illinois. By 1900, Illinois had transformed from western outpost to agricultural Mecca of the country. Illinois signified the midway point for the United States where commerce and industry converged in the North at Chicago and in the South at St. Louis, Missouri. Important entities orbit these neighboring counties producing prosperity in the region. The Mississippi River is the state’s western boundary line; Chicago and Lake Michigan are to the northeast; and the large cities of Peoria, the Quad-Cities, Rockford, and Bloomington-Normal loop around these two counties. In the 19th century, canals, trains and the Illinois River crisscrossed the area and connected Bureau and LaSalle counties to the rest of the state while individuals and families, defined by their ethnicity, farmed the land and worked the mines.

Other ethnic groups arrived before 1880 to this region to become farmers: Belgians, Norwegians, Dutch, and Germans. So, too, other Old Immigrants from eastern states came to farm such as the Scottish, the Irish, and the English. Their presence is evident in census records, city directories, and church records. Lives of the first Illinois pioneers from 1820’s to 1860’s were laborious and the environment merciless. Affluence
helped, but many had meager funds. The best chance a pioneer family in Illinois had for surviving unpredictable weather, health, and the wilderness was by relying on neighbors and family members for help and possessing the virtues of industry and perseverance.²

Rebecca Berland’s diary revealed much in terms of how first families to the prairie survived and what roles each family member played.³ She, her husband and two children arrived to Illinois circa 1832 from Yorkshire, England. In her diary, she explained the process of acquiring land: the U.S. government surveyed and divided into portions of 80 acres each. District offices recorded transactions. In the 1830’s the price for a parcel of land was 100 dollars for 80 acres. If one could not afford to pay, one could temporarily claim the land with the oath that one would cultivate and improve the plot of wilderness. After a time period of four years, the land was yours.

Her family was fortunate; they had money with them to purchase a cow, a mare, two pigs, and a skillet for baking cornbread. That would enable them to survive their first year while they cultivated and harvested eight acres of wheat and four acres of Indian corn. Furthermore, a house was standing and ready for them to move in. Berland’s account illustrated the necessity for cooperation and assistance from neighbors and family members in order to survive the first few years. When testing the unpleasant taste of Indian corn after she had baked the “sad paste” in a skillet on hot ashes, she borrowed milk and eggs from her nearest neighbor, Mr. Paddock, 1.5 miles away in order to improve the recipe. They bought their livestock from another neighbor, Mr. Oakes. By
June, their four acres of wheat was ready to sow, and they were obliged to borrow two sickles because “nor were any to be had for under a dollar each.” Their friend Mr. B. lent them two. They borrowed a wagon and oxen to transport fifty bushels of their wheat to the storekeeper, Mr. Varley. Another neighbor, Mr. Knowles, who lived two miles away, agreed to plow and harrow their eight acres of wheat in exchange for a fine English watch worn by Rebecca Berland’s husband. The Berland’s survival depended on their neighbors.

Within her memoirs, Rebecca Berland expressed her love and appreciation for her husband. They were a determined couple who worked endlessly. Rebecca was still weaning her baby while her nine year old son labored beside both parents by cutting wood, working in the fields, or assisting with domestic chores. On the farm, children were required to work and it was expected that everyone would pitch in and help as needed. For example, when Rebecca’s husband fell and sliced his knee open on the borrowed sickle, as a result, he very nearly died from infection and fever. The wheat had to be sown, so she proudly exclaimed, “I reaped, carried home, and stacked our whole crop of wheat, consisting of three acres, with no other assistance than that of my little boy under ten years of age.”

Norwegian immigrants came to the Midwest after 1825 second only to Ireland with regard to the percentage of its population that emigrated. Mission and Miller Townships within LaSalle County received many Norwegians who settled in order to
escape religious persecution. The family infrastructure was paramount for success on the farm. Within farm families, children played an integral role. As sources of free labor, power distribution depended upon birth order and gender as discussed in Jon Gjerde and Anne McCants study "Individual Life chances, 1850-1910: A Norwegian-American Example." The responsibilities of first born in a farm family were specific. Males were more valued than females. Generating large families was important; it was hoped that sons would outnumber daughters.

Older sons and daughters had better likelihood of marriage than middle or younger siblings, and girls were able to leave the family farm earlier than their brothers because they were less central to the farm. This is not to say that female work was not important. In fact, it was essential for male farmers to have wives and daughters because "the market for paid female farm labor was nearly nonexistent" and women would perform sex-defined labor of both genders." The household structure was hierarchical with power placed on older siblings. Locational outcomes depended upon birth order and gender. Only one son could inherit the home farm, usually the oldest. If other sons wanted to remain on the farm or could not secure a farm of their own, "they were precluded from marriage." Similarly, non-inheriting daughters could not bring a husband home with them nor could they obtain a farm of their own unless they married. A daughter who desired neither left the rural environment entirely.

In 1825, Rev. Jesse Walker, a religious dissenter from Norway, journeyed to
Chicago looking for a place to establish his church and school, but he chose LaSalle County instead to serve the needs of the Indians on Mission Creek. Although the church closed six years later “due to lack of interest by the Indians” subsequent Norwegians came to LaSalle County for religious freedom.\textsuperscript{11} The town of Norway was the first permanent settlement of Norwegians in America. As the Norwegians settled in earth-dug homes called sloops, they, like the Swedes in Bureau County, depended on their neighbors to ameliorate their challenges. For example, farmers constructed tile drains for clearing out swampy areas. Clay tiles of various lengths were laid in a ditch below the surface then covered with dirt so that bridges were unnecessary, and the surface could be tilled. Farmers formed agreements so that tile lines connected at the borders of farms.\textsuperscript{12} This type of partnership created ethnic communities.

As settlements developed, woman and children performed all types of work required on the farm. Outside of the farm, the family centered upon the church, the most significant feature of ethnic regionalism. First settlers had not a church to attend, but services would be conducted at home where the father would read the Gospel, the Epistle, the Collect, while family members would sing hymns. Once settlers established churches, “they served as a primary social institution for thousands of immigrants.”\textsuperscript{13}

In 1892, Lars Petter Magnuson emigrated from Sweden to work as a farmhand in Bureau County. He had hopes of saving the family farm by forwarding his pay back to his immediate family still in Sweden, including his father, sister, wife and three children.
For three years he worked and saved as a tenant farmer outside of the town of LaMoille, Illinois. Taken by the area and the prospect of establishing his own farm, Magnuson altered his plans by deciding to bring his family over to Bureau County instead. Sadly, he succumbed to typhoid fever in 1895 and perished, and his family never arrived.¹⁴ He was drawn to Bureau County because of the Swedish community already connected to the area. The crop failures in Sweden in 1867 and 1868 encouraged many Swedes to follow religious dissenters who had arrived in 1845. A steady flow of Swedish immigrants, mainly farmers and tradesmen like Lars Magnuson, settled in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Canada.¹⁵

Within the county seat of Bureau named Princeton, 2000 Swedish residents, nearly half the population, inhabited the small city.¹⁶ As a great example of ethnic regionalism, Princeton was the central town in the county for obtaining farm equipment, buying and selling grain, and patronizing other businesses. The major ethnic component was the Swedes evidenced by business proprietors named Johnson, Landahl, Peterson, Nyman, Nelson, Pierson and Anderson. Another example of Swedish infiltration in Princeton was the churches. Churches were frequently prefaced by their ethnicity. The Swedish Baptist, Swedish Methodist, Swedish Mission, and Swedish Lutheran accommodated the Princeton enclave.¹⁷ These protestant entities provided important socialization and ethnic bonding. To farmers, who were often miles from their nearest neighbor, the church was a means for communication and recreation. Church auxiliaries
and associations like the Swedish Sick Benefit Association, Ladies Foreign Mission Circle, Young People’s Union, and the Brother’s Society connected citizens. The community flourished because of their ethnicity; they were able to pass traditions, language, and identity to one another. With regard to city associations outside of their ethnic church, if approximately half the population of Princeton was Swedish, then the officers and members of various community clubs like the Princeton Agricultural Association, Masonic, Women’s Club, and War Veterans Association spread their ethnic presence to others and united the community.

According to biographical sketches, there were various reasons why they came to Princeton; many stumbled into the area on their way elsewhere like Chicago, the utopian community of Bishop Hill, or Rock Island, Illinois. Others were heading north and west to Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Kansas. Others arrived hoping to purchase their own land after they had worked as farm laborers, like Lars Peterson. Most were poor, leaving Sweden for better economical prospects. In Sweden many were artisans, but when they arrived to Illinois, they taught each other how to farm. Proud of their work ethic and parsimonious lifestyle, many became quite wealthy who owned up to 400 acres of land in the late 1800’s.

As farmers in this north-central region of Illinois cleared the lands and established their farms, they began to specialize. Limited diets expanded from corn “Johnnycakes” to include fruits, pork, beef, poultry, and dairy products. Certain families in the rural
neighborhood became noted for their atypical products that sustained them and produced a marketable crop. James Forristall, a farmer in Bureau County produced apples in his orchard and fields of potatoes. To secure a better livestock, Angus cattle was imported as well as Poland China hogs and Shropshire sheep. Clydesdales and Belgian stallions were brought into the region. In 1874, Dr. Ezra Stetson of Neponset, Bureau County, imported from France the first purebred Percheron horses which he sold all over the country. Specialization added depth to markets, revealed wealth in the area, and imparted a unique aura to rural Illinois.

Commercial interests added to the distinctiveness of the area such as the Illinois-Michigan Canal. A national public works project on a grand scale, the canal connected water systems from the Atlantic in the East to the Gulf of Mexico by joining the Eerie Canal to Lake Michigan and Lake Michigan to the Illinois and Mississippi River. Beginning in 1836 and finishing twelve years later, the canal’s contribution of transporting goods and industry was a monopoly in the beginning years until replaced by the railroad, but the canal’s more remarkable contribution was that the canal populated Chicago and north-central Illinois by bringing thousands of Irish immigrants to the area.

Constructing the Illinois-Michigan canal brought many Irish immigrants to LaSalle County. Working for one dollar a day and a gill of whiskey, the Irish dug the 96 mile canal for 14-16 hours a day; many died from cholera and malaria. Shanty towns arose along the Illinois River and housed the immigrant workers. Because the city of
LaSalle was the terminus for the canal, a large cluster of Irish established themselves in the twin cities of LaSalle-Peru. Suddenly, the area resembled Ireland with names like O’Neill, Manley, Murtaugh, Quigley, Cody, Dempsey, and McGuire creating the ethnic neighborhood. One of their chief concerns was to erect a Roman Catholic Church. Canal boss Billy Byrne, a popular Irish leader, pressed for the ethnic marker with the Diocese of St. Louis. The Diocese agreed and within a year, the LaSalle mission was invested on April 1, 1838 to serve the upper third of Illinois, and a large stone church, christened St. Patrick’s, was inaugurated in August despite a severe cholera outbreak that killed hundreds that year. Ethnic regionalism existed in LaSalle-Peru because immigrant groups like Irish found work along the Illinois River.

In addition to the Irish in LaSalle County, other immigrants such as Poles and Italians came in sizeable numbers, and they excavated natural resources found along the river such as sand; quarries were established in Utica and at Ottawa, the county seat of LaSalle. In 1858, in the city of Peru the largest zinc smelting and acid phosphates company in the United States flourished. J.L. McCormick built an ice house and shipped ice blocks on barges to southern ports. Like other river towns in Illinois, the growth and success of a town resided on the shoulders of their people more than economical interests. Factories that brewed beer, produced tiles, made glass, assembled farm equipment or watches provided labor options to families, but a century of change altered the industrial climate; many are no longer in business, but the people still remain.
NOTES

1 "In 1880, two-thirds of corn was produced in Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. When Chicago became the most important packing center, cash-corn farming emerged in Illinois. In 1900, the Corn Belt was a large region of increasingly distinct parts, specializing in hogs, others in cattle, and a few in grain production." John C. Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 130.

