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Frontier in Transition: A Demographic History of Benton Country, Minnesota, 1850-1870

Stephen J. Schilling

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FRONTIER IN TRANSITION:
A DEMOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF BENTON COUNTY, MINNESOTA, 1850-1870

by
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Bachelor of Science, University of North Dakota, 1970

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
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This Thesis submitted by Stephen J. Schilling in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done.

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County, Minnesota, 1850-1870

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Date November 9, 1976

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine closely the transformation of a frontier area into a settled community. The demographic history of Benton County, Minnesota, from 1850 to 1870, is examined in detail. The major emphasis is on the structure of the population and its changes over a twenty-year period. The central goal is to determine if there was a pattern to these changes. Generalizations applied to the entire frontier will then be compared to this one county to see if they are valid.

The manuscript census was the major source of information. The demographic information for each individual, age, race, sex, occupation, and wealth, was recorded on computer cards and analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. This program tabulated single demographic characteristics for the population and then cross-tabulated two or more characteristics to see how they related to each other. Persistence rate and nativity were tabulated by hand. Traditional sources, such as newspapers, local histories, and the like, were also used. By combining these two techniques, the history of this one county was examined in detail.

Several themes emerged over the course of the twenty years studied. In 1850, the population was mostly male and between the ages of 20 and 40. There were few women and few foreign-born. No women were represented in any of the skilled occupational categories. The persistence rate in the county was very low although the population grew substantially.

Settlers usually came from the Northeast, New England, or the British Empire. The foreign-born element exclusive of the British Empire increased greatly. By 1870, when the county was no longer part of the frontier, the population structure was much like that of the nation. The number of men and women was fairly evenly balanced and no age bracket was overrepresented. Women were present in all occupational skill categories. Thus, as the county shifted from a frontier region to a settled community, the population changed from one dominated by young men to one that was a miniature reproduction of the national structure.

Case studies of other counties in Iowa, Wisconsin, California, Texas, and Illinois indicate that these themes were common to many frontier communities. Their populations were generally dominated by young men. The settlers came from states not immediately adjacent to the one to which they migrated. When these counties were studied over a long period of time, their populations showed a characteristically low persistence rate coupled with a growing population. It is hoped that this study will extend the validity of other historians' findings to Benton County.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.¹

When Jeremiah Russell arrived in Benton County (See Map 1, p. 70) in 1849 to set up shop at an Indian trading post, he was at the end of a long journey. Like most frontiersmen in the wilderness that was Minnesota Territory, he had not been born there. His long journey to Minnesota began in Eaton, New York, where he was born on February 2, 1809. He went to school there and at an early age learned the printer's trade while working for the Fredonia Gazette. Restless, he traveled to Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin before taking charge of the American Fur Company's post near Sauk Rapids in Benton County.

Benton County was certainly part of the frontier in 1849. The first settler had arrived only a year before and the first death of a white person was that of Russell's son, sixteen-month-old Albert Russell, in September, 1850. Jeremiah Russell soon gave up the Indian trade and became a successful farmer and publisher of the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman. The skills that he had learned back in Fredonia, New York, were beginning to find a place on the frontier, in 1854. As Benton County grew and

¹ Psalms 107:4-7.

prospered, Jeremiah Russell, his farm, and his business prospered with it. He helped to bring many of the ingredients of civilization to the county, but not only with his newspaper. The first session of the district court was held in his home and part of the land on which the county jail was built was donated by him.

Benton County changed, and many would call the change progress; but the old frontiersman was left behind. Jeremiah Russell was a loyal Democrat and his newspaper accordingly championed the Democratic cause. This, in a county that was rapidly becoming Republican in its sympathies, hurt his business, and in 1860 the paper died. But the editor of the Republican newspaper that followed had learned his trade at the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, so even in defeat Jeremiah Russell's influence carried on. By the time he died in 1885, he had been a member of the First Territorial Legislature, county treasurer, county auditor, and justice of the peace. When he died there were railroads, farms, lumberyards, and bridges where before there had been only wilderness. Jeremiah Russell witnessed and often assisted in this transformation of a backwoods county from wilderness to a settled community.² What Jeremiah Russell saw from 1849 to 1870 is what this study is all about.

My purpose is to examine closely the transformation of wilderness that Jeremiah Russell saw and participated in. Rather than deal with such a change in generalities, the demographic history of one county, Benton County, Minnesota, will be examined in microcosm to see exactly how this

²N. H. Winchell et al., History of the Upper Mississippi Valley (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society, 1881), pp. 343, 344, 349.

process worked and to see if some of the generalizations applied to the frontier are valid in this particular case.

The manuscript census records will receive particular attention. Demographic information such as age, race, sex, occupation, and wealth for each individual has been recorded on computer cards and analyzed utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Place of origin and the percentage of population remaining from one census to the next (the persistence rate) has been calculated by hand sorting since the small size of the community does not require that all manipulation be done by computer. SPSS will then tabulate key characteristics and analyze them to determine if any meaningful statistical relationships exist. For example, a cross tabulation of sex and occupation would indicate the number of men and women in each of six occupational classifications. The Chi Square test will then be applied to this cross tabulation to determine if the two variables, sex and occupation, are significantly associated. Once each census has been analyzed individually, the different censuses can be compared to each other. These tests should determine the composition of the community at each census and how it changed from one enumeration to another.

Benton County was selected for a variety of reasons. It made the vital transition from frontier to settled community in the years from 1850 to 1870. Furthermore, the records needed to study this transformation are readily available, most notably the manuscript census for 1850,

1860, and 1870.³ Benton County was also blessed with three newspapers during this period, although they did not publish concurrently. In fact, it was the first county north of Saint Paul to have any newspaper at all. This gives Benton County the quality of being a frontier community in transition to settled community with a newspaper and, therefore, ideally suited to the purposes of this research. Moreover, county boundaries were unchanged from 1860 to 1870. This continuity of geographical area eliminated some uncertainties. If the county boundaries had changed, it would not be possible to determine if demographic changes were due to population or the whim of the state legislature. Equally important, the population involved is small enough to be manageable yet large enough to be significant. Thus, Benton County, with its frontier characteristics, available records, and convenient size is an ideal model for a case study of a frontier in transition. Benton County is the laboratory in which the northern agricultural frontier of the Civil War era can be studied in microcosm.

This thesis will first look at Benton County through traditional sources, such as contemporary newspapers, local histories, and the like. Then, using a computer analysis of census records, I will determine the

³The census records for 1850 are available; however, the county boundaries changed considerably between 1850 and 1860 (Mary Ellen Lewis, *The Establishment of County Boundaries in Minnesota* [MA Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1946]). Therefore, the degree of continuity found in the period from 1860 to 1870 is not found in the period from 1850 to 1860. Benton County in 1850 was much larger than in 1860, but the bias introduced would tend to make the figures conservative since the population was clustered around Sauk Rapids. The 1850 census will be included as an introduction since the major emphasis is on the period from 1860 to 1870.

demographic changes during the period from 1850 to 1870.⁴ Combining these two techniques should provide some valuable insight into the transformation of a frontier county into a settled community. Benton County serves as a case study of how this process worked, and understanding Benton County will contribute its mite to the understanding of the whole frontier.

⁴One of the basic assumptions of this study is the accuracy of the individual's responses to the census taker's questions. There have been some difficulties in this area. Melvin Zelnik, "Age Heaping in the United States Census: 1880-1950," Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly 39 (July, 1961): 540-573, points to the problem of age heaping: an abnormal number of individuals were found in age brackets that were a multiple of five. The occupations category also lends itself to different interpretations. A man may have listed himself as a clergyman although he had never attended a seminary and made his living as a farmer. His claim to that title was due to his leadership of informal worship services on the frontier. Such inaccuracies and shades of meaning must be kept in mind when working with census records. But the census is a valuable source on the lives of ordinary citizens and often it is the only source.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF BENTON COUNTY, MINNESOTA

Benton County's scenery caused one Scottish visitor (who was no less than a professor of Latin at the University of Aberdeen) to remark, "I was vividly reminded of some of our larger streams in the old country, many of its craggy banks and thickly wooded back-grounds closely resemble the Rhine or some Lake scenery in the west of Scotland."¹ That was quite appropriate for "a visiting Scottish gentleman," and the residents of the county were probably quite flattered by the comparison with such a distinguished part of Europe. Such remarks, however, would have meant little to the original inhabitants of the county, the Santee Sioux.² But the Sioux did not remain undisputed masters of the area. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the Ojibway or Chippewa, advancing from the Lake Superior region and armed with French guns, battled the Santee for possession of the land and in 1825 the two tribes divided the area between them.³

This state of affairs did not go undisturbed for long, for another force, the white frontiersman, was making itself felt in the region. That dubious forerunner of civilization, the Indian trader, appeared in

¹Sauk Rapids Sentinel, 7 August 1868, p. 1.

