

MCLEAN COUNTY AS EVOLUTIONARY MODEL

Frederick B. Hoyt, Illinois Wesleyan University
Michael Matejka, Editor, Livingston and McLean County Union News

ABSTRACT

We submit the following models based on our work in McLean County, Illinois to explain the evolution of local businesses:

Model I. From Agriculture (and other extractive industries) to Manufacturing to Services.

Stage 1. The agricultural basis of the county is obvious, and was from its settlement in the 1830's. It contains the richest topsoil in the world--once you get the steel plow that broke the plains. Less apparent, but equally important, were the late 19th century coal mines, long since boarded up and filled in.

Stage 2. Manufacturing made its debut after the Civil War, as progress, both in the County and in the United States, came to be symbolized by smokestacks. E.g., Dr. Wakefield's medicines (among the first nationally branded, nationally distributed consumer goods), and the Williams Oil-o-matic, along with the plethora of locally made consumer goods, such as beer and candy. Dominant were the railyards, repairing the equipment on the six lines that crossed Bloomington-Normal, stamped the community as a manufacturing town--with unions and shops.

Stage 3. The third stage in the evolution of the county was the emergence and dominance of the service sector. When the rail yards closed in the 1950's, State Farm replaced farms, Illinois State University grew from a normal school (teacher's college) of 3,000 to a multipurpose university of over 20,000, making the County's work force today primarily white collar, much of it technical, most of it counted as service in the census.

Model II. Longitudinal Changes, involving ownership of production, and extent of distribution, provide a second model for explaining the evolution of the county's business mix.

Stage 1. Initially, businesses (including farms) were locally owned, and sold, primarily, locally produced goods.

Stage 2. Post Civil War marked a second stage. During this period: locally owned stores sold nationally produced goods, and local producers also tapped into national markets.

Stage 3. Nationally owned stores, selling nationally produced goods constituted a third stage. The chains started coming into Bloomington-Normal in the 1920's, especially the mass merchants. This radically altered mass marketing and nature of business; for example, it changed the nature of the trading area, gradually turning the other county towns into bedroom suburbs.

Stage 4. Today, the county boasts both internationally owned retail and manufacturing organizations, using internationally produced raw materials or selling internationally produced goods.