2 Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 40-70. Community based survival strategies helped strengthen the rural neighborhood. Neth explained that farmers followed a code of ethnics; it was understood that lending and borrowing were “good.” It was important for a neighbor “to request assistance as well as provide it.” Another source, *Prevailing Over Time: Ethnic Adjustment on the Kansas Prairies, 1875-1925* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 44-47, 191-201, by D. Aidan McQuillan, concluded that as each immigrant group arrived, they defined themselves by their communities and they mutated their old world selves by combining a new dimension into their collective narratives “... they spun a new folklore based on battles with scorching summer heat, invading grasshoppers, terrifying prairie fires, and the dangers of sudden blizzards and tornadoes.” Even if new farmers had money with which to purchase livestock and husbandry, new pioneers suffered through their mistakes and bad fortune. They underfed their oxen. Roots or rocks tore and broke their plows. Droughts and frosts destroyed crops. Cholera or accidents maimed production and killed family members. See Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1972), 49-50. Many first pioneers felt disillusioned about the Illinois frontier in the 1830’s. “... carrying foolishness to the extreme to live in such a deserted part of the earth where there were no civilized people. Mother, who had opposed the migration project for twenty years, was now forced to live in a house worse than a pigpen in Switzerland, spending the days cooking for a hungry group before an open hearth, baking bread daily in iron pots and working late into the night mending the tattered clothes of the men.” Raymond Jurgen Spahn, *The Swiss on Looking Glass Prairie: A Century and a Half, 1831-1981* (Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 37.

3 Greenberg, *Land that Our Father’s Plowed*, 67-84.

4 Ibid., 69,76,79,80.
5 Sonja Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony: Family, Farming and Community in the Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 125-129. Husbands and wives were considered management teams, with the men “calling the shots” and over half of the women in charge of the farm bookkeeping. It was expected that wives, sons, and daughters would work in the fields. Salamon concluded, “Production participation by all family members, regardless of gender, is validated by the goal of achieving continuity.”


9 Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony*, 120. Salamon asserts, “In farm families where the husband and the wife bond is dominant, resources are considered theirs rather than family property, and children are expect to leave, form an independent family, and produce their own resources. In families where the father and son bond is dominant, land resources belong to the family line and are handed down from father to son.”

10 See also Jon Gjerde *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 192-201.


12 Ibid., 126.

13 Lagerquist, *In America the Men Milk the Cows*, 107-110. Women’s participation and contributions were behind the scenes. A woman’s life was punctuated by religious traditions from birth until death. For example, confirmation marked the end of childhood. As early as the 1860’s Norwegian Lutheran local churches formed groups to support the
mission of the larger church. The *kjelpeforening*, “women’s society” accepted all adult women as soon as they married. The *kjelpeforening* became a necessary social alliance; to exclude oneself from the group would mean to exclude one from the community (134). The women often organized the social calendar for the whole congregation.

14 Jesse Johnson, ed., “Century-Old Family Mystery Brings Genealogy Buffs to Area” *Amboy News* (Illinois), 9 October 2002. Lewis Peter Magnuson’s obituary can be found in the *LaMoille Gazette*, 30 November 1895, vol. VII.

15 According to Mike Light, “Swedish Immigration to Rock Island County, Illinois” (M.A. diss., Illinois State University, 1993), crop failure, strains in the timber industry and high unemployment motivated Swedes to America in the 1850-1900. The second phase from 1868-1873 included 100,000 Swedes who left for America; and in the third phase from 1879-1899, 493,000 Swedish citizens left their homeland. Eventually a network of “tales and frequent trips back and forth across the Atlantic created a desire to immigrate that had little to do with economics. The Swedish population already in America exerted a constant pressure upon relatives and friends to come and join them” (4-7).


17 For a listing of Swedes residing in Princeton as well as their businesses and associations in 1900, consult *The City Directory of Princeton* at the Princeton Genealogical Society, 512 Main St. Princeton, IL 61356.


20 Leonard, Big Bureau and Bright Prairies, 13-25.

21 Jim Redd, The Illinois and Michigan Canal: A Contemporary Perspective in Essays and Photographs (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 1-2. For six short years, the I&M canal profited by a virtual monopoly on trade between the Mississippi Valley and the East. That all ended with the railroad in 1854. Still, peak years for the canal were from 1860-1890. Chicago as a city grew rapidly because of its location as “a cargo transfer point between lake and canal boats.” The population grew “from twelve hundred to seventy-four thousand after six years of operation, a boom due largely to the canal.” The canal closed officially in 1933. For more readings about the rise and fall of the I & M canal, read Prairie Passage: The Illinois and Michigan Canal Corridor by Emily Harris and photographs by Edward Ranney (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Donald W. Griffin, “The Commercial Failure of the Hennipen Canal,” Western Illinois Regional Studies, vol 13-14 no. 2 (1991), 27.


CHAPTER III
COMPARING TWO COAL TOWNS IN BUREAU COUNTY, 1900:
SEATONVILLE AND LADD

In the year of 1900, the village of Seatonville had a population of 909 people, and as the crows flew four miles to the north, the town of Ladd supported 1272 residents. These towns existed primarily to support the coal mining industry in north central Illinois which made each community both dynamic and industrious. Coal mining infiltrated the very existence of the town and defined roles for all members of a family. Women of all ethnicities catered to boarders in addition to their immediate families while ethnicity determined the job of males or whether children went to school or worked along side their parents.

By examining the 1900 federal population census, many components of the Seatonville family unit can be analyzed. The evidenced showed that 160 residents, most of whom were male, immigrant coal miners between the ages of 20-40 years boarded in village homes. The village was home to 174 families. The average family size was five, and the average number of boarders living in a household was two. Approximately seven people, then, shared the same house.¹
Below are eight examples of “typical” families in Seatonville in 1900 as reported by the Twelfth Census of the United States:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 39-year-old Irish coal miner had been in the U.S. for fourteen years and had a wife, three children, and a 37-year-old brother who worked with him as a coal miner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 32-year-old coal miner boarder who was born in, and his parents came from, Lithuania Russia had been in the U.S. for one year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 35-year-old Lithuanian Russian saloonkeeper had been in the U.S. for fifteen years. His family size was six: he had a wife and five children plus five boarders living at that time in his home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 41-year-old female dressmaker born in and from New York had four children and two boarders who lived in her home. She was married but her husband’s whereabouts were unknown. Her fourteen-year-old son was a coal miner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 28-year-old Swedish engineer had been in the United States for 8 years and had a wife and one child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 28-year-old English mine foreman whose parents were from England had a wife and three children and one boarder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 32-year-old Belgian who had been in the country for 25 years had a wife and one child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 50-year-old coal miner who had been in the country for 11 years had a wife, two children, plus extended his home to two boarders. His 18-year-old son was also a coal miner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Census takers at the turn of the century scribbled notations indicating Seatonville’s ethnic solidarity. As suggested in Carol Giesen’s Coal Miners’ Wives, the life of a coal-mining town and the necessity for families to seek consolation and support from their kinship network--that is,
their families and neighbors—was crucial to their survival. Giesen reported the sentiment of one woman in Kentucky: "We have something in common, like a bond. You have to be a miner's wife to understand a miner's wife." Although Giesen's study was set in Kentucky, Illinois miners shared a similar culture; the grisliness of a miner's life transcended state borders.

Every family entry in the Seatonville census revealed patterns as well as important differences. Categorizing the families by their ethnicity dramatically revealed the make up of the citizens and their occupations. For example, the raw data uncovered that Italians performed two occupations. Of the 41 Italian families cited in the census, 39 heads of house had been coal miners and 5 were saloonkeepers. It would be safe to say that Italians in Seatonville in 1900 were coal miners and their primary source for socialization took place in an Italian bar. Five saloons existed for thirty-nine heads of house, their sons, and 55 Italian boarders. In addition to charting the families based on their ethnicity, population totals exposed the relationship between families and boarders in Table 1.

Table 1. Population Totals of Seatonville, Ill., Based on Ethnicity, 1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNICITY</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>BOARDERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What can be divulged about the residents of Seatonville in 1900 from the census?

One specific observation showed that the population of Italians, Swedes, and Russian Lithuanians was comprised of more boarders than families. In general, although an average of two boarders occupied the house of a family, there were quite a few homes, seventeen in fact, which had four or more boarders living in the home. A handful of those seventeen had more than six boarders living with them. The census also revealed that boarders stayed in homes corresponding to their own ethnicity, no doubt seeking compatibility in language and customs or simply because they were following a migration route. The exception was the lone Welshman who resided with an Anglo-American family from New York. Not surprising, the highest number of boarders sojourning in a home were in the two leading ethnic immigrant groups, the Lithuanian Russians and the Italians.

The square footage of houses lived in by the working-class population in 1900 was small, begging the question: how did they all fit into cramped quarters? Obviously, bedrooms were shared; the smaller the house, the less privacy and space. Boarders would rent a bed and share it with other boarders alternating their sleep between shifts. The responsibility of feeding and washing (in some cases, the upper body of the worker) fell
on the shoulders of the women and girls in the house who acted as chambermaids, washers, and cooks. An Irish servant girl from Butte, Montana described her routine that echoed similar routines shared by laboring females across the United States: “Monday was wash day. Tuesday was ironing and Wednesday was kind of pick up everything . . . Thursday we usually did a lot of cooking. Friday, the beds had to be changed, the rooms all cleaned and dusted and the kitchen had to be scrubbed . . .” 6 The female workload was cumbersome and devoured all hours of the day and week. Keeping boarders, though, was an important way for families to supplement the miner’s income. Due to the continuous flow of migrating immigrant men who came to work in the mines, “A woman with three boarders would raise about a third of a typical family’s income in 1900.” 7

From the way in which the census was taken, it is possible to study a neighborhood as well as an individual family. When census agent, Martin G. Bolt, walked through the neighborhoods and logged each family onto the census form, one deduction was clear: If one family had several boarders renting a room or beds in their home, chances were, so had their neighbor. For example, on July 2, Mr. Bolt inspected a cluster of nine families who lived next door to each other. All of the families had two to four boarders living with them. Neighbors were of the same ethnicity further strengthening a network jelled by old world customs and languages. However, on June 30, in another neighborhood no boarders lived with any family, suggesting that families tended to structure their streets around what was the norm of the neighbor. Perhaps those people did not have kinsmen moving in from the old country; maybe they did not need
the money. Those families without boarders were the “American” families—at least second-generation citizens whose parents’ ethnicity was not noted but rather identified by the state in which the parent had been born. To residents in Seatonville, ethnicity only referred to immigrants who, even if they had been in the country for several years and were citizens, were different because they utilized a language other than English, or they relied on the migration pattern of their ethnicity to find work. 

Other than the Welshman (considered Anglo and therefore “close enough” to resemble his hosts) who stayed with an American family, Americans boarded a total of 11 migrating men who were also considered American.