²Theodore C. Blegen, Minnesota, A History of the State (Saint Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), pp. 19-26.

³Ibid.

1789 when Jean Baptiste Perrault built a trading post on the Sauk River.⁴ The rapids in the river made the locality a center of activity. Although Perrault moved on, other Indian traders followed. Robert Dickson built another trading post for the winter of 1805-1806, just below Sauk Rapids, while Watab, north of Sauk Rapids along the Mississippi River, was the site of a trading post from 1844 to 1855.⁵ The American Fur Company built yet another post at Sauk Rapids in 1848.⁶

Explorers looking for the source of the Mississippi River soon joined these Indian traders. Lieutenant Zebulon Pike of the United States Army passed through in 1805, followed by Lewis Cass and Henry Schoolcraft in 1820, Giacomo Beltrami in 1823, Henry Schoolcraft again in 1832, and Joseph Nicollet in 1836.⁷ While neither trader nor explorer stayed for long, fur trading posts had brought some men to the county who stayed long after the posts were gone. Jeremiah Russell, the redoubtable frontiersman, took charge of the American Fur Company's post at Sauk Rapids in 1849. Another frontiersman of the same caliber was David Gilman, who ran the trading post at Watab. His career resembles Jeremiah Russell's in many ways. Like Russell, he was born in New York and moved to Minnesota Territory by way of Vermont and Michigan. He settled in Watab in 1848 to take charge of another American Fur Company post. In the course of the years, he was Sheriff of Benton County, delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1857, and finally postmaster. He, like Russell,

⁴ Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur Trading Area, 1660-1855," Minnesota History 11 (December, 1930), 374-75.

⁵ Nute, "Minnesota Fur Trading Area," 374-75.

⁶ Works Progress Administration, Inventory of the County Archives of Minnesota, Benton County (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Records Survey Project, 1940), p. 6.

⁷ Blegen, Minnesota, pp. 87-91, 108-109, 112-23.

lived through the entire period covered by this narrative and was later honored as Benton County's first permanent settler.⁸

Gilman's trading post suffered because the white man's encroachment on Indian lands and life became more forceful than just exploration and trading. In 1837, the Chippewa ceded all their lands east of the Mississippi to the United States government.⁹ This included all of Benton County except a small area between the Watab and Crow Wing rivers, which was designated as a reservation for the Winnebago Indians. They were removed in 1855, leaving the government in possession of most of the land in the county.¹⁰ Eventually the land was surveyed and offered for sale. This set the stage for the appearance of another type of frontiersman, the land speculator. These greedy men promptly bought up the best land and priced it as high as the market would bear. As was often the case in newly established counties, the county seat became a sought-after prize that would enhance the value of the land. A town in possession of the county seat would receive the county's political, judicial, and administrative activities and that would attract people and money, much to the great benefit of the speculators.¹¹ Benton County was no exception to this form of economic rivalry.

In 1856, the county seat was moved from Sauk Rapids to Watab. This removal generated a great deal of bad feeling against the speculators,

⁸Winchell, Mississippi Valley, pp. 368-69.

⁹N. H. Winchell, The Aborigines of Minnesota (Saint Paul: The Pioneer Company, 1911), p. 620.

¹⁰WPA, Benton County, p. 5.

¹¹Daniel Boorstin, The Americans, The National Experience (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 164-65.

for many people thought these avaricious individuals were motivated more by greed than by a desire to improve the county. These feelings were probably justified because once the new county seat had been established, a board of county commissioners was created which promptly awarded contracts for a jail, courthouse, and administrative buildings. Bonds with a high rate of interest were issued for this construction, but the tax base of the county was not adequate to pay the interest or even the principle, to say nothing of the county's regular expenses. The land had been overpriced, discouraging settlement and keeping the population small. When the bond holders demanded payment, the officers of the county repudiated the issue completely. The holders then sued the county and won their case in the courts, forcing the county to levy a heavy tax to pay the judgment. This further retarded economic growth. Obviously, 1857 was not a good year for Benton County; indeed similar scenes were enacted throughout the North, which was caught in the Panic of 1857. Speculators, county officials, and contractors had so scrambled the finances of the community that many years passed before the situation was settled and the county was out of debt. The ravenous activities of the speculators proved self-defeating. They discouraged the very economic activity they desired and from which they hoped to profit. In 1859, the county seat was moved back to Sauk Rapids.¹²

But the county did make progress in other areas. In 1854, the locality acquired its first newspaper, the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, published by the energetic Jeremiah Russell with William Wood, editor, and

¹²Winchell, Mississippi Valley, pp. 341-42.

George Benedict, printer.¹³ It published in an area that Jeremiah Russell described as "a frontier county, the very outskirts of civilization."¹⁴ It was not a very spectacular newspaper. It contained mostly small-town gossip, serialized novels written by William Wood's wife, and a good deal of other trivia. But its view of the future was highly optimistic. Like most small-town newspapers, it became the loyal supporter of everything local and grandiloquently advertised the virtues of the county:

We close this imperfect notice of Sauk Rapids by simply remarking that its geographical position; its great water power; its distance to the Commercial Emporium of the Territory, the certainty of its being upon the Great Northern thoroughfare to the Pacific, whenever it shall be opened, its being at the highest point of the Mississippi that steamboats have ever reached or will for years to come; the beautiful and fertile country by which it is surrounded; what with these and other advantages necessarily pretermitted at this time, the connection that Sauk Rapids must, in the lapse of a few years, become an important commercial and manufacturing town irresistibly forces itself upon our mind.¹⁵

This vision of the future was an unrealistic as it was optimistic. Saint Cloud just to the south prospered and overshadowed little Sauk Rapids, which did prosper--but the great future that the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman envisioned never materialized. Small-town editors have often been accused of confusing "the vision and the reality" of the situation that confronted them, and Jeremiah Russell was no exception.¹⁶ Sauk Rapids, as it was in 1855, was really too small to support a newspaper, but Jeremiah Russell could see a great future for the town and the newspaper if only

¹³Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 3 May 1855, p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid., 5 January 1860, p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., 24 May 1855, p. 2.

¹⁶Boorstin, Americans, p. 127.

the town grew enough. So his task became not only the business of publishing but also the creation of a community and the conquest of the wilderness.¹⁷ Small towns with dim prospects had become great centers of commerce before 1855, and they could become so in the future as well. At least Russell thought it could happen again, so he and his "Booster Press," as Daniel Boorstin calls it, worked with that vision of Sauk Rapids in mind. Optimism and faith said it could happen again.¹⁸

The newspaper, like Jeremiah Russell himself, sided with the Democrats.¹⁹ But this was not good judgment in a county that was changing its political loyalties. Even Russell noticed this: "We can elect Democratic rulers to preside over us--we can place at the head of the affairs of state persons of responsibility and high merit--or we can permit the opposition to ride into power over our infirmities and make Minnesota a Republican state."²⁰ The fear became reality; in the local elections of 1859 Benton County elected all Republican county officials except for a lone Democrat as treasurer.²¹ The county had changed and left Jeremiah Russell behind. Pleading financial difficulties, he discontinued the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman in 1860.²²

¹⁷Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁹Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 27 December 1855, p. 4.

²⁰Ibid., 8 October 1857, p. 2.

²¹Ibid., 3 November 1859, p. 2.

²²Ibid., 5 January 1860, p. 1.

This disaster in the fortunes of one editor did not leave the community without a newspaper, however, as the Frontiersman was promptly replaced by The New Era published by William Wood.²³ A major characteristic of The New Era was the Republican tone of the newspaper, as it was caught up in the new politics that spread like wildfire in the Northwest. Far removed from the day-to-day problems of slavery (only one black man seems to have resided in Benton County during the twenty years of this study), it was nevertheless concerned with the slavery issue, as it declared in the principles reprinted in every issue:

1. Opposition to the extension of slavery.
2. No more slave states except by competent affirmative legislation.
3. Hostility to the re-opening of the slave trade.
4. Liberty of conscience and equality of rights for native and adopted citizens.
5. Repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law.
6. Opposition to the principles announced in the Dred Scott Decision.
7. The policy of granting 160 acres of land to actual settlers on the Public Domain.
8. Hostility to the corruption and extravagance of the National Administration.²⁴

It accused James Buchanan of being an "old tyrant" for vetoing a Homestead Act,²⁵ and it inaccurately referred to all Democrats as "seceders."²⁶ It campaigned hard for the election of the Republican candidate for President Abraham Lincoln. But The New Era had an even shorter life than the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman; it ceased publication on November 27, 1860.²⁷

²³Ibid.