The duration of time immigrants had been living in the United States emerged as an interesting result from the census. Most residents, be they first or second-generation immigrants, including the boarders, had been in the U. S. for longer than ten years. Only 39 out of the 160 boarders had been in the country for four years or less. Table 2 illustrates heads of the families had been living in the U.S. for longer periods of time. The new wave of immigrants in the late nineteenth century had been living in Bureau County for a generation; 86 immigrant families had been in the U.S. for over 20 years.
Table 2. Households with Boarders, Seatonville, Il., 1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in the U.S.</th>
<th>0-9</th>
<th>10-19</th>
<th>20-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900.*

Did the coal mines provide labor and wages to all workers in Seatonville? The answer was yes if you were a boarder. Out of 160 people who boarded in Seatonville, only 20 people did not work in the mines. On a large scale, the entire population of Seatonville over the age of fifteen was employed either in the coalmines or performed services that supported the running of the mine, including leisure or feeding of miners such as worked performed in saloons. The most interesting aspect to be gained from the census was not so much what one did, but what type of job was available to you based upon your ethnic group. As mentioned before, if you were Italian, two professions were open: coal mining or saloonkeeper. Similarly, the Irish were either coal miners or one of three saloonkeepers (excluding one merchant and one blacksmith). The Russian Lithuanians made up the largest percentage of the total coal miners in the town, and yet they had only one saloon. No other jobs were open to them. Whether this was an ethnic discrimination or choice by the Lithuanians was not apparent.
There was definite ranking among jobs, and members of ethnic groups set their social status among their professions. The craftsmen of the town were the Swedes. As an ethnic group of ten families and eleven boarders, they were engineers, carpenters, masons, painters and plasterers; only four were coal miners. The more enviable jobs (which often meant the cleaner and safer jobs) were professional in nature. Only the English and other “Americans” who resembled the Anglo protestant could secure a professional position. For example, the only preacher in the town was English. So, too, were the hotelkeeper, the mine foreman, and the mine superintendent like John Cherry, who was a 59-year-old man who had lived in the U.S. most of his life. Three of his four children went to school, including his fourteen-year-old son Joseph, and his eighteen-year-old daughter who was also a clerk.

The newly arrived immigrant would follow the footsteps of his kin. If the census showed that all Lithuanian Russians who came to Seatonville worked in the coal mines, it would be safe to bet that subsequent Russians would be coal miners as well. As Donna Gabaccia noted of immigrants in that period, “Segregation of European immigrants by ethnic group and class, while visible and persistent, was voluntary. Work and residence heavily influenced immigrant men and women’s opportunities to meet, socialize, and solve problems collectively.” ¹⁰ The need to cluster and connect to others from the same culture and ethnicity is the definition of ethnic regionalism. This reality kept an ethnic group performing the same job and moving in the same social circles.
Consequently, an ethnic hierarchy formed in these communities. Second and third
generation Americans had the advantage of time in the U.S. to learn a trade or expand
their language skills beyond the group cluster and were generally wealthier than newly
arrived immigrants. There was a correlation between Old Immigrants possessing higher
paying, more respectable jobs. Their children had the privilege of attending school rather
than to be forced to supplement the family income by working. For instance, 18-year-old
Isabella Cherry’s clerk job was an enviable position since most girls who earned wages
during this time, according to the census, were hired for domestic help. Other Old
Immigrants like the Belgians, Swedes, French and Germans were the merchants and the
leaders of the community. They were policemen, managers of stores and lumberyards,
foremen, and engineers of the mines.\footnote{11}

Children also played an economic role in the family of this coal-mining village.
Twenty-five children between the ages of 9 and 17 earned wages. Males were coal
miners starting at the age of 13. They were also day laborers or learned a trade with their
fathers in the family business such as carpentry or plastering. Most girls were hired as
domestic help. Though children worked to supplement the family income, Seatonville
parents wanted their children to attend school, and the census supports this desire.
According to the census, families reported that most children were “in school.” The
exception was coal mining families whose children ended their schooling in order to
work in the mines. Take for example the following entry: “A fifty-one-year-old coal
miner who had been in the United States for twenty-eight years was a widow with five
sons, three of which aged 14, 17, and 19 worked in the coal mine. His two other children aged 9 and 11, still attended school.”

Is the town of Ladd similar to Seatonville?

Ladd, a coal-mining town, differed from Seatonville in two important ways. First, the population of Ladd grew rapidly from citizens in 1890 to 1,272 in 1900. Second, the two predominant ethnic groups were from Italy and Ireland. Ladd had no Lithuanian Russians, although they did have twenty-two families who were considered “Polish Russians.” Like Seatonville, smaller numbers of Old Immigrants came from Sweden, Germany, Belgium, Scotland, and Wales. Ladd even had a Syrian fruit dealer named Joseph Gorra along with his fifteen-year-old daughter, Rosa, who worked as a housekeeper. But the flavor of Ladd resided in the ethnicity of 46 Italian and 25 Irish families. Twenty-nine were considered “American” because heads of families and their parents were born in a U. S. state.

As far as boarders were concerned, Ladd had a significant number, 218. The most interesting observation gleaned from the census was that Ladd’s boarders were scattered throughout the town but packed into a small number of homes. In other words, while in Seatonville everyone seemed to house a boarder or two, in Ladd, few family homes held a boarder. In fact, 141 boarders lived with seventeen families for an average of more than 8 boarders per household. Table 3 shows the numbers of boarders living in Ladd.
Table 3. Boarders Staying with Families in Ladd, 1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Families with four or less boarders living in their homes</th>
<th>77</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families with five to seven boarders living in their homes</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families with eight to 16 boarders living in their homes</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Twelfth Census of the United States, Ladd, Illinois, 1900

As in Seatonville, the occupations and their desirability in Ladd corresponded with ethnicity. It was again the English and the Americans who were the station engineers, the store managers, the firemen, the yardmasters, and the teachers. But Ladd differed from Seatonville in one particular way: it was a better-rounded town that contained several institutions and businesses. While Seatonville’s institutions were mostly saloons, Ladd had a school, a church, a city hall, a fire house, a bank, a police station, a railroad station, a grain elevator, various agents, merchants and craftsmen such as harness makers, dressmakers, railroad car repairmen and carpenters. Of course, Ladd had its share of saloons, too. The town of Ladd was not merely about coal. It wanted a permanent existence.

In addition to census reports, another way to gain a visual perceptive of Ladd was by studying the Sanborn Map of 1906, the first map created of Ladd by the New York Insurance Company. One of the more interesting aspects of the map concerned the 80 dwellings in the village. For the total population of 1272 people, each house averaged 15 people, suggesting that high numbers of immediate and extended family members lived under one roof. The boarders in Ladd cramped themselves into a smaller number of
homes than those in Seatonville, but the congestion was due to the inadequate number of houses to support its population.

When viewing Main Street, another aspect of Ladd was evident: twelve saloons occupied a three-block radius. Four others were spread throughout the town—sixteen saloons for 1272 people. For communities like Ladd and Seatonville, saloons were community-gathering places for men to share information, gossip, and friendship. Some saloons catered to families if it was a "tame" or respectable enough. An Irish immigrant miner explained, "When you dig for all day in the moist drifts underground, and you come up, and there is no sunlight, no waves beating against a rocky shore, why, a saloon, is a heaven then." 15 Saloons were a way for men to rest from the dark, gruesome life of coal mining.

The working conditions of miners were dangerous, as citizens from the neighboring town of Cherry would attest when 259 miners and rescuers died from a shaft fire in the Cherry Mine Disaster in November 19, 1909. 16 The Seatonville and Ladd mines were shaft mines called Longwalls. That meant that all coal was removed and each room was backfilled with rock to provide support. 17 Cage elevators would lower and raise the miners from the interior. Boys would open the shaft doors, feed the mules, light the lamps with kerosene and perform various other errands. Shifts were usually 12 hours long, six days a week. Fires, shifting earth, machine breakdowns, explosions, and black lung disease were common dangers all miners and their families worried about. 18 The cage, usually without side walls, would hurl men up and down the shaft at fast speeds.
causing dismemberment or deaths. The psychological scars of a coal miner included feelings of suffocation and melancholia due to the confinement of the shafts, and working in the dark. In 1909, average pay for coal miners was $690.00 annum for white, native-born residents while foreign-born immigrants averaged $444,\textsuperscript{19} standard amounts for the time.

Although the mines have long been closed, one can still witness remnants of the bustling towns of Seatonville and Ladd by gazing at the great pyramids of the Midwest, the slag piles. These two coal-mining towns are legacies to an industrial history of importance. It was the need for jobs which attracted so many immigrants to the coalmines. Many immigrants and workers had previously mined in Pennsylvania but moved west to Illinois in the 1890’s, just as they would move to southern Illinois in the 1920’s. Others decided to stay and call Ladd home. Ladd has survived the coal industry and has been able to maintain its small town culture due to the fact that it diversified from coal to commerce and mercantile businesses.
NOTES


2 Carol Giesen, *Coal Miners' Wives: Portraits of Endurance* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 16-19; See also Richard Joyce’s “Miners of the Prairie: Life and Labor in the Wilmington, Illinois, Coal Field, 1866-1897” (Master’s thesis, Illinois State University, 1980), 25-26. “One of the features of all mining communities was the ‘brooding expectancy of death, the day-to-day destruction of human life that cause wives to send their men off to mines each day always wondering whether they will return alive.’”

3 *The Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Seatonville Village.*


6 Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-1941* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 20. Although this Irish girl described her housekeeping routine from a mining camp in Kentucky, female workers in Illinois no doubt had similar routines. See also, Dorothy Schwieder, *Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa’s Coal Mining Communities, 1895-1925* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983).


9 Scholars generally agree that the first wave of immigrants arrived in the U.S. from 1789-1890, while a “new wave” came in 1890-1920’s. This new wave consisted of eastern and southern Europeans who labored in the mines. Leonard Dinnerstein & David Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration* (New York: Columbia University

10 Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, 77-78.


12 *The Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, Seatonville village, entry 313.


14 *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1st-9th* of June, 1900.


CHAPTER IV
THE FAMILY UNIT, THEIR OCCUPATIONS, AND THE PREDOMINANCE OF
THE RAILROAD IN MENDOTA, LASALLE COUNTY, 1900

Mendota in LaSalle County was founded in 1853 when the Illinois Central Rail
Road and the C.B. & Q.R.R. (Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Rail Road) converged in
the middle of the Illinois plains, 100 miles west of Chicago. The majority of businesses
flourished from freight distribution. Town leaders, however, were wise enough to
diversify beyond the world of railroad industry, or Mendota would have wilted and died
along with many other towns whose dependency rested on the shoulders of one industry,
such as what happened in Ladd when coal mining production ended. The community
attracted second generation Americans, transient African Americans, and descendents
from Germany and the United Kingdom. The importance of the extended family for the
first two generations of migrating immigrants was vital. But in 1900, “native-born
Americans no longer needed the clan membership that had existed on the frontier” in
areas like fifty-year-old Mendota.¹ By 1900, the population of Mendota was
approximately 5000. The family unit in Mendota was nuclear with few extended family
members or boarders sharing the same household. They fulfilled their labor and
professional occupations defined by their age, gender and connection to the railroad.

Throughout the nineteenth century, young couples with few children trekked to
the agricultural frontier. In “Kinship Networks and Migration,” immigrant historian
Robert C. Ostergren explains that “. . . the kinship factor was an integral one.” After fifty years of development, settlers living in Mendota had established roots. How many migrants extended the chain migration to Chicago or to the West is unknown, but a study of migration patterns of a nearly identical town to Mendota in 1890 confirmed that Americans in Illinois were a transitory group. Paxton, Illinois, 103 miles south of Chicago and a railroad depot for the Illinois Central and the Lake Erie & Western, reported that residents were “relatively mobile” and headed for Chicago and Kansas in 1890.3

The majority of the families in Mendota at the turn of the twentieth century had parents who had been born in other parts of the United States such as Missouri or Pennsylvania. The largest ethnic group was German while the remaining residents came primarily from countries within the United Kingdom. Starting in the 1850’s, the Illinois Central brought Germans, Irish, Welsh, and the English to the area. Mendota was a prime example reflecting this migration of the late nineteenth century.4 German migration chains had brought East Frisians by paddleboat on the Illinois River to Peoria (90 miles south of Mendota) before the IC laid its tracks. Another German chain from the island of Ruegen off the coast of Pomerania settled in nearby Bloomington. Migration chains, then, attracted immigrants from the same region of Europe.5 Robert Frizzel asserts, “Where the first migrants from a given area happened to settle, others would follow.”6

According to the 1900 Federal Census, eastern Europeans and Italian families did not settle in Mendota. Additionally, of the 682 families residing in Mendota in 1900, only
nine African American families were officially documented in the census, though most likely an undocumented population came from the South by train. Mendota was an Anglo-Saxon community made up of a miscellaneous array of merchants, tradesman, and professionals.

Two census gatherers split the three wards of Mendota on the first of June and tackled the streets to gather statistical information one household at a time. The Sun Bulletin warned residents they would be coming. Trying to explain the relevance of the census, as well as why they should give out personal answers to probing strangers, residents were told, “From the answers to the questions it is possible to determine the birth rate, the prevalence of marriage, the proportion of women and children to the whole population, the duration and fruitfulness of marriage . . . these questions are a matter of public necessity.”7 Dividing the town into wards, they questioned on average twenty families a day. The layout of the city in 1900 can be ascertained from maps drawn by the Sanborn Map Company of New York City, established for the purpose of handling insurance fire claims. Segmented into 10 districts, the approximate population of Mendota advertised was 5000,8 although the twelfth census in 1900 reported a smaller number of 3762.9 Two wards contained 468 families while the third ward encompassed 214 families for a total of 682 families who resided in the city of Mendota, although when individually tabulated, there was an increase of 44 families.
Table 4. Family Composition of the City of Mendota

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heads of House with no spouse or children:</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Head of house with spouse only</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male head of house with spouse and one to four children</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male head of house with spouse and more than four children</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families with extended family members (children, adults)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed spouse (male or female)</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heads of house who did not work</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodgers, servants</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American families (total of 33 people)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Illinois, *Twelfth Census of the United States, Mendota Township, 1900*

A few general statements can be made concerning these statistics. First, families were three times more likely to have 1-3 children in their household. German Protestants, who typically did not equate the success of the family unit by the size of the family—unlike Irish or Italian Catholic families who did—were the major ethnic component in Mendota; therefore, it was not surprising to discover that family sizes were small. In fact, one quarter of all families had no children at all. But of those families who did have children, three-quarters of them had fewer than four children.

Second, only one-quarter of the families in Mendota had extended family members living with them. This proportion coincided with the national pattern of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Historians Hareven and Vinovskis, surveying the
years from the 1860’s to 1890’s concluded that 75 to 80 percent of families were nuclear, with only 12 to 15 percent extended and 3 to 5 percent single-member households.\textsuperscript{11} Within these kinship networks, families favored strangers sharing their lodgings, while outside the household they preferred to interact with kin rather than with strangers. Immigrants who came to the U. S. relied heavily upon the network of familial ties. Most were unable to speak English, and in need of work; and many longed for their familiar native culture. Subsequent generations—or in Mendota’s case, residents in 1900—found it unnecessary to belong to ethnic organizations designed to assist newly arrived immigrants from the mother or fatherland; the residents themselves were providing the assistance. Historians have classified Americans in the nineteenth century as rootless and migratory, yet by the end of the century, boarding had lost its “formal poor-relief function in a familial society . . . boarding was still chosen as a family surrogate.”\textsuperscript{12} In other LaSalle and Bureau County towns like Spring Valley and LaSalle, the diversity of ethnicity and high numbers of boarders was significant. This was not the case in Mendota.

Two statistics in Mendota were unusual; first, one third of all families had a widowed head of house, be they male or female and those widowed tended to be over the age of 50. In fact many were aged in their 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, with their 30-50 year-old children living with them. In 1900, 186 widows lived in Mendota and Table 5 shows the break down between age groups.
Table 5. Ages of a Widowed Male or Female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30 yrs old</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 yrs old</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 yrs old</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60 yrs old</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70 yrs old</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71-80 yrs old</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-90 yrs old</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 91</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Twelfth Census of the United States, City of Mendota, 1900.

Not all the widowed had children and those who did not could have been documented in the census as a lodger, servant, or an extended family member. Forty-five widowed lived alone as head of house; 38 widowed lived at home with a parent; but 102 widowed out of 186 had children to support. Two families follow to illustrate the statistics. The first family highlighted, the Bach family, showed second generation Anna Bach, a widow at age 55, had four daughters and one son, ranging from the ages of 11 to 22. Anastasia and Anna Louise, the older two, worked as a seamstress and a servant girl to help support the family. Interestingly, the mother Anna, received no outside income evidenced by the entry “NG” (no gainful employment) under the occupation line of the census. In this family, it appears the daughters carried the financial burden; perhaps the mother brought work into the home, such as sewing and washing.

The second family selected was Georg Gardner’s family. His parents were Irish, but Georg was born in Pennsylvania. At 76 he was a widower and a landlord. He had two
sons living with him, Georg P. and Corbus, aged 43 and 31. Georg P. was also a widower, and his two daughters, Netty and May, lived with their father, uncle, and grandfather. The Gardners employed a live-in servant, twenty-one year old Theresa Metzen. Everyone in the household was an adult, but only half earned a salary. Netty was twenty-one with no outside income while twenty-year-old May was a teacher. The younger son, Corbus, was a lawyer while his older brother, Georg P. had no noted outside income. Could he have assisted with the duties of his landlord father? Did Netty run the house and watch over Theresa the maid or maybe her ailing father? At the age of 76, perhaps Georg Sr. needed assistance. Regardless, this older family had three generations living under one roof with two professionals and a servant, which suggested that the Gardners were financially comfortable.

Many of these widows had lost their husbands in the Civil War, according to Steve Dancey, curator at Carnegie Hume Historical Museum in Mendota. Approximately 125 widows in 1900 were victims of the war. In addition to the high number of those who were widowed, the numbers showed that Mendota had an unusually low mortality rate. According the U.S. Census Bureau, the national life expectancy at birth for men in 1900 was 46.3 years and 48.3 years for women. Roughly one in three families was widowed because the majority of them outlived the national average. In 1900, many Mendotans were old.

The second peculiar statistic of the families in Mendota concerned a third of them, specifically 157, who reported they earned no income. The appendix of the Department
of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census Special Reports Occupations, for 1900, reprinted instructions to census gatherers with an explanation how they should define occupations as well as what constituted a professional, trade, domestic, manufacturing, or merchant job. With regard to income, instructions stated that “no entry should be made for a lawyer, merchant, manufacture, etc., who has retired from practice or business or for a wife or daughter living at home and assisting only in the household duties without pay; nor for a person too old to work or a child under 10 years of age at school.” For example, in the census, the family numbered 368 headed by Bell Bailey from New York and the family numbered 369 headed by Anna Harris from Ohio, were both heads of house who did not earn a salary nor did their children. At age 50 and 78, respectively, Anna Harris’s daughter was a 55-year-old widow herself, with a fourteen-year-old daughter to support, too. While their ages might explain their non-gainful employment entry in the census, the census does not reveal how these two neighbors, and very possibly friends, survived financially when they did not work, or their children.

It is not clear what kind of aid these 157 families with no income received. Nor is it clear how many heads of house “retired” from their vocation and received a pension. The Illinois Poor Law had been enacted as early as 1819. As of 1900, the county was responsible for administering relief to the poor. The Act of 1874 stated that relatives were obligated to support their kin; if that were not an option, then support would be granted from a county poorhouse. If the county had no poorhouse, they were to be placed in the care of a contracted home. If only partial care was needed, then temporary relief was
granted. If a township provided no relief, a county agent and overseer assessed the situation. Although it is not evident what Mendota's situation was with regard to the poor, it can be assumed that county officials attended those who needed relief. Most likely wages earned in the family resulted from homework or money from boarders. The also provided a skilled service to the community such as sewing or alterations, or working as a laborer who was paid in cash, and therefore not earning an official salary that would have been documented by the census.  

African Americans in Mendota

There were nine African American families living in the city of Mendota in 1900, and they were scattered about the town. All of their neighbors were white; they were not segregated to the fringes of the town, as one might guess. Two men lived alone with no spouse or children; one female was a servant, and one male was a teamster. Other occupations included a waiter on the dining car, a hotel clerk, a day laborer, a brick yard laborer, a laundress, and a billposter. One non-traditional marriage existed: James Smith the bill poster, was a 34-year-old African American from Washington D.C., and he married Anastasia who was older by nine years and white. After 1848, Illinois miscegenation laws did not recognize “the marriage tie between a white and a Negro” although by 1900, no laws prohibited interracial marriages. Only thirty-three African Americans lived among approximately 4000 whites and they performed service jobs and existed independently of one another. That was what the census told; however, the Illinois Central brought many more free blacks to Mendota. The diaspora of African
Americans from the South hoping to escape Jim Crow oppression added to the population of the town, but they were not documented by official means. They were a nomadic, band of citizens no town desired and for which no statistic other than oral recollections could document.\textsuperscript{20}

Persecuted in the Northern environs, "... between 1870 and 1910, an average of 6,700 southern blacks moved north annually," historian Jacqueline Jones notes, "and Midwestern cities received only a few hundred black southerners each year." Recollections from those who migrated support these findings. Generally, these early movements of African Americans consisted of young men and women traveling alone. As single sojourners, they found work in the homes of white families.\textsuperscript{21}

Even when a sizeable number of African American citizens lived in a town, they were not welcomed for long. This was true in the Illinois region under discussion or elsewhere. For example, the largest cluster of African Americans in the area resided 30 miles away in Spring Valley, an ebullient, ethnically diverse, coal-mining town in eastern Bureau County. According to the Spring Valley census of 1900, 132 African Americans lived together at "The Location," the name given to the black neighborhood on the periphery of town, but these black citizens could not escape racial tension or even riot.\textsuperscript{22} In 1895, a race riot erupted, inciting a mob that demanded mine manager, Sam Dalzell, to discharge all black miners and make them leave the city. His action served as punishment for an incident which occurred in the early morning on August 4, where an African American supposedly robbed and shot Barny Rolle, a twenty-six-year-old Italian miner.
Not satisfied by Dalzell’s response that he would fire those guilty of the robbery, a large mob of approximately 400 men attacked and assaulted the residents and homes in “The Location.”

With this disturbing incident fresh in the minds of the people of Mendota, it might explain why only nine African American families lived in Mendota. Apprehensive of repeating a similar situation if African Americans were allowed to reside in Mendota, racist pressures forced African Americans to relocate elsewhere, like the cities of Chicago and St. Louis where they could find housing, work, and the support of hundreds of other African American families.