²⁴The New Era (Sauk Rapids), 2 February 1860, p. 2.

²⁵Ibid., 12 July 1860, p. 2.

²⁶Ibid., 28 June 1860, p. 2.

²⁷Ibid., 27 November 1860, p. 1.

Perhaps with the election over, politics was no longer able to sell enough newspapers--or perhaps it had only been a campaign sheet to begin with.

The Civil War brought troubled years to Benton County as it did to most counties in the nation. But there was a difference. Not only were there the bloody actions in the South to be concerned about, but the Sioux Uprising of 1862 caused additional worry. Although Benton County's limited population could not play a major role in either conflict, men from the county did respond to the challenges. Some, like Felix Parrant,²⁸ joined Hatch's Independent Battalion of Cavalry as part of General H. H. Sibley's expedition and fought the Sioux in Minnesota and the Dakota Territory.²⁹ Company I of the Seventh Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which was recruited from Benton, Stearns, Sherburne, and Todd counties, probably received most of the men from the county.³⁰ This regiment responded to President Lincoln's call for troops after the defeat of General McClellan's army in July, 1862.³¹ The First Lieutenant of Company I was George Mayhew, a farmer from St. George in Benton County and a veteran of the Mexican War.³² The Seventh Minnesota was also part of General Sibley's expedition and fought the Sioux in Minnesota and the Dakota Territory as far west as the Missouri River (near present-day Bismarck). Not until October, 1863, did this regiment depart for the South

²⁸Winchell, Mississippi Valley, p. 356.

²⁹C. C. Andrews ed., Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865, 2 vols. (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1890), 1:549-601.

³⁰Ibid., 1:349.

³¹Ibid., 1:347.

³²Winchell, Mississippi Valley, p. 363.

to began fighting rebels instead of the Sioux. It participated in battles at Oxford and Tupelo, in Mississippi and Nashville; in 1864 it formed part of the force that laid seige to and captured Spanish Fort outside of Mobile, Alabama, in February, 1865. The end of the war found the unit near Selma, Alabama.³³ It returned to Minnesota and was disbanded at Fort Snelling in August, 1865, the same fort where it had been equipped in August, 1862.³⁴ These men had come to the cutting edge of civilization, had fought both Indian and Confederate, and finally had the opportunity to devote themselves to the tasks for which they had originally come West.

The Sioux Uprising, while it had been "a most terrible and exciting war," had not been fought in Benton County.³⁵ It was quite real to the soldiers, whether in Dakota Territory or Mississippi, but for the majority of the population the war years passed quietly once the initial excitement of the Uprising had settled. The nearest fighting with the Indians was more than a hundred miles to the south, close enough to cause worry but distant enough to cause minimal disruption of daily life. Many men of military age in the county had not served at all and had been content to stay at home. For some, such as First Lieutenant George Mayhew or Private Felix Parrant, the end of the fighting meant that they could take off their blue uniforms and go home to rejoin those who had never left. But others, such as Private Alvin Chapman or Private Albert Hodgdon, would never come home, for the war meant death and burial far from Benton County.³⁶ For the men who served, the memories of what they had seen and

³³Andrews, Civil War, 1:355-69.

³⁴Ibid., 1:367.

³⁵Ibid., 2:201.

³⁶Ibid., 1:383.

done in those years would remain forever. As a sergeant in the Seventh Minnesota Volunteers later remarked, "It seems to me now more like a dream than a reality, but it was reality indeed which we will never forget. I wish to remember it while I remember anything. I look upon those years with more pride than all the others that I have lived."³⁷

But these men were not alone. As one would expect in any frontier community, during the years following the Civil War they were joined by many veterans who came to Benton County to settle, and those men probably felt much the same as the sergeant. Such units as the Third Missouri Infantry, Fifth Indiana Cavalry, and Sixteenth New York Infantry were represented in the new settlers.³⁸ So while the Civil War was quite remote, it became part of the county's history through the veterans who settled there.

Settlement continued during and after the war; the population nearly doubled every ten years. The St. Paul and Pacific Railroad arrived at Sauk Rapids in 1866³⁹ and at Watab in 1867.⁴⁰ It hauled granite, lumber, and crops out of the county, and goods for the Hudson's Bay Company passed through headed for the north. Railroading was new and exciting in the area and it is not surprising that the town was immensely proud of its rail service and the men who ran it. One editor observed that "the regularity with which the trains arrive and depart is unsurpassed by any

³⁷Ibid., 1:369.

³⁸Winchell, Mississippi Valley, pp. 352, 351, 354.

³⁹Sauk Rapids Sentinel, 11 September 1868, p. 1.

⁴⁰Richard Prosser, Rails to the North Star, (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1966), p. 11.

other road in the country, while the employees are men of the most obliging and gentlemanly character."⁴¹ The newspaper may have been a little over-enthusiastic but the railroad was vital for any economic development in the area and, besides, it showed that at least some of the high hopes of the past were coming true.

In addition to the railroad, the county also acquired another newspaper, the Sauk Rapids Sentinel, published by George Benedict in 1868. He had been the printer for the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, but unlike Jeremiah Russell or William Wood he tried to be independent in politics.⁴² It was a successful newspaper and became the official newspaper for Benton, Mille Lac, Morrisson, and Sherburne counties.⁴³ Like its predecessors, this paper had unbounded faith in the future. "We are convinced," wrote the editor, "that the manufacturer, the merchant, and the artisan, with all the multitude that follow in the train of enterprise and capital must, by the inevitable course of events at no distant day, establish their domestic abodes and seats of industry within her [Benton County] limits."⁴⁴

This optimism seemed justified. In addition to a railroad, the county now possessed a stone dam across the Sauk River for water power and milling.⁴⁵ Two flour mills and three lumber mills were operating in the area.⁴⁶ Land value had climbed from \$13 per acre in 1860 to \$27 in

⁴¹Sauk Rapids Sentinel, 31 July 1868, p. 1.

⁴²Ibid., 22 May 1868, p. 1.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 24 June 1870, p. 1.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Bureau of the Census, The Statistics of Wealth and Industry, Ninth Census (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), p. 535.

1870.⁴⁷ The locality was making modest progress in its desire to become an economic center. The commercial section of the newspaper, two pages out of four, contained enthusiastic advertisements for various new businesses. New grocery stores, lumber yards, liquor stores, and even a billard parlor were opening up with every issue. These advertisements were so energetic that by 1870 they had spilled out of the last two pages and onto the front page. The future must have looked bright as the comforts of civilization arrived. Gone were the days when Robert Russell (no relation to Jeremiah Russell) could avenge a murdered peddler by lynching three accused Indians, as happened in 1849.⁴⁸ The county now possessed a district court and a jail. School districts had been organized⁴⁹ and there were Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches in addition to the Congregational Church organized by Reverend Sherman Hall.⁵⁰

A century later, Benton County is much like the rest of rural Minnesota. Prosperous farms and small towns dot the landscape. Fences, roads, and telephone wires cross the land. The cliffs on the banks of the Sauk River are picturesque. The respectability and quiet prosperity of successful farmers replaced the wilderness. Perhaps the great future envisioned by Jeremiah Russell did not come to pass but the farms and villages remained and thrived. It is a modest triumph for the common man.

⁴⁷Thomas J. Pressly and William H. Scofield, eds., Farm Real Estate Values in the United States by Counties, 1850-1959 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 34.

⁴⁸Robert Flint, A Genealogical Register of the Descendants of Robert and Agnes (Leitch) Russell (Minneapolis: The North Saint Paul Courier, 1923), p. 6.

⁴⁹WPA, Benton County, p. 10.

⁵⁰Winchell, Mississippi Valley, pp. 343-44.

CHAPTER III

THE 1850 CENSUS

The 1850 census serves a useful function as an introduction to the analysis of the 1860 and 1870 censuses although there was not the continuity of geographical area between 1850 and 1860 that existed in the following decade. But 1850 serves as the starting point because at that time Benton County was definitely the frontier. Jeremiah Russell called the country "the very outskirts of civilization" and with a population density of far less than two persons per square mile, it certainly fit the usual definition.¹

But more information than this is necessary in order to describe the community accurately. Who were these people? From where did they come? What was the composition of the population and how did it differ from the nation as a whole? By nativity, they were chiefly from Minnesota with the British Empire and the states of the Old Northwest supplying most of the rest (see Table 1). There was a sprinkling from New England, the Northeast, and the South. Outside of the British Empire, the foreign-born element was almost non-existent, with only two Germans and a single Russian. The Indian population had been moved out by this time. However, the most conspicuous individual must have been a solitary black man born

¹ Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 5 January 1860, p. 1.