**Occupations Held by the People of Mendota**

The occupations held by the residents of Mendota in 1900 corresponded with the businesses listed on the Sanborn Map and illustrated the variation between trade, merchant, and professional jobs. The map also shows the diversity of businesses in operation which ultimately led to the survival of Mendota after the decline of the railroad industry by 1917. Based upon how many city blocks the company utilized, one could guess which businesses required the most employees, such as the Mendota Tile and Brick Co. located on the northwest side of the town, or the Black Brothers Machinery Company established on Main and Monroe Street. Table 6 lists the primary employers in the city just after the turn of the century.
Table 6. Major Employers of the City of Mendota, 1902

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlas Grain Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Brothers Machinery Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter Organ Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigars First Co., (factory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. L. Roger’s Creamery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwin and Hess Brick Yards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henning Brewing Company Brewery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter and Hapeman’s Lumber Yard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. D. Tower and Sons Co. Agricultural Implements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendota Mfg and Transfer Co.,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheller &amp; Goebel Carriage Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday &amp; Pohl Carriage Works</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sanborn Map Company, Mendota, 1902

Two colleges, Wartburg Lutheran Seminary College and Mendota College, along with public and private elementary and secondary schools, employed the largest percent of professionals: 27 teachers. The presence of an educated populace combined with a high number of industrialists allowed Mendota’s leaders to cultivate the most growth and prosperity from the town. While these key employers drove Mendota’s economy, the non-essential businesses embedded prosperity in the community. A significant percentage of professional residents bought luxury items such as fine clothing, house furnishings, and jewelry. Eighteen entrepreneurs who lived off their investments, along with the six doctors, six dentists, three bankers, three lawyers, two veterinarians, six ministers and two priests, twenty-seven teachers, two photographers and one embalmer, made up the white-collar class.
According to the Department of Commerce and Labor special report on occupations, a categorical description of occupations was set forth for census takers. The categories were: professionals, trade and transportation, manufacturing and mechanical, domestic and personal service. Jobs were listed under these categories further defining the broad categories. Information in Table 7 lists the categories and jobs reported from the Mendota census. Notice that blue and white-collar jobs were mixed. Between those who provided the service and those who received the service, an equitable, middling workforce kept Mendota active.

Table 7. Categories and Totals of Professions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROFESSIONALS:</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors, lawyers, clergymen, dentists, teachers, civil or mining engineer, artists, surveyors, capitalists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRADE AND TRANSPORTATION: 318</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchants, Real estate agents, accountants, bookkeepers, wholesale dry goods, clerks, bank clerks and cashiers, peddlers, telegraph operators, salesman, teamsters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANUFACTURING AND MECHANICAL: 258</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter, masons, painter, machinists, plumber, pressman, dressmaker, seamstress, clock repairer, bricklayer, printers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOMESTIC AND PERSONAL SERVICE: 97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firemen, policemen, housekeeper, servant, bartender, hotel clerk, barber, laundress, landlord</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Twelfth Census of the United States, City of Mendota, 1900
Child Labor Force

The 1900 census documented 993 children in the city of Mendota. A surprisingly few number of adolescents from the ages of 12-17 worked in categories defined by the Department of Commerce and Labor report. This would be another indication of Mendota's wealth. In other communities where newly arrived immigrants struggled to survive, families expected their children to supplement familial income. But in Mendota, their children were not required to work in order to keep the family solvent. Table 8.

Table 8. Child Labor and Education Totals

| Children (12-17) who worked: | 68 |
| Children (6-17) who went to school: | 532 |
| Children who neither worked nor went to school: | 392 |

Source: U.S Department of Illinois, Twelfth Census of the United States, Mendota, 1900

Education was valued, but only one half of the children's population attended school: One hundred eight children were under the age of six, so they were not old enough to attend leaving 274 children who did not officially attend school. Excluding those children who worked on the farm, few children worked under the age of fourteen, which corresponded to Illinois law. The census does not report whether those who were listed as earning a wage also attended school. Table 9 lists the specifics of Mendota's child labor force. Only two fields of employment were available to girls--those involving
domestic work or seamstresses—but boys’ options were numerous. Many apprenticed
themselves to trade or manufacturing jobs while others were laborers, messenger boys, or
in sales.

Table 9. Ages, Gender, and Occupations of Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Occupation Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 year old male</td>
<td>(1) day laborer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 year old female</td>
<td>(2) servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 year old males</td>
<td>(3) day laborer, barber appr., brickyard laborer, messenger boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 year old females</td>
<td>(4) servants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 year old males</td>
<td>(5) bridge laborer, miller apprentice, tailor apprentice, soda worker, factory worker, fireman apprentice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 year old females</td>
<td>(7) servant, dressmaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 year old males</td>
<td>(11) printer, cigar apprentice, salesman, laborer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 year old females</td>
<td>(9) servant, seamstress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 year old males</td>
<td>(12) dry goods salesman, printer, salesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 year old females</td>
<td>(9) servant, laundress, seamstress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Twelfth Census of the United States*, Mendota City, 1900

The Occupations of the Railroad

As a railroad hub of LaSalle County for the Illinois Central Railroad (IC) and the
Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad (CB&Q), Mendota was one of 49 railroad
stations that had been systematically selected to service the IC by the Associates Land
Company. That company encouraged migrating Americans to settle in the area. This
process depended on the ability of railroad officials to create an infrastructure whereby
settlers turned the land into acres of crops such as corn that then needed to find its way to
cities via the railroad. When the IC was completed in 1856, it ran 705 miles from northern Illinois to the southern Illinois town of Cairo and formed the longest line in the world. By 1900, the Illinois Central had expanded her line to 3,845 miles and generated an annual income of $37 million, earning the IC the nickname “Main Line of Mid America.” The CB&Q, on the other hand, was one of the four Granger railroads created to run west to service pioneers and fledgling cities. Originally running only in Illinois, feeder lines extended her west to Denver and Wyoming, to haul crops and livestock. At the heart of any railroad depot was the roadhouse, and like other nineteenth century Americana structures—for instance, covered bridges—each roadhouse was architecturally unique, varying in size and splendor. The Union Depot in Mendota was an imposing brick structure with a center tower and pyramidal roof that pierced the sky. Extending a block on central Main Street, it offered amenities for railroad workers and passengers who came to town, including washing facilities, a restaurant, lounge, law offices, businesses, and a photo studio. While railroad magnates helped establish wealth and beauty in the heartland, they did so by exploiting natural resources and workers.

Workers of the railroad were one of the more exploited workforces in the country. Historians Dubofsky and Dulles contend that skilled workers could expect low wages and long hours in the 1890’s while unskilled laborers “existed on the barest subsistence level.” Labor was a cheap commodity and a worker’s right to organize into a union was not accepted by employers. Edward Harriman who controlled the I.C. and C.B.& Q, could marvel at “the golden age of the railroad,” but the miraculous show of technology
was bought and paid for by the sweat and lives of men and their families including many immigrants. Other notorious line owners, J. P. Morgan, Alexander Cassatt, George Gould, William Moore, and Vanderbilt, achieved their fabulous wealth through corrupt means like rate fixing. These practices influenced both the railroad worker and the farmer.

Still, the railroad was the prime mode of transportation for Americans and was important because it touched the lives of everyone. The general public respected the railroad crew and saw their work as a noble occupation. Men who worked on the railroad all of their lives often felt a loyalty to the line. They even thought of “their” train as female with and their relationship to the machine a marriage of sorts, producing an allegiance based upon a devotion and duty to uphold and care for “her.”

Working on the railroad meant that some jobs were more prestigious than others. Two positions were most enviable, the engineer and the conductor. Engineers rose in ranks from brakemen to conductors to firemen then to engineer, and it was his hand that steered the locomotive. The conductor dealt with the public collecting fares, and since he had absolute authority, he was in charge of the train. All freight conductors and most passenger conductors began their careers as brakemen; on passenger trains one could find them on the platforms or at the brakes, or leaning into the cars to call station names. On a freight train, a man could hardly find a tougher job than to be a brakeman. Before Congress insisted that the Westinghouse air brake be used in 1893, cars had to be stopped by hand. That was the brakeman’s job. Standing on the roof of a freight car, he would
spin a cast iron wheel connected to a shaft that ran down to the brakes, thereby slowing or stopping the train. A most dangerous profession, a brakeman on top of a fast freight in the dead of winter with the roof of the car slick with ice and the wind crystallizing his sweat could easily be blown off when the train lurched about.

Before a man could become an engineer, he had to experience being a fireman. Although considerably safer than being a brakeman, the fireman’s job was tedious. It was his job to feed the furnace with coal. In a perpetual squat, he shoveled, twisted, and fed the fire. He controlled the speed of the train by how much coal was used. His job required delicacy and knowledge in order for the train to stop and start gracefully from each depot. These traits would train him for the coveted engineer job.\(^{32}\) In 1900 Mendota, occupations supporting the railroad were standard of the style and accommodations offered to Americans. Passengers in a dining car were awarded a waiter. A mailman sorted the mail en-route to his final destination. Messengers relayed information.

Table 10. Occupations and Totals in Mendota of Men Working on the Railroad: 77

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bridge builder (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>train dealer (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>car inspector (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>messenger (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreman (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agent (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireman (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waiter (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carpenter (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>railroad laborer (34)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>station engineer (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cashier (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bar inspector (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>switchman (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baggage man (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gate tender (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postal clerk (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engineer (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>express driver (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brakeman (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>telegraph lineman (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clerk (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: United States Twelfth Census, 1900
Although the railroad was a dominant force in society, the railroad could be hazardous to workers' health, because it was dangerous to operate the train and many did not survive train accidents. According to the vital statistics report compiled by the Department of the Interior, railroad accidents in Illinois killed 667 people in 1900. More specifically, the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics reported page after page describing occupational accidents as well as the cause and character of each railroad worker's injury to testify to the job's precarious nature. Flying cinders inflamed switchmen's eyes. Track laborers sprained, cut, or smashed their feet and ankles. Brakemen suffered from mashed or amputated fingers. Although railroad employees made mistakes or had bad luck that cost them a limb or their lives, it was not the employee of the railroad that suffered most of the reported fatalities, but the "trespasser stealing a ride" — that is, the tramp or "hobo" — who suffered the more serious accidents of amputation and death.

Train collisions were grisly spectacles. In Mendota, passengers were not the only ones at risk, because the I.C. and C.B. & Q.R.R. paralleled Main Street, increasing the chance that pedestrians or onlookers would become involved in accidents. Of the 667 deaths in Illinois caused by railroad accidents in 1900, 85 of the victims were under the age of fourteen while 72 were over the age of sixty. This meant that a quarter of the deaths came to those who were not likely to be employed by the railroad, but were either in a crash or an onlooker. Trespassers, who were most likely transients, as well as railroad employees, comprised the remaining 510 people who had died from association
with the railroad. In Mendota, the hazards of working on the railroad were aptly reported in the June 1899 issue of the *Sun Bulletin* in the obituary for 59-year-old engineer, Harlan Tyler:

At about 12:45 p.m., while his fireman, James Binley, was handling the engine, Mr. Tyler was standing in the gangway, between the cab and tender, watching for signals while pulling back a string of flat cars. The coal was piled high on the tender and thus partly cut off the view of the man working the engine. While he was in this position the train backed into a number of empty passenger coaches with great force, and the water tank was broken loose and shoved ahead so as to catch the engineer between the end of the tank and at the back of the cab. His leg was broken in two places once below the knee and once between the knee and the hip, and bones were forced through the flesh, causing severe loss of blood.\(^{35}\)

Mr. Tyler died four hours later. He had worked on the railroad most of his life beginning at age fifteen as a laborer, then in his twenties he was promoted to yardmaster for the C.B. & Q. He was elevated to engineer on the Mendota passenger train, and for twelve years gained the admiration and respect of his co-workers until his untimely death. Chances were great that some type of injury would eventually claim the railroad worker.