TABLE 1
 NATIVITY FOR BENTON COUNTY IN 1850

<u>New England</u>		<u>Northwest</u>	
Vermont	14	Wisconsin	29
Connecticut	3	Ohio	13
Maine	16	Illinois	3
Massachusetts	6	Iowa	11
New Hampshire	2	Michigan	6
Total	<u>41</u>	Indiana	7
		Total	<u>69</u>
<u>South</u>		Minnesota	141
Alabama	2	<u>Foreign</u>	
Virginia	2	Canada	69
Arkansas	1	England	3
Missouri	2	Ireland	9
Georgia	1	Scotland	5
Tennessee	1	Germany	2
Kentucky	3	Russia	1
Maryland	1		
Total	<u>13</u>		
<u>Northeast</u>			
New York	24		
Pennsylvania	17		
New Jersey	<u>1</u>		

in Alabama, the only non-white registered.² This man, perhaps a runaway slave, probably preferred freedom in a remote section of the frontier to the slave society of the pre-Civil War South. He was a man who had moved far, both in terms of geography and status. In this aspect even he resembled his neighbors, for this was a population that moved often. The first white child to be born in Sauk Rapids did not come into the world until 1852.³ Obviously there could be no white population indigenous to the region; everyone in the census had to move at least once in order to get there, but many people moved several times. This is demonstrated by the Olmstead family.⁴ The parents were born in New York, their oldest child in Pennsylvania, their youngest children in Iowa, and in 1850 they lived in Minnesota. This was a very migratory population. Only a few years before, this area had been virtually uninhabited. Now a population of transients began to move into the area. Most had been born in states adjacent to Minnesota, or in Canada, but many had traveled a great distance, like Lewis Kent, the forty-five year old black man from Alabama or the Russian-born Isaak Marks. Having moved frequently in the past, they would continue their migratory habits, for they were no more than temporary residents with no permanent roots in the county. Since men far outnumbered women (the sex ratio was 185), any man seeking

²Records of the Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Manuscript, Minnesota, Schedule I, Free Population, Record Group 29, (National Archives Microfilm, M432, roll 367).

³Winchell, Mississippi Valley, p. 343.

⁴Seventh Census of the United States.

a mate would have to look outside the locality.⁵ Unmarried, restless young men with no roots in the community would make for a very unstable population.

The lack of a normal population distribution, such as the one for the entire United States population, which shows an even downward curve (see Figure 1), contributed to this instability. The curve is highest on the left, indicating the greatest percentage in the youngest age groups. The curve steadily declines, denoting the natural forces that gradually reduce the population over the years. This is much as would be expected, with more children than elderly and progressively smaller groups in between. This national distribution presents an even curve. In contrast, the age frequency distribution for Benton County (see Figure 2) is anything but. It has two peaks, one on the left for the large number of very young children, and another in the 20 to 30 age bracket. Between these two peaks is a dropoff in the teen years. After age 40, the curve again drops off, evincing the small percentage over 40. Although there was one individual aged 72, the maximum age in the community, many age brackets between 50 and 72 were empty. This is caused by the great concentration in the 20 to 40 age group, which accounts for nearly half of the entire population instead of less than a third as in the nation as a whole (see Table 2 for comparison). This gives the curve a peak in the middle that is totally unlike that of the nation. Paradoxically, the population was both older and younger than the national distribution.

An age-sex frequency distribution presents the same contrast (see Figure 3 for Benton County and Figure 4 for the United States). The

⁵The sex ratio is defined as the number of men per one hundred women.