By focusing on families, occupations, and the railroad, this study has found that Mendota was a prosperous, firmly incorporated community with social institutions, miscellaneous businesses, and industries. This diversification allowed residents to exist in a world where luxury items were attainable. This was not a city of poor immigrants who sustained themselves with a single industry like neighboring towns who mined coal; therefore, Mendota in 1900 was an ideal example of ethnic regionalism that combined both industrial jobs and farming. Those of German and United Kingdom ancestry lived there (a handful of families came from Sweden and Norway) making Mendota a white
community. Mendota was a stopping point for two railroad lines; however, it was also a farming community. Surrounded by a sea of corn, Mendota’s wealth came from the farmers, too, who journeyed into town to send off their crops and spend their money. The rich black soil had served the area well; the freight trains were more than willing to transport Mendota’s wealth while passenger cars transported families who had tamed the prairie and reaped what they sowed.
NOTES


4 Ibid., 81.

5 A colony of East Frisians, who were headed for St. Louis changed their minds and settled in Oregon and Dixon Illinois, 100 miles west of Chicago and directly north of LaSalle and Bureau County. Unlike most immigrant groups who came to seek religious freedom or because their poverty precipitated change, the East Frisians were wealthy and sought more of it. Their motivation was “but the pure human wish to develop even more favorably their living conditions in the wonder-land of America.” East Friesens settled throughout the state of Illinois, Western Iowa, Southern Minnesota and Eastern South Dakota. Their history can be read in Kenneth De Wall, The East Friesens in America (Topeka: Jostens Printing and Publishing, 1986).


7 June 1, 1900, The Sun Bulletin, “Taking the Census.”


13 Oral interview with Steve Dancey, curator at Carnegie Hume Historical Museum, Mendota. He claims that approximately 125 widows in 1900 were Civil War widows.


19 Interview with Illinois law archivist, Mr. Kenny, at the Illinois State Library, Springfield.


23 Bureau County Republican, August 8, 15, 22, October 31, November 7, 14, 21, 1895.


27 Unfortunately, the Union Depot was torn down in 1942—the architectural beauty is sorely missed from the downtown landscape.


30 Personal interview with retired railroad worker, Bill Cummings, Peru, IL, November, 2003.


32 Ibid., 192-196.


35 Obituary report in *Sun Bulletin*, June 8, 1899.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Initially, residents of Bureau and LaSalle Counties were farmers. Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, and Americans from eastern states came to claim the land. In conjunction with farming, advertising for the construction of the Illinois Michigan Canal in the 1830’s attracted the Irish while in the 1850’s advertisements for the construction of railroads lured other European immigrants to Illinois. In the 1880’s, Eastern and Southeast Europeans such as Poles, Russians, and Italians came to work in the coal mines. This study explored how LaSalle and Bureau Counties fitted into the rural parameters of nineteenth century America.

Historian Susan Rugh’s *Our Common Country* explored nineteenth century agrarian life in Fountain Green, Illinois. On the east side of the Mississippi, Fountain Green is approximately 150 miles from Bureau and LaSalle Counties. The conclusions Rugh drew concerning agrarian culture are comparable to this region of Illinois. She claimed that “Agrarian capitalism diminished a traditional dependence on family labor,” noting that family sizes were smaller, and the work roles of children were “trimmed to fit new ideas of childhood and adolescence.”¹ In the city of Mendota, this was the case. Children were expected to attend school and their labor consisted of typical roles for girls
and boys; girls performed household or sewing jobs, and boys were apprentices or laborers. In Seatonville, more children worked than attended school, and large immigrant families expected them to supplement the family income.

In rural communities mechanical devices and hired hands eased the labor of the farmer. According to Rugh, “independent land ownership became more of an ideal than a reality by 1900.” Patrimony weakened as original farm families who had staked and cultivated their land could not convince their heirs to manage the family farm. Sons wanted their own land and impatiently left the farm and traveled west. Or, the city attracted sons and daughters to pursue careers and to seek excitement. As households changed, renting land and hiring farm hands to assist the farmer was common by 1900.²

Employment opportunities in Bureau and LaSalle Counties were available on farms and in the coal mines with the inherent understanding that the railroad would transport their goods to larger cities such as Bloomington, Peoria, and Chicago. In the 1850’s when the I.C. Railroad was constructed in LaSalle and Bureau Counties, over 100,000 men were employed. The need for this kind of labor was advertised bringing in eastern Americans and immigrants from Ireland, Poland, and Germany.³

Rugh emphasized the importance of rural regionalism, which coincided with this study’s analysis of a community by using ethnicity as a prism. Migration communications—letters, church postings, ethnic newspapers—enticed individuals to communities; it was their ethnicity that played a vital role in the development of a town or city. Mendota’s German influence, Ladd’s Italian and Polish mix, Seatonville’s
southeastern European blend, and Princeton's Swedish influence are cases in point. With varying degrees of success, ethnic groups created communities while satisfying labor demands using their ethnicity as glue for social fortification against unfamiliar Midwest surroundings.

The success of a community was defined by ethnic regionalism. A formula for success would include the following ingredients: the ethnic church, the family, the saloon, and citizens participating in various institutions such as schools, government, police and fire stations, fraternal associations, and their fellow merchants. The ethnic umbrella protected these components of society. A community that had one, two, or three ethnic conglomerations and utilized these social structures would assuredly grow. For instance, in LaSalle and Bureau Counties the ethnic church coupled with merchant growth proved important due to Scandinavian, Dutch, and German influences, in Bureau County protestant churches, especially Lutheran, precipitated ethnic regionalism. In La Salle County, Roman Catholicism dominated communities such as the twin cities of LaSalle and Peru whose ethnic mix consisted of primarily Irish, Italians, and Poles.

However, areas which attracted numerous ethnicities fractured a community. Either too few ethnic institutions were established or not enough members kept them operational. Also, if an ethnic group did not establish an ethnic church, it was rootless, and that community's chance of survival would assuredly falter. In addition, the negative side to ethnic regionalism was ethnocentrism. Differing groups such as African
Americans or ethnic groups other than the majority were not tolerated in a community. They were discouraged or forced from partaking in community affairs.

If one accepts Illinois as the heart of the Corn Belt and geographically the center of the Midwest in 1900, then one could extend the image to include LaSalle and Bureau Counties as the center of America in terms of geography and agriculture. Therefore, the study of ethnic regionalism in Bureau and LaSalle Counties could be viewed as a fair representation of rural America in 1900.
NOTES


CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Initially, residents of Bureau and LaSalle Counties were farmers. Germans, Swedes, Norwegians, and Americans from eastern states came to claim the land. In conjunction with farming, advertising for the construction of the Illinois Michigan Canal in the 1830’s attracted the Irish while in the 1850’s advertisements for the construction of railroads lured other European immigrants to Illinois. In the 1880’s, Eastern and Southeast Europeans such as Poles, Russians, and Italians came to work in the coal mines. This study explored how LaSalle and Bureau Counties fitted into the rural parameters of nineteenth century America.

Historian Susan Rugh’s *Our Common Country* explored nineteenth century agrarian life in Fountain Green, Illinois. On the east side of the Mississippi, Fountain Green is approximately 150 miles from Bureau and LaSalle Counties. The conclusions Rugh drew concerning agrarian culture are comparable to this region of Illinois. She claimed that “Agrarian capitalism diminished a traditional dependence on family labor,” noting that family sizes were smaller, and the work roles of children were “trimmed to fit new ideas of childhood and adolescence.”¹ In the city of Mendota, this was the case. Children were expected to attend school and their labor consisted of typical roles for girls
and boys; girls performed household or sewing jobs, and boys were apprentices or laborers. In Seatonville, more children worked than attended school, and large immigrant families expected them to supplement the family income.

In rural communities mechanical devices and hired hands eased the labor of the farmer. According to Rugh, “independent land ownership became more of an ideal than a reality by 1900.” Patrimony weakened as original farm families who had staked and cultivated their land could not convince their heirs to manage the family farm. Sons wanted their own land and impatiently left the farm and traveled west. Or, the city attracted sons and daughters to pursue careers and to seek excitement. As households changed, renting land and hiring farm hands to assist the farmer was common by 1900.2

Employment opportunities in Bureau and LaSalle Counties were available on farms and in the coal mines with the inherent understanding that the railroad would transport their goods to larger cities such as Bloomington, Peoria, and Chicago. In the 1850’s when the I.C. Railroad was constructed in LaSalle and Bureau Counties, over 100,000 men were employed. The need for this kind of labor was advertised bringing in eastern Americans and immigrants from Ireland, Poland, and Germany. 3

Rugh emphasized the importance of rural regionalism, which coincided with this study’s analysis of a community by using ethnicity as a prism. Migration communications—letters, church postings, ethnic newspapers—enticed individuals to communities; it was their ethnicity that played a vital role in the development of a town or city. Mendota’s German influence, Ladd’s Italian and Polish mix, Seatonville’s
southeastern European blend, and Princeton’s Swedish influence are cases in point. With varying degrees of success, ethnic groups created communities while satisfying labor demands using their ethnicity as glue for social fortification against unfamiliar Midwest surroundings.

The success of a community was defined by ethnic regionalism. A formula for success would include the following ingredients: the ethnic church, the family, the saloon, and citizens participating in various institutions such as schools, government, police and fire stations, fraternal associations, and their fellow merchants. The ethnic umbrella protected these components of society. A community that had one, two, or three ethnic conglomerations and utilized these social structures would assuredly grow. For instance, in LaSalle and Bureau Counties the ethnic church coupled with merchant growth proved important due to Scandinavian, Dutch, and German influences, in Bureau County protestant churches, especially Lutheran, precipitated ethnic regionalism. In La Salle County, Roman Catholicism dominated communities such as the twin cities of LaSalle and Peru whose ethnic mix consisted of primarily Irish, Italians, and Poles.

However, areas which attracted numerous ethnicities fractured a community. Either too few ethnic institutions were established or not enough members kept them operational. Also, if an ethnic group did not establish an ethnic church, it was rootless, and that community’s chance of survival would assuredly falter. In addition, the negative side to ethnic regionalism was ethnocentrism. Differing groups such as African
Americans or ethnic groups other than the majority were not tolerated in a community. They were discouraged or forced from partaking in community affairs.

If one accepts Illinois as the heart of the Corn Belt and geographically the center of the Midwest in 1900, then one could extend the image to include LaSalle and Bureau Counties as the center of America in terms of geography and agriculture. Therefore, the study of ethnic regionalism in Bureau and LaSalle Counties could be viewed as a fair representation of rural America in 1900.
NOTES


Endnotes


5 Figure 1 and Figure 2 pictures reproduced from Carnegie Hume Historical Museum collection, Mendota Illinois.


10 Population of the United States: Twelfth Census, 1900, 547.


17 “Taking the Census”, The Sun Bulletin, 8 June 1899.

18 The Twelfth Census: 1900, Mendota, Illinois.


21 Steve Dancey, telephone interview by author, June 5, 2003. As curator of Carnegie Hume Historical Library, Mr. Dancey graciously shared his substantive knowledge of Mendota, especially in the areas of widows in 1900 as well as African Americans migration via the train, including the frustration of having no concrete numbers, only oral recollections made over the years by Mendota residents who could remember the African American presence.


27 “Taking in boarders was one way to meet the rent. And as a means of supplementing income.”


30 12th Federal Census, Spring Valley, Illinois, 1900.

31 Bureau County Republican, August 8, 15, 22, October 31, November 7, 14, 21, 1895. The Spring Valley Race Riot,

32 Sanborn Map Company, Mendota, 1902.

33 12th Federal Census, Mendota, Illinois, 1900.

34 Ibid. June 1-21.
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Interviews


Cynthia Bruchman
His327-Dr. Wyman

September 16, 2002


The Immigration Commission consisted of eleven committee members including chairman, Senator William P. Dillingham, and was established by the 61st Congress for purpose of investigating the “immigrant situation” in America in 1909. Reports of the Immigration Commission were comprised of twenty-five parts and forty-two volumes. These lengthy findings focused upon Immigrant impact on U.S. industries. As listed on page III of Volume I, part I, the extent at which the use of an immigrant labor force is evident purely by noticing the variety of industries they infiltrated. Coal, iron, steel, cotton goods, slaughtering and meatpacking, glass manufacturing, cigar and tobacco manufacturing, oil, and copper mining are but a few of the industries where immigrants labored. It is no wonder, then, why the U.S. congress produced a task force with carte blanche power to investigate the situation. The “situation” was that too many immigrants were in America, and America relied too heavily upon a labor force that was foreign. What was the commission looking for? A reason to export or divest? Evidence to support immigration laws restricting immigrant entry into the United States? If the majority of U. S. industries employed immigrants, and the commission could prove industry suffered because of an inferior labor force, then governmental intervention at a national level would justify the removal of the deficient labor force. Or is that too sinister, too much of a covert operation? Perhaps the commission was organized in order to gather information about a significant number of the nation’s population that worked and lived around the industries they
supported. Perhaps the commission was organized to perform an anthropological study for the purposes of assimilating the immigrants. That is, maybe they needed facts to support reform policies that targeted the Americanizing of immigrants. Were leaders of the country worried that due to the increasing numbers of immigrants in the U. S., the essence of America diverged and became polluted? Was there a fear that the melting pot was spoiling the American identity? Were these ethnic pockets in need of homogenizing in order to salvage the American character? What conclusions did the report reveal?

The scope of the report begins with a national view of the coal mining industry followed by specific states where coal-mining industry thrived. Specifically, the main coal arteries in the U.S. lied under five states: Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Illinois, Ohio, and Alabama. Tables on page 4 of the report reveal the incredible rise of the coal industry's yearly output in tons as follows:

1860—6,494,200
1890—111,302,322
1901—225,888,149
1905—315,062,785
1908—332,573,944

Of the interesting results discovered in the countless tables and graphs within the Dillahun Commission’s report, one was that 90 percent of the workforce who manned the mines was comprised of immigrants. Although one could find a statistic to show most all European countries represented in the mines, most of the immigrants found in the mines came from southern or eastern Europe (p. 229). Another interesting discovery was that most of the immigrants working in the mines were first generation immigrants, meaning that the workers in the mines had been in America less than ten years and therefore could rarely speak or understand English. Imagine the safety hazards that could occur with a labor
force that could not read or understand rules or instructions. "Under these circumstances it is not surprising that they know little or nothing of rock formations, of fire damp, of the properties of coal dust, and the handling of explosives . . . It is probable that the instructions of the mine bosses and inspectors are, because of this fact, frequently misunderstood" (p 233). Clearly an immigrant who had worked the mines and had been in America less than ten years paid a dear price. " . . . a very large proportion of the deaths and injuries reported for the coal mines of the United States occur among the less experienced miners, it is clear that the employees of the races of southern and eastern Europe, having had little experience in mining either in this country or abroad, are particularly liable to accidents"(p 228). What is interesting to note is that the commission placed blame on the workers for their fatalities, and not on the mining operation itself. "They are responsible for a considerable proportion of all the accidents occurring in the mines" (p 233).

Part II and Part III of the Dillingham Commission report involved a regional look at the coal mining industry with Part II dealing specifically with Pennsylvania, and Part III with the Midwest. In these sections, the report gave the impression it was an anthropological study. Issues such as the economic status of the household; the working environment, racial displacement, and housing and living conditions were considered in order for the commission to understand the immigrants and to discover how the industry fared with an immigrant labor force. The results implied that immigrants did not work their shift and left the industry behind. The immigrant life was dependent upon and existed for the mining industry itself. That is, they worked the mines, slept close to the mines, bought their food at company stores located at the mines, recreated by the mines, and went to church close to the mines. In short, the mining industry was more than a source of
employment, the mining industry produced communities whereby its citizens lived and worked and rarely left its side. What were the characteristics of a mining community?

On page 591, part III, the commission investigated Illinois mining communities. Within ten districts, the racial composition was identified, compared and contrasted. For example, in community one, 100 miles west of Chicago, the mines opened in 1889 to Irish, Welsh, and the English. But a second wave of Northern Italians rushed to the area and by 1893, the population of the area doubled to include them. They were hired because “they were more easily controlled than the English-speaking peoples” (p 592). Was this an advantage, then, of hiring immigrants who did not speak English? Although fatalities were high among immigrants who could not understand the English language, that was offset due to the fact that employers found the Italians malleable? In community two, English speaking immigrants worked in the mines and formed a community. But within two years, Italians, Poles, and Lithuanians came to work causing complaints from the Irish, Welsh, and English. The racial disbursement radically changed. In 1886, 99 percent of the populations were from the United Kingdom. By 1889, the percentage changed to 20 percent. “The pioneer employees finally called a strike, which lasted eight months. At the end of that time, almost all English-speaking miners had either stopped working in the mines voluntarily or had been displaced” (p 593). Communities with prominent racial groups resented “outsiders” working in “their” mines. So much so, they were willing to strike and risk losing their job in order to eradicate the “foreign” presence from English-speaking camps. This pattern spread throughout the state of Illinois. In all of the ten districts, foreign born, eastern Europeans overran old immigrants who were Welsh, Irish, and English.
What can one extract from the commission's report? The immigrant work force was a volatile and fast changing environment. When shafts were opened, English-speaking immigrants worked the mines. Non-speaking, foreign-born employees replaced them within a very short time. As far as the mining companies were concerned, the recent immigrants simply were better employees. Consequently, "when the rapid development of the early eighties led to a great demand for labor, the companies were willing to receive the races of recent immigration, because they had found them tractable and less inclined to give trouble than the older immigrant races. Moreover, these races while they were less efficient than the older and experienced miners had been found to be very industrious and regular in their work" (p 659).

An important realization about the commission's report concerns the attitude of coal industry toward the immigrants who worked the mines. It is clear an advantage for hiring foreign speaking immigrants is that because they were reluctant to cite their grievances, employers treated them poorly. The living conditions were abysmal, unsanitary, and depressing. For example, a typical immigrant boarding houses was overcrowded, untidy, dirty because immigrants packed the room. "One room is frequently used as a combination kitchen, dining room, and bathroom. When the men come from their work in the evening a tub containing a few inches of water is placed on the floor, and stripped to the waist, each man kneels over the tub and washes himself. As many as 8 or 10 men will wash in the same water. The housewife washes the back of each man, and in the intervals attends to the cooking. The usual price for board, lodging, and washing is from $15 to $18 a month . . . and is never found among the Americans" (p 341).
Was the Dillingham Commission looking for ways to exhort a foreign labor force? What did the Dillingham Commission intend from their most ardent and lengthy investigation? While no conclusion was brought forth concerning the motives, one can offer a conjecture that the report was intended for social reform. The American people and the American leaders were attempting to Americanize a fast and exploding population of immigrants. I believe the country was very much afraid that these immigrants who manned the mines and other industries were polluting the American waters. Because industries only allowed horrid living conditions and treated them more like animals than human, (because they could get away with it) Americans looked upon these dark, strange foreigners as vastly different, inferior, and with repulsion. The Dillingham Commission report was created to investigate the problem of the interior and then could be used to promote polices for Americanizing the immigrants.
Effects of Social Reform: The Illinois Orphan Train Riders

Of Bureau and LaSalle Counties

Cynthia Bruchman

Social historians studying reform polices like the orphan train movement in America (1865-1927) which relocated 150,000 children from the overcrowded urban streets of New York City and sent them west to rural homesteads have focused on the orphan trains as an event or when accounting for the history of asylums, orphanages, the study of the family, or the child. With the exception of The Great Arizona Orphan Train Abduction by Linda Gordon, very few studies, however, concentrate specifically on a small region or the orphans that were deposited there including the effects of their forced migration. How did the orphans affect the Illinois community? How did the community affect the orphans? Did religion play a significant role in their upbringing? For instance, Bureau County is principally Protestant while its neighbor, LaSalle County, is predominately Catholic. What differences or similarities do the orphans reveal about these religiously diverse counties? What can the orphans tell us about their work? Bureau County is made up of farmers cultivating the black, fertile soil while in LaSalle County, the labor force tended the transportation route on the Illinois River or descended into the depths of mines to extract the mineral, coal. In the nineteenth century, LaSalle County was an immigrant depot made up of Polish, Irish, Italians, and Slavs. Bureau County attracted Swedes and Germans. Of the approximate 150 orphans that were deposited in LaSalle and Bureau Counties, what percentage of orphans did the professional class claim, and what percentage did the working class adopt? How did the distinctive social classes treat them? Since many of the orphan train riders were immigrants themselves, was there a problem with ethnic or racial integration? That is, did orphans who were from Irish descent have problems existing in Italian
family? What of the railroad? The Chicago and Rock Island Railroad cut through the two counties and linked Illinois to the Far West. What role did trains have upon the area and the orphans? The answers to all of these questions will highlight a time period when the Midwest could no longer be considered a western outpost as well as show the effects of social reform in the region of two Illinois counties, Bureau and LaSalle.

Many Americans have never heard of the orphan train riders. Only a few are aware of childhood conditions which provided the impetus for creating a plan of action to reform their situation as well as solve a large problem that existed in the city of New York. Even Boston and Philadelphia followed New York’s lead of “placing out” orphans from the city to the plains states. Nineteenth century mindset allowed for the reformative program to exist; it would be unimaginable to implement the same policy today. An explanation is necessary before one can examine the burgeoning Illinois region for the effects of reform.

New York City in the 1850’s and 1860’s was swarming with homeless children, abandoned babies, destitute women, and the elderly who were sick or dying in the streets. Poverty, immigration, inadequate housing, and a financial depression after the Civil War filled the hospitals, asylums, orphanages, churches, and other benevolent organizations to excess.1 Trying to survive, the children who wandered and worked the streets worried citizens and officials. As their clothes became rattier and their skin became grimy and their survival skills became sharpened in order to hustle a meal or a coin, the homeless child became in the eyes of adults a wretched, roving mutt. When they worked together, these orphans of the streets, they were feared as one would fear an itinerant pack of dogs. The children became an embarrassment to society. Ironically, mixed with aversion for them was compassion and genuine sorrow for their

fate. The injustice of the situation pulled at benevolent and Christian heartstrings. Plus, creating the metropolis New York was supposed to be a grand achievement. The city was expected to emulate American civilization. The marvels of ingenuity and the intellectual prowess of American culture were displayed for the world to monitor. How could New York City create skyscrapers and bridges and subway systems but ignore its residents and allow their abysmal living conditions? With every newly erected building, New York City developed into a cold jungle where its youngest inhabitants fought to subsist. Many organizations and distraught citizens wondered how to solve the problem of the little wanderers.