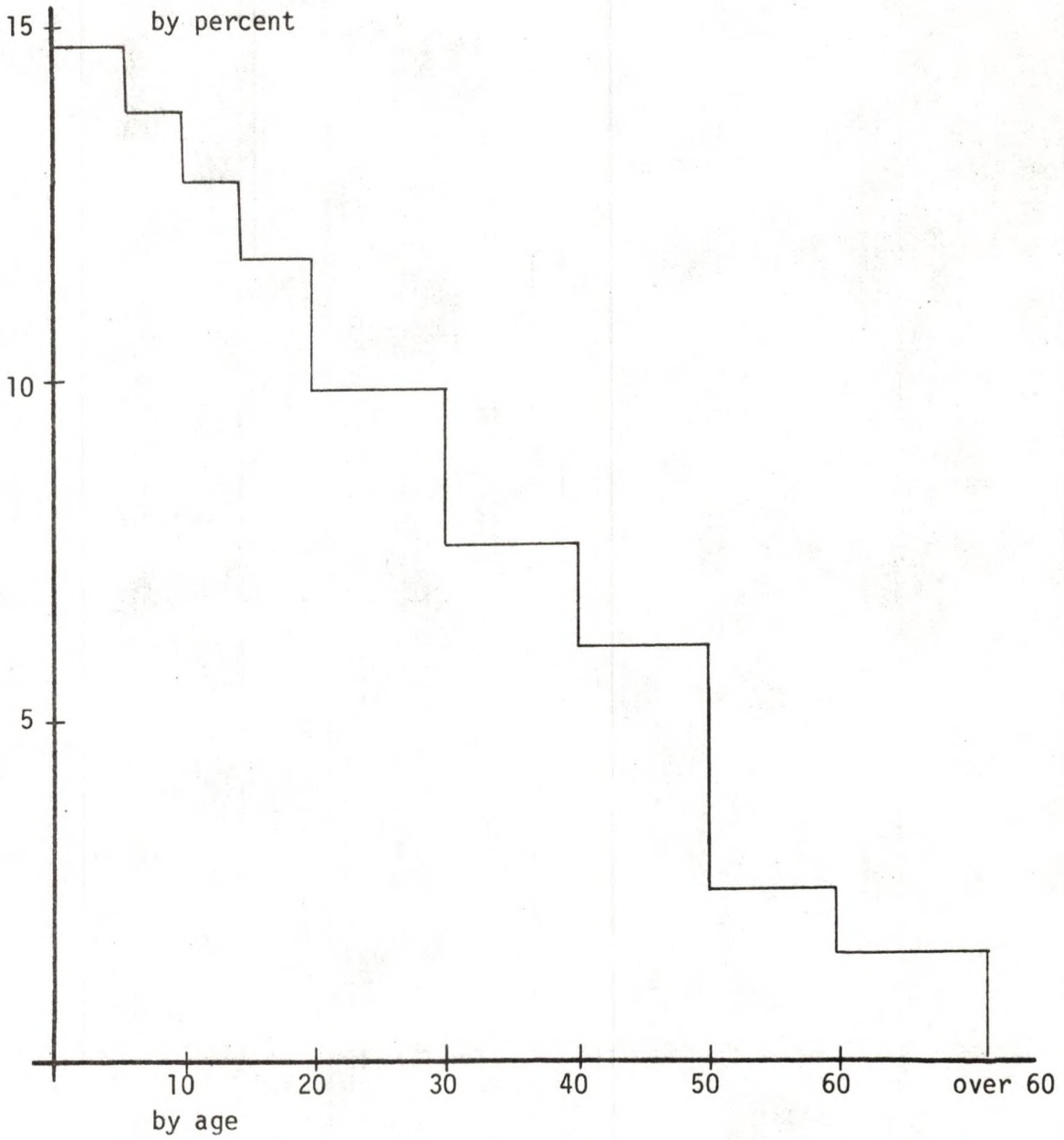


Fig. 1. Age Frequency Distribution for the United States in 1850

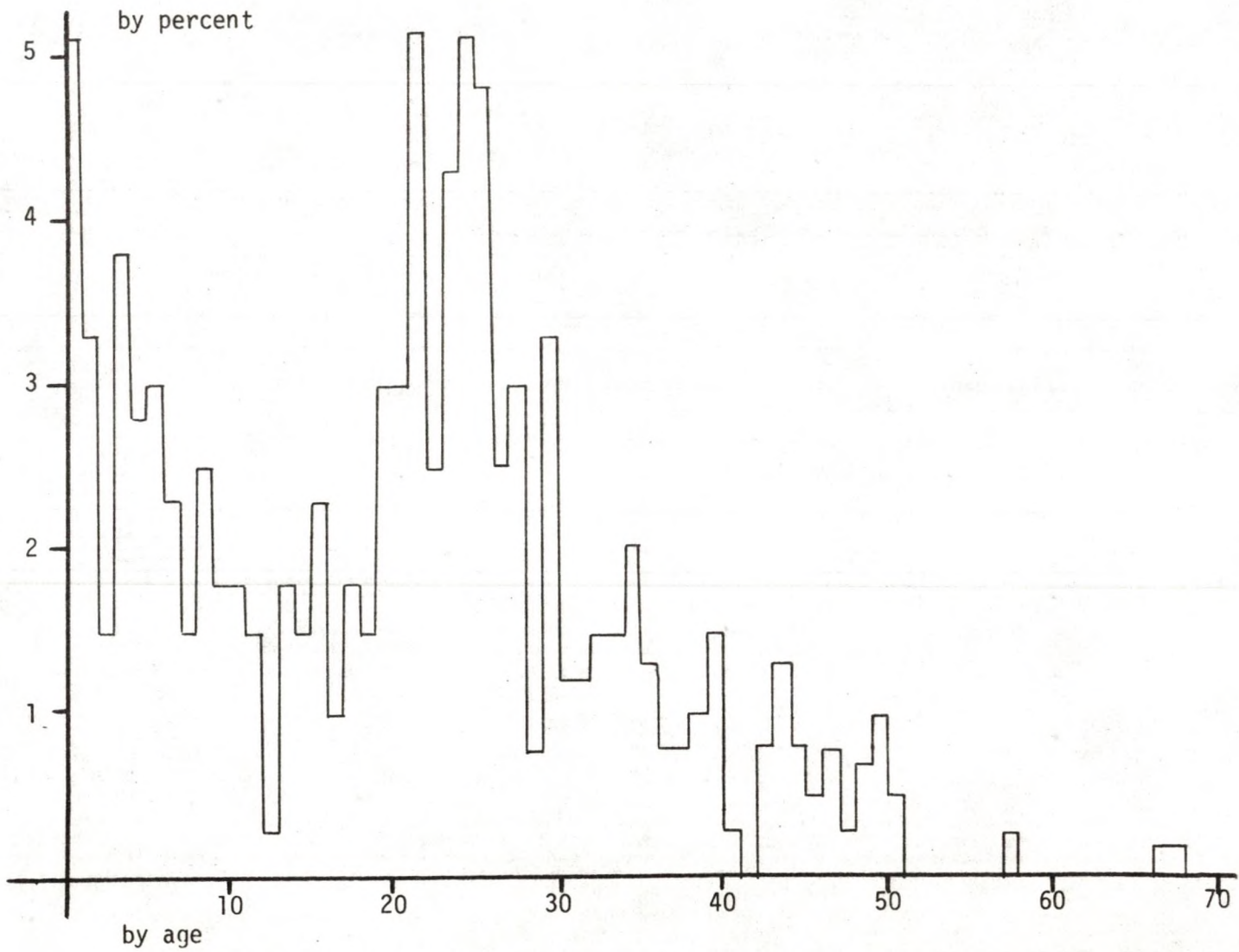


Fig. 2. Age Frequency Distribution for Benton County in 1850

TABLE 2
 POPULATION COMPARISON BETWEEN BENTON COUNTY AND THE
 UNITED STATES BY PERCENT

	1850	1860	1870	
Percent between 20-39 years	48.5	38.9	29.2	Benton County
	30.6	30.0	28.7	United States
Percent over 40 years	6.9	12.3	16.3	Benton County
	16.9	17.6	19.3	United States
Percent Male	65.0	53.4	55.0	Benton County
Percent Female	35.0	46.6	45.0	Benton County