Simultaneously, the western frontier and plains were in dire need of labor. Homesteads, ranches, farms, and landowners needed workers to domesticate the animals and cultivate the land. The nineteenth century glorified the principles of Manifest Destiny. The pastoral landscape was a heaven on earth; the craving to own property was rampant; and the effort to secure the boundaries of America from coast to coast was desired by the government and realized by its people. The fresh air and unlimited space of the West became alluring incentives for escaping the maladies of the city. The solution appeared obvious. Place out the orphans to the West. Leaders of the orphan train movement believed the fresh air and wholesome farm work would build character and provided stability and structure for the children. The relocation would satisfy the orphan’s ultimate wish: a chance to belong in a family and be loved.²

How successful was the program? It depended upon the individual orphan. Imagine it is 1880 and an eight-year-old girl who boarded the train heading to Indiana is wearing the only piece of clothing she owns, a ruffled dress donated to her by one of the sisters at the New York Foundling Asylum. Freshly bathed and combed, the young girl along with twelve other orphans is seated in a car. What could she be imagining? She was told a family in Indiana would be
adopting her; the sisters had found her a home. With no hope of parents ever wanting her in New York, perhaps she was filled with excitement as she imagined someone wanting her—maybe they would even buy her a doll! In the same car, from a different orphanage, sat the twelve and thirteen-year-old brother and sister. The two had been together, living in the streets of New York since they could remember. They were the only family each had. They were picked up by the police for wandering and deposited in an orphanage one-year ago. It was bedlam there. There were not enough cots or food; they had fared better living in the alleys of the city. They were told a family in Nebraska would take them both into their home. The couple who wanted them was old, and they needed young bodies to work the farm. The brother and sister consented at first, to get away from the city, plus they were intrigued about the West—maybe they would see an Indian! But about the time they passed through Pennsylvania, it dawned on them that maybe the old couple only wanted servants, not children to love. Much too self-reliant from living a life of autonomy, the brother and sister decided to run away in Ohio, never to be heard from again. Another orphan, a boy of ten, made it to Illinois only to beaten by the first set of adoptive parents for his intractable will. He was relocated around the county two other times before he settled with a German family who could hardly speak English, but they doted on him lovingly and appreciated him as a translator. He was grateful for his expulsion from the city. Each of the 150,000 placed out orphans had a story to tell—some with happy endings and others destined for tragedy. Although the process of displacing was regimented and the execution of the program professionally run, one could never predict the relationship between child and parent and community.

The program developed for displacing the orphans began in New York City by the efforts of one man, Charles Loring Brace. Trained for a religious vocation at Yale Divinity School, he

became interested in missionary work and expressed his love for God by directing his ambitious personality toward urban reform and eventually founding the New York Children’s Aid Society in 1853. The Children’s Aid Society was not founded for the purpose of placing out the orphans west, but rather as an asylum for improving the conditions of the poor; however, it did not take long for Brace to activate the experiment. The first set of orphan train riders left in 1854 and headed to Dowagiac, Michigan. However, Brace was not the only man who desired to solve the problems of urban life. Robert Hartly of the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, and John Earl Williams, of the Boston Children’s Mission, advocated a similar program for relocating orphans as a way of reform. Additionally, in 1840 and 1850 due to great increase of immigration in the city, there were between 30 to 40 alms giving charities in New York City dispensing relief. In 1843 a municipal governmental association, the New York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, was founded acting as an auxiliary to the various public or private charities. By 1850, the Association agreed to the need for a Juvenile department and erected a house of detention at 109 Bank Street. By 1856, the Juvenile Asylum relocated to a 35 acres on 175th street where the new house would hold 500 juveniles. Only children between the ages of 7–14 were admitted into the New York Juvenile Asylum. Working with the Western Placing Agency in Chicago, over 6,000 children were placed out during the time of the Orphan Train Movement. Although the New York Juvenile Asylum was firmly established, and many individuals were concerned about urban reform and had thought of orphans migrating to the West, it was because Brace implemented the conception of “placing out” orphans that he was awarded credit for the creation of the orphan train movement.³

Brace's philosophy was unique for the time and his reasons for placing out were wrapped around the philosophy of Social Darwinism. Brace admired the young urchins who grew up in the slum families. He felt their harsh lifestyle along with the pressure to produce income for their families produced little men; through self-governing, they were tenacious survivors. Often he plucked these little men, even if their parents lived, out of the streets in order to send them west, to be of use. Brace did not want to save them from the city. He thought they possessed the right disposition for taming the Far West. He did not want to pacify or soften the children through conformity; he wanted to channel their resourcefulness in a constructive way. He wrote to his friend after one year of forming the Children's Aid Society: "I have to do mostly with rough, hearty, poor boys, and with friendless children who have learned how to take care of themselves—such as I do love or like. I think there is nothing in the world so interesting as a healthy, manly boy, and the attempt to help these fellows to help themselves is the most pleasant to me possible."\(^4\)

Another benevolent institution that participated in the care of unwanted babies, care of pregnant mothers, and placing out was the New York Foundling Hospital, run by the Sister's of Charity. Established in 1870, Sisters Irene Fitzgibbon, Teresa Vincent McCrystal, and Ann Aloysia, ran the day to day operations and saw their operation expand over a forty-year period from 1872-1914. The procedure for placing out between the various agencies was similar in that it was a process that was, for the most part, carefully and professionally executed.\(^5\)

The orphans were transferred via train because it was affordable. By 1860, one could depart from Boston and reach Omaha, Nebraska in three days. Eleven railroads converged at Chicago utilizing 30,500 miles of railroad tracks. Chicago behaved like a wide trunk whose long

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roots penetrated the country and transformed the railroad industry into the primary means of travel as well as the method of hauling the children. Four main agencies participated in the orphan train movement and used similar methods for implementing the foster care program: The New York Foundling Hospital, The Children’s Aid Society, The New York Juvenile Asylum, and Boston’s New England Home for Little Wanderers. Approximately 10 to 40 children traveled under the supervision of an agent who, at certain intervals, delivered the children to the care of community leaders or religious houses who were waiting for the children. Sometimes, individual children or pairs had been previously requested and arrangements had been made in advance between adoptive parents and asylum. At other times, a dozen orphans arrived as a collective group to the town whereby persons or families waiting to see the children first, picked the one they wanted.6 Reading their testimonies, one can imagine the fright and degradation many orphans felt who stood on a community stage as though it were an auction block while strangers prodded them for unsuspected health issues, and all the time, at this crossroad of their lives, they hoped a nice family would choose them. What rejection to be the last one standing!

How did the Children’s Aid Society and The New York Foundling Hospital find communities who wanted the orphans? The CAS hired agents who stopped in towns along train routes and posted flyers advertising the unwanted children of New York and proposing to arrange a “screening committee” for the purpose of selecting suitable parents for the orphans. These committees were comprised of male leaders of the town, usually the town doctor, a lawyer, clergymen, newspaper editor, store owner, and a teacher. They were expected to facilitate the agent upon the arrival of the orphans, approve or disapprove the union, and witness

the signing of the contract between the Agency and the parent. The following is a contract of terms from the 1890’s:

Boys fifteen years old are expected to work till they are eighteen for their board and clothes. At the end of that time they are at liberty to make their own arrangements.

Boys between twelve and fifteen are expected to work for their board and clothes till they are eighteen, but must be sent to school a part of each year, after that it is expected that they receive wages.

Boys under twelve are expected to remain till they are eighteen, and must be treated by the applicants as one of their own children in matters of schooling, clothing and training.

Should a removal be necessary it can be arranged through the committee or by writing to the agent.

The society reserves the right of removing a boy at any time for just cause.

We desire to hear from every child twice a year.

All expenses of transportation are paid by the society.

Signed, E. Trott, Agent
Children’s Aid Society
24 St. Marks Place, N.Y. 7

It is important to note that these contracts only allowed the Children’s Aid Society the legal right to redirect the orphan’s placement if the situation warranted. The terms of the contract did not cover the right to inherit the family farm, for instance, if both parents past away, or legally bind the orphan and the parent in a formal adoption that is known today.

The procedure used by The New York Foundling Hospital and the Boston Home for Wayward Children incorporated a distinct approach. The Foundling Hospital, a Catholic organization who was aware of the need for homes of unwanted children, notified priests. Then, the priests would ask their congregation for volunteers to take the children. Interested adults could sign up for a child, specifying hair color and eyes, gender, skin color, and size of child. The theory behind this was that a child would most likely fit into a family who visually matched. For example, a farmer with no sons and five, red-haired daughters requested a boy with red hair and fair complexion, who would complement the family. Not only did the Foundling Hospital
find and deliver the orphan to the family, he later inherited the farm. The Foundling Hospital also utilized an indenture-type contract as a way of gathering legal power without going to court, if the orphan did not acclimate to his new family or home. Both the The New York Foundling Hospital and Boston Home for Wayward Children reclaimed orphans who were not successful in their new environment as the following letter explains:

Mr. Thomas Allen of Marblehead sent by Express to the boy James Donlon who was sent to him 2 years ago; he says the boy is constantly running away and can do nothing with him. It took him a long time to find it out.

One aspect of the orphan train movement that was similar was the desire to hear from the placed out children at least once a year. The New York Juvenile Asylum stored hundreds of letters sent by the placed out children, guardians, and the visitors who saw them. Despite the formulaic tone of each letter, i.e., most all mention they attended school, or that the venture West was a good decision, and how grateful they were to the Asylum, the letters also managed to reveal hints about their personalities, hopes, regrets, and fears. The letters also showed the values existing in the homes they lived in including their work ethics, their faith, and their morality.

Here are three examples:

From Cornelius Bogart, aged Eighteen, came to Illinois in 1889

"It has been six years since I left the Asylum, and I have been in seven different homes and was never satisfied, although my first home was a good one, and I have wandered from place to place until about two years ago when I settled down in my present home; so I have been out of school considerably. I would advise the children to be content and not to go off looking for something better, but try to be agreeable and useful, and so make friends and then you will have clothes and comfortable homes. I have had an experience and know what I am saying. It is a good thing to send the children into the country, away from vice, where they can have good homes. I have not forgotten your kindness in obtaining a home for me when I was in need, but I never have written you a letter before, and perhaps you think I do not appreciate what you have down for me. I am fond of reading and enjoy the Youth's Companion, and I find the Report very

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7 Ibid., 172.
interesting. I have lost considerable schooling by not staying in my first home, for which I am sorry.” Mazon, Ill.

From Annie Evans, Aged fourteen. Came to Illinois in 1889.

“My brother and I had a happy home with my parents until I was nearly eight years old, and then my father fell sick and died in a few days. My mother afterward married again, but she left her husband and then could not support us, and we were put in the Asylum, where we stayed for one year, and then came West. I was much benefited by the training and schooling which I got at the Asylum, and I have improved my condition very much by coming West. I have gained many friends out here, and have a very nice time, and I think I shall remain in the West after I am eighteen. My mother writes to me and she says she is coming out here when she has money enough saved. We have the prettiest baby, only two years old, but as bright and smart as some who are twice as old. I have learned to talk and read and sing in the French language. It is very pleasant in Illinois, and there are many things to see in the country which city children do not see, and I think it would be a great benefit for the Asylum children to come West. I will send you my photograph as soon as possible. Will you please send me Mabel Jordan’s address?”

From Annie Schultz, aged thirteen. Came to Illinois in 1889.

“I have had a pretty good time since I came west, and I have learned to work a great deal. I have not done so well as I might have done, but I hope I will better hereafter. I know I am a very trying child, and I have a habit of answering back, and I want you to tell how I can break myself of it. I like the Christian Weekly very much, and we take the Youth’s Companion, which I like to read. I have great many clothes, and Mrs. Warren’s son has a little girl whom I like very much, and I have been to visit her, and stayed three weeks. I wrote to my bother and sister, and they answered my letters, and I wish you would tell me where Katie is, and give me Mary and Johanna Brill’s address. When I came here a year ago, I weighed eighty-one pounds, and now I weigh one hundred and two pounds. I wish I could see my bother and sisters, for I feel lonesome without them.”

What revelations can the orphan train riders reveal about LaSalle and Bureau County?

The following chapters are segmented focusing on different aspects of orphan life ranging from labor, religion, the railroad, ethnicity, and social status. These ingredients shaped and defined the orphans and their community into a portrait waiting to be unveiled.

End of Introduction.

I have pictures I would like to include in the introduction, but I don’t have a scanner. Looks like the book now will have six chapters including a conclusion of the findings. I hope this is what you were envisioning I would do.