by percent

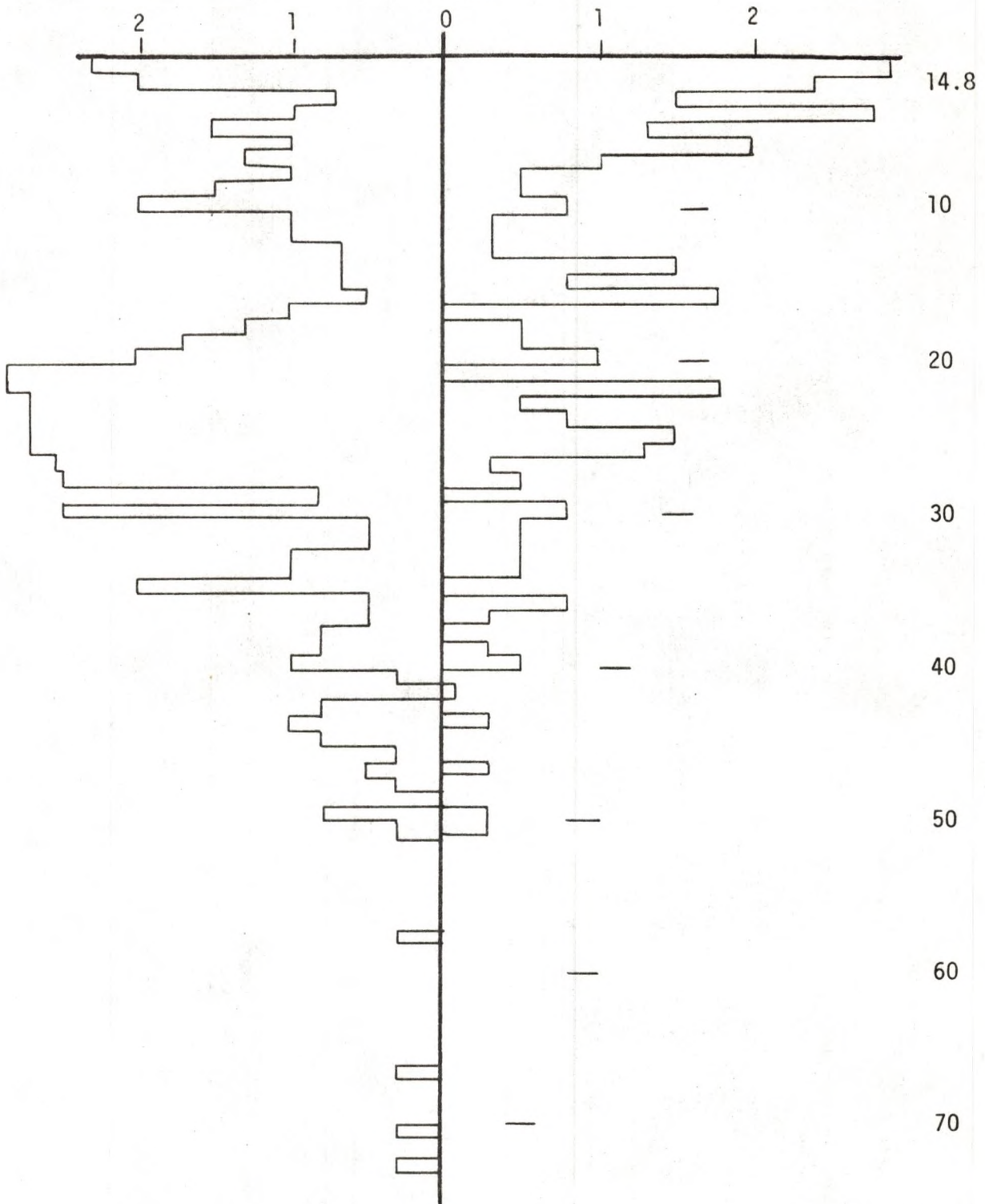


Fig. 3. Age Sex Distribution for Benton County in 1850

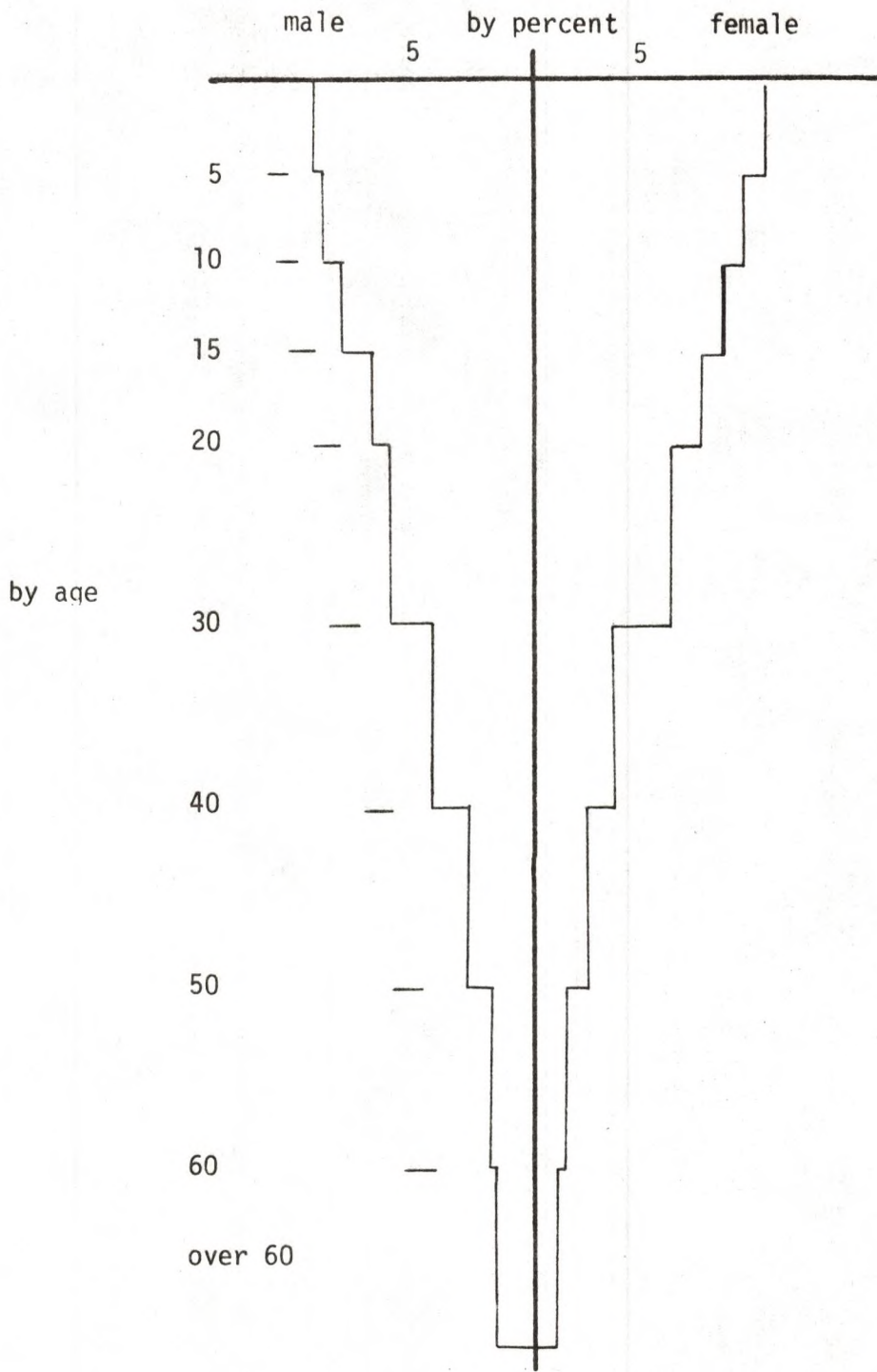


Fig. 4. Age-Sex Distribution for the United States in 1850

distribution for the nation shows an even distribution, an inverted pyramid with the largest numbers in the youngest age groups. Succeeding brackets decline. The two sides are fairly evenly balanced between male and female. The sex ratio was 105 in the nation--but in Benton County it was 185.⁶ This shows that rather than the even distribution characteristic of the nation, there was the same picture of peaks and valleys as with both sexes combined. But here again it becomes apparent that most of this distortion from the national curve was due to the distribution of males, who peaked in the 20 to 40 age group. Men outnumbered women in that classification 37 percent to 11 percent. These statistics describe a young male population geared toward physical work in agriculture and lumbering. In a community where the first concern was turning wilderness into civilization, a great deal of hard labor had to be done, and a population that consisted largely of young males provided the muscle to accomplish this task.

This masculine characteristic is further emphasized by the distribution of skills even though few people in the county possessed any skills at all. More than three-fourths of the population was non-skilled (see Table 3). Not only did males outnumber females in the general population

TABLE 3

OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL OF THE 1850 POPULATION BY SEX ACCORDING TO PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION

	Non-skilled	Craftsman	Skilled	Clerical	Professional	Total
Male	77.3	10.2	8.2	2.0	2.3	100
Female	100.0	0	0	0	0	100

⁶Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, 2 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1:14.

(65 percent to 35 percent), but men also completely dominated the skills in the county. No woman found a place in any of the skilled occupational levels. Apparently the only place for a woman in this frontier community was as a wife. While young men dominated the scene and women found little position except in the home, men over forty, a distinct numerical minority and proportionally far fewer than in the rest of the nation (see Table 2), occupied a position of importance. For example, they had an influence on the county's politics far greater than their numbers would seem to indicate. As shown by Table 4, most of the county officials were men near or over 40, albeit one man was only 22. The majority of the elected officials belonged to an age bracket that included a very small

TABLE 4
COUNTY OFFICIALS IN 1850 BY AGE

Judge of Probate	Frederick Ayer	46
Sheriff	David Gilman	39
Treasurer	Curtis Bellows	48
Surveyer	George Sweat	27
County Commissioner	William Aitkin	58
County Commissioner	Joseph Brown	32
County Commissioner	James Beatty	33
County Commissioner	Phillip Beaupre	26
Register of Deeds	James Hitchens	22
Clerk of the District Court	Taylor Dudley	39

percentage of the population. Considering that men over 40 probably possessed most of the wealth of the community, this political dominance is easily understood. They did, in fact, dominate the professions as well. But this only reinforces the impression that men over 40 held vastly more influence than their numbers suggest. Politics, skills, and probably wealth were in their hands. Thus, while young men dominated the population numerically, older men carried most of the influence and prestige. For example, Jeremiah Russell belonged to this group of leading citizens--by this time he had already become a successful farmer, editor of the county's newspaper, and delegate to the First Territorial Legislature.

These older men provided an element of stability in a restless, mobile population. Some of them, like Jeremiah Russell, David Gilman, and Sherman Hall, came to the county when it was wilderness. In a community that had no roots, which had been created from wilderness in only a very short time, these middle-aged patriarchs were the ones who would provide the direction for the future development of the county. In contrast to most of the rest, who were recent arrivals, most of whom would probably soon depart; the patriarchs had already put down some roots. They were the ones who had already come to have an interest in the development of the county.

CHAPTER IV

THE CENSUS OF 1860

The decade from 1850 to 1860 saw considerable change in the population structure of Benton County. Although the population increased from 394 to 620, this growth was only 226 souls. As opposed to the size of the population, the composition did change and in ways which made 1860 significantly different from 1850. One of the most noticeable alterations is the age frequency distribution (see Figure 5). The 20 to 40 year old age bracket is still marked by a conspicuous bulge but it is less than in 1850. The curve is beginning to even itself out and is becoming a smoother distribution. In addition, the curve is extending itself into the older age brackets. The oldest individual in 1860 was 80 as compared with 72 in 1850.¹ Those over 50 now accounted for 6.6 percent of the population while in 1850 they composed only 1.5 percent. This shift is primarily due to a shrinkage in the 20 to 39 age group. Instead of numbering half of the population, it was now down to a third. This was still more than the national percentage, but it was not as extreme as in 1850. It shows that Benton County was losing the characteristics that made it part of the frontier and was beginning to take on a population distribution like that of the entire nation.

Indicative of this loss of frontier flavor was the male-female ratio (54 percent to 46 percent) which was considerably more equal than

¹Records of the Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Manuscript, Minnesota, Schedule I, Free Population, Record Group 29, (National Archives Microfilm, M432, roll 367).

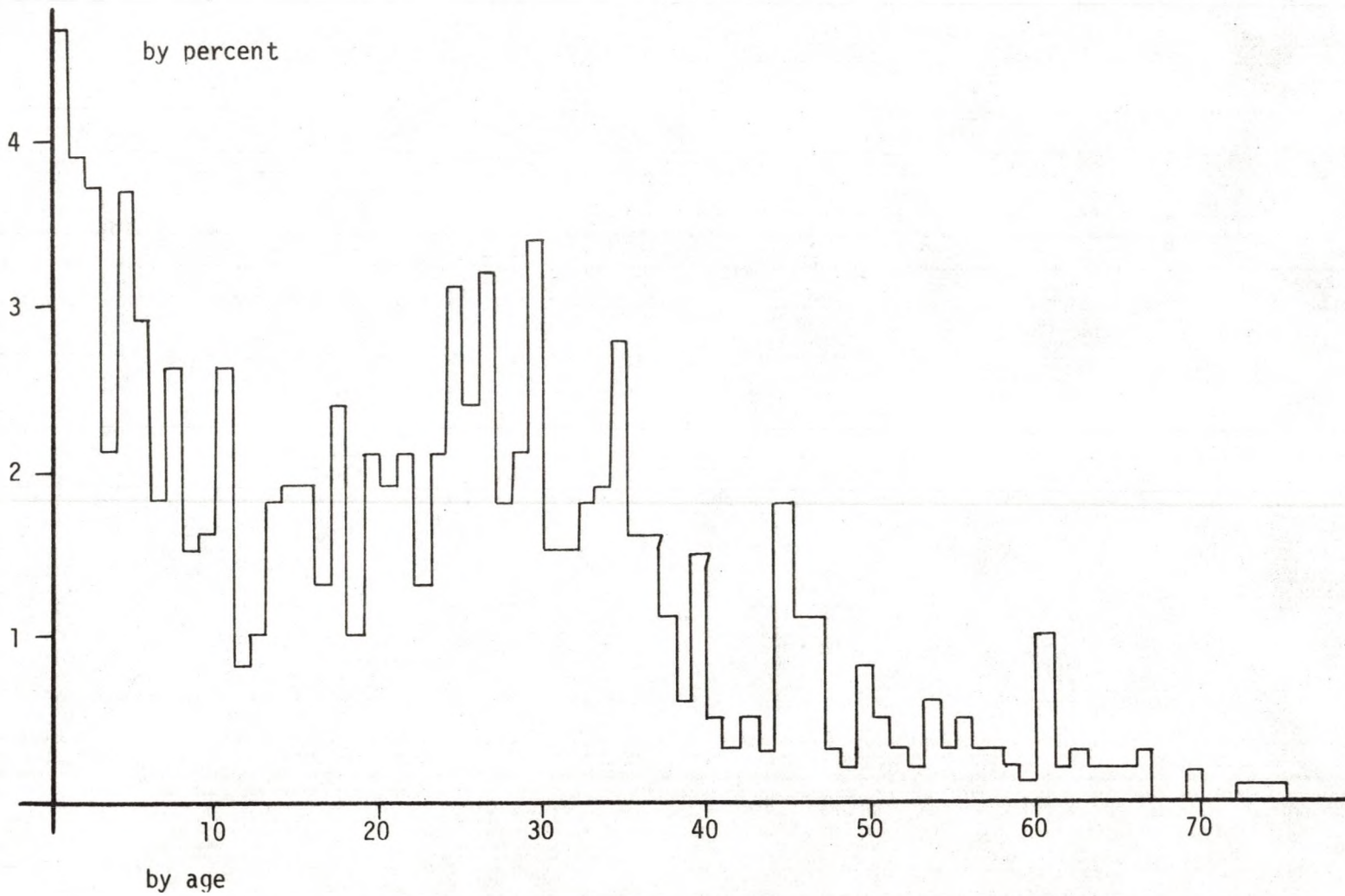


Fig. 5. Age Frequency Distribution for Benton County in 1860

in 1850. In this sense, also, Benton County began to resemble the nation rather than the frontier. Along with more women, there was more wealth. Unfortunately, wealth figures were not recorded in 1850. This could be the fault of the census taker, who may simply have neglected to record them, or it could be due to the fact that most people had nothing to declare.² But the 1860 figures reflect a varied distribution of both real estate and personal estate. Although most of the populace had nothing or less than \$1,000, some individuals had prospered.³ Three men were worth between \$8,000 and \$10,000 and 89 had estates valued between \$1,000 and \$7,000. The \$7,000 to \$8,000 bracket was empty. Assuming that the lack of figures in the 1850 census reflects a lack of capital in the community, the decade had seen some affluence come into the area. Part of this must have come from agriculture since this was primarily a farming community. Land values more than tripled, from \$4 per acre in 1850 to \$13 per acre ten years later.⁴ Some industry had appeared with the establishment of two flour mills and three lumber mills.⁵ These businesses employed a total of only seven men, and were probably intended to handle local needs only. But their output, valued at \$6,000 annually, shows that the county was developing more than the subsistence agriculture expected in a remote frontier district.

In addition to millers and lumbermen, other skills began to appear. While fully 85 percent of the population did not even claim a skill in

²Errors of the census taker are one of the hazards of working with the manuscript records. Illegible penmanship is also encountered.

³Eighth Census of the United States.

⁴Pressly and Scofield, Farm Values, p. 34.

⁵U.S. Census Office, Manufactures of the United States in 1860, Eighth Census (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965, p. 277.

1850, this figure had dropped to 60 percent in 1860. Some individuals might have been only unskilled laborers but at least that was something. Every skilled classification increased its percentage. More professionals, clerical workers, craftsmen, and skilled workers were found in the community. This increase might be expected considering the increase in wealth. But more than just increasing the number of skills in the county, and in sharp contrast to ten years earlier, women were present in the skilled categories. Men still vastly outnumbered women at every level, but it is perhaps surprising that women were represented at all. Statistically there was still a significant relationship between sex and occupational level. The Chi Square test had a significance of 0.0. That is, there was no chance that the relationship between sex and occupation was random. But this domination was not so complete as in 1850, when no women were represented in any of the skilled categories. By 1860, there were female clerks, seamstresses, household servants, and cooks. Some women were even professionals, such as teachers and hotel managers. This is due in part to the numerical increase in females, who were no longer such a minute proportion of the population. Thus, very basic changes had occurred in the county in the decade from 1850 to 1860. The population distribution evened out, wealth increased, the sex ratio became more balanced, and women entered the skill categories (see Table 5).

The simple population increase does not explain this. Rather, these factors bear testimony to a basic shift in the area's society. The Benton County of 1850 was a frontier locality, masculine dominated in order to accomplish the task of defeating the wilderness and bringing some semblance of Western civilization. This task appears to have been partially accomplished. The community possessed more wealth and more

TABLE 5

OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL OF THE 1860 POPULATION BY SEX ACCORDING
TO PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION

	Non- skilled	Crafts- men	Skilled	Clerical	Professional	
Male	61.8	15.2	14.2	2.4	5.8	99.4
Female	95.6	1.4	.7	.4	.7	98.8

*Figures do not total 100 percent due to ambiguous designations and illegible handwriting.

more people so it could support more doctors, lawyers, clergymen, who were needed in any society but could not be supported by a very small community. This set up a circle, for the new professionals also made the area more civilized and more attractive to future settlers. The process of moving into the frontier often left women behind just as it left the professionals.⁶ But as with the professionals, women followed. This is basically what happened in 1860. This increase in the number and status of women hardly made for an egalitarian society but it did represent a sharp change from ten years before. The county still possessed only about one person per square mile, so technically it was still in the frontier (if the frontier is defined as an area with two or fewer people per square mile) but it was beginning to make the transition to a settled community.

The remarkable thing about this logical process is that the people who were making this transition were not the same ones who had come to the frontier in 1850. These new pioneers seemed to travel a greater distance for the privilege of homesteading in Benton County. The states of the Old Northwest (see Table 6) no longer contributed the large

⁶Boorstin, Americans, p. 92.

TABLE 6

NATIVITY IN BENTON COUNTY IN 1860

<u>Foreign born</u>		<u>Northeast</u>	
Holland	5	New York	101
France	7	Pennsylvania	15
Germany	17	New Jersey	2
Sweden	1	Total	118
Total	30		
<u>British Empire</u>		<u>New England</u>	
Ireland	28	Vermont	33
England	33	Massachusetts	6
Canada	35	Maine	87
Scotland	12	Rhode Island	1
Total	108	Total	152
<u>Old Northwest</u>		<u>South</u>	
Indiana	7	Kentucky	2
Wisconsin	18	Alabama	1
Ohio	30	Virginia	1
Illinois	9	Maryland	1
Michigan	8		
Iowa	4		
Total	76		

percentage that they had ten years before, perhaps because they were more settled. States closest to Minnesota must have sent their pioneers elsewhere because those who settled in Benton County made a long journey to do so. Settlers from nearby Wisconsin were outnumbered by those from distant Maine 87 to 18. Scotland sent more than Illinois. Settlers from the Old Northwest bypassed the area and families from the Northeast, New England, and the British Empire moved in. The portion of the population that had traveled the furthest, the foreign-born, grew markedly. This

segment, exclusive of the British Empire, increased ten fold, from three to thirty. Although still not a very large proportion of the population, this segment indicates a trend in the changing composition of the society. The great pre-Civil War waves of immigration were beginning to reach this area. Immigrants were always important to the settlement of the frontier and their increase was another sign that the frontier here was passing.

The larger number of immigrants was also evidence of the wanderlust that the people of this era must have felt. They seemed to be very restless, as shown not only by the distances they traveled but by the frequency with which they moved, for the county had a remarkably low persistence rate.⁷ Only eighteen people, or 4.5 percent of the 1850 population, was found in the 1860 census. Because women who married and thus changed their name were not traceable, this percentage may have been a little higher. But given the small number of women in the 1850 census the persistence rate could not possibly have been more than 10 percent. This, together with a growing population, presents a picture of a very unstable society. Few people stayed in the locality very long before they moved out. Yet there were enough new arrivals not only to replace those who moved out but to increase the total number. There must have been a constant influx of people into the county with a steady outward migration. This county must have been like a busy bus station with people constantly arriving and departing. The census only caught a snapshot of those who happened to be there at a particular time before moving on.

⁷The persistence rate is defined as the percentage of people from one census who are found in a later census.

The very small percentage of those who stayed the decade, however, included some interesting and important individuals. Three of the pioneer settlers, David Gilman, Jeremiah Russell, and Sherman Hall, were among these, as were George Sweet and Taylor Dudley. These men often held public office between 1850 and 1860.⁸ At one time or another, they were Probate Judge, County Commissioner, Sheriff or Auditor. They almost seem to have been elected to any office they wanted for as long as they wanted. While other individuals successfully sought public office, one or more of these men always held some position. They were the first to settle in the area, they stayed, and they constantly exercised an influence over the life of the community. Thus, this very small nucleus of permanent settlers played a very prominent part in the life of the community. Perhaps the ability of a locality to make the transition from frontier to civilization depends upon the county's capacity to attract and hold a small core of permanent settlers who would stay and develop the area. They would provide an element of stability in a very unstable population. They provided some continuity from one decade to the next. Benton County possessed this small but active group, and it was making the transition.

⁸WPA, Benton County, pp. 261-65.

CHAPTER V

THE CENSUS OF 1870

Benton County in 1870 extended the trends of previous years. The age frequency distribution shows almost no bulge in the 20 to 40 age bracket. This concentration, which was so noticeable in 1850 (see Figure 2, p. 23) and still noticeable in 1860 (see Figure 5, p. 31), melted away by 1870. The result is a curve that is much more normal (see Figure 6), with a further extension into the older age brackets. The oldest individual in the community in 1870 was 99 years old; he was a retired farmer born in New Hampshire. Although he was very much alone in that age group, he did represent the trend toward more old people in the community, a trend that began to make the population distribution for Benton County look more like that of the nation. Those over 40 represented 19.3 percent of the total population in the nation while in Benton County they composed 16.3 percent (see Table 2, p. 24), a difference of only 2.9 percent. In 1850, this difference was 10 percent. The 20 to 39 age group, which represented 48.5 percent of the county's population in 1850, and was then nearly 20 percent greater than the corresponding percentage for the nation, declined to 29.2 percent in 1870, only .5 percent greater than the nation. The two features which were so noticeable in 1850, the great numbers of young adults and the scarcity of old people, so evened out by 1870 that there was scarcely any difference between the population distribution for the nation and that for the county.

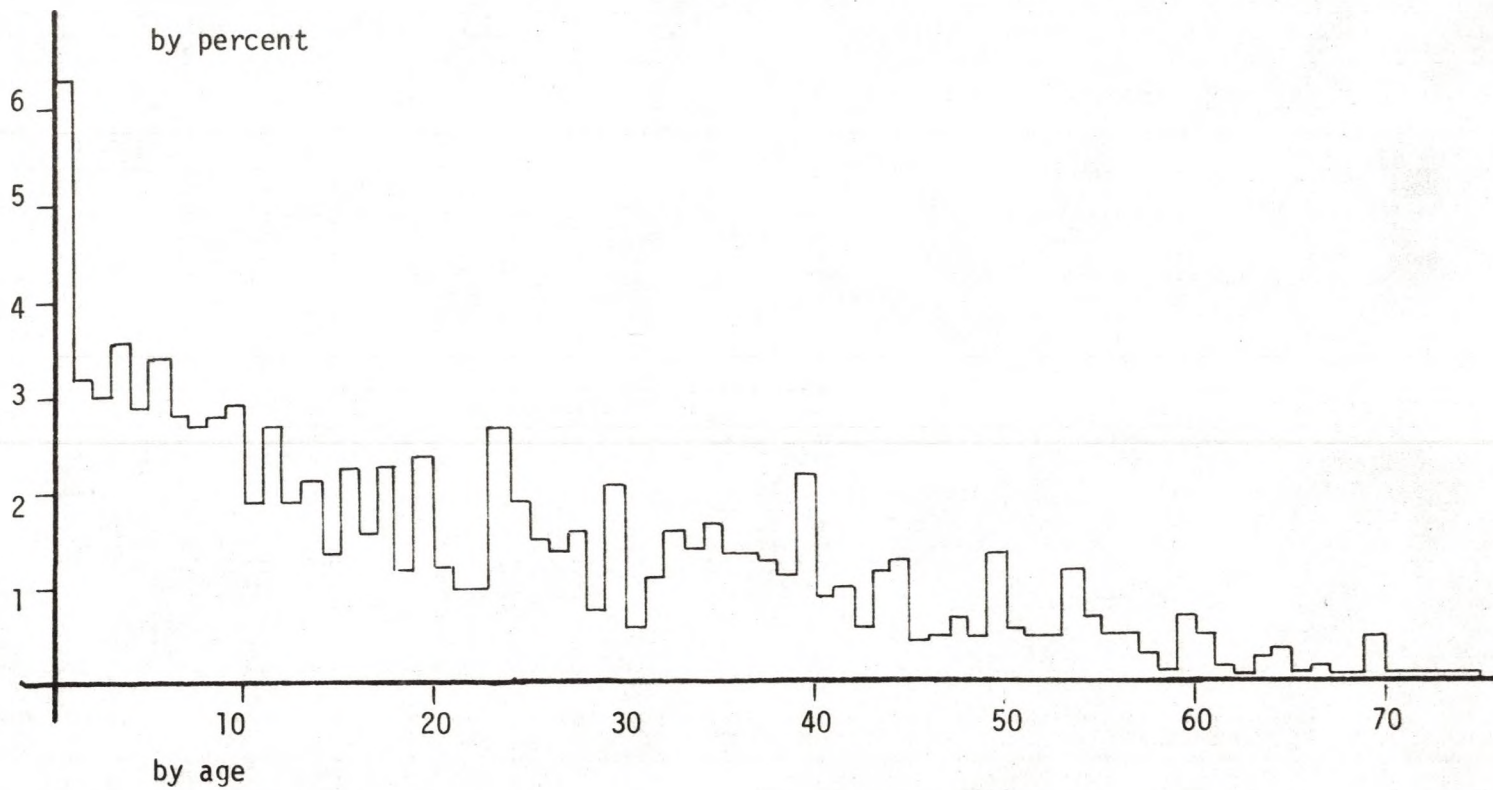


Fig. 6. Age Frequency Distribution for Benton County in 1870

The age sex distribution shows much the same picture (see Figure 7). It resembles an inverted pyramid, like that of the nation. Men still outnumbered women but that was true of the nation as well. This structure does not have the balance of the national distribution but that might be expected in a relatively small sample as compared to a very large one. Whatever demographic conditions that were peculiar to the county in 1850 had, by 1870, virtually disappeared. Probably the most prominent of these conditions and perhaps the most symbolic was the fact that Benton County no longer conformed to the conventional definition of the frontier. By 1870, there were about four persons per square mile, while in 1850 there had been less than one. The frontier had moved elsewhere. The masculine society that had existed in 1850 for the conquest of the wilderness was no longer needed. In 1870 as in 1860, women found a place in almost all levels of the occupational classification (see Table 7).

TABLE 7
OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL OF THE 1870 POPULATION BY SEX ACCORDING
TO PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION

	Non- skilled	Crafts- man	Skilled	Clerical	Professional	Total
Male	72.6	9.7	12.1	1.5	3.1	99.0
Female	96.9	.6	1.2	0	1.2	99.9

Twenty years before, single men had dominated society, but by 1870 the basic social unit of the county was the family, consisting of husband, wife, and children. The concept of the extended family with grandparents, their married children and grandchildren living in the same household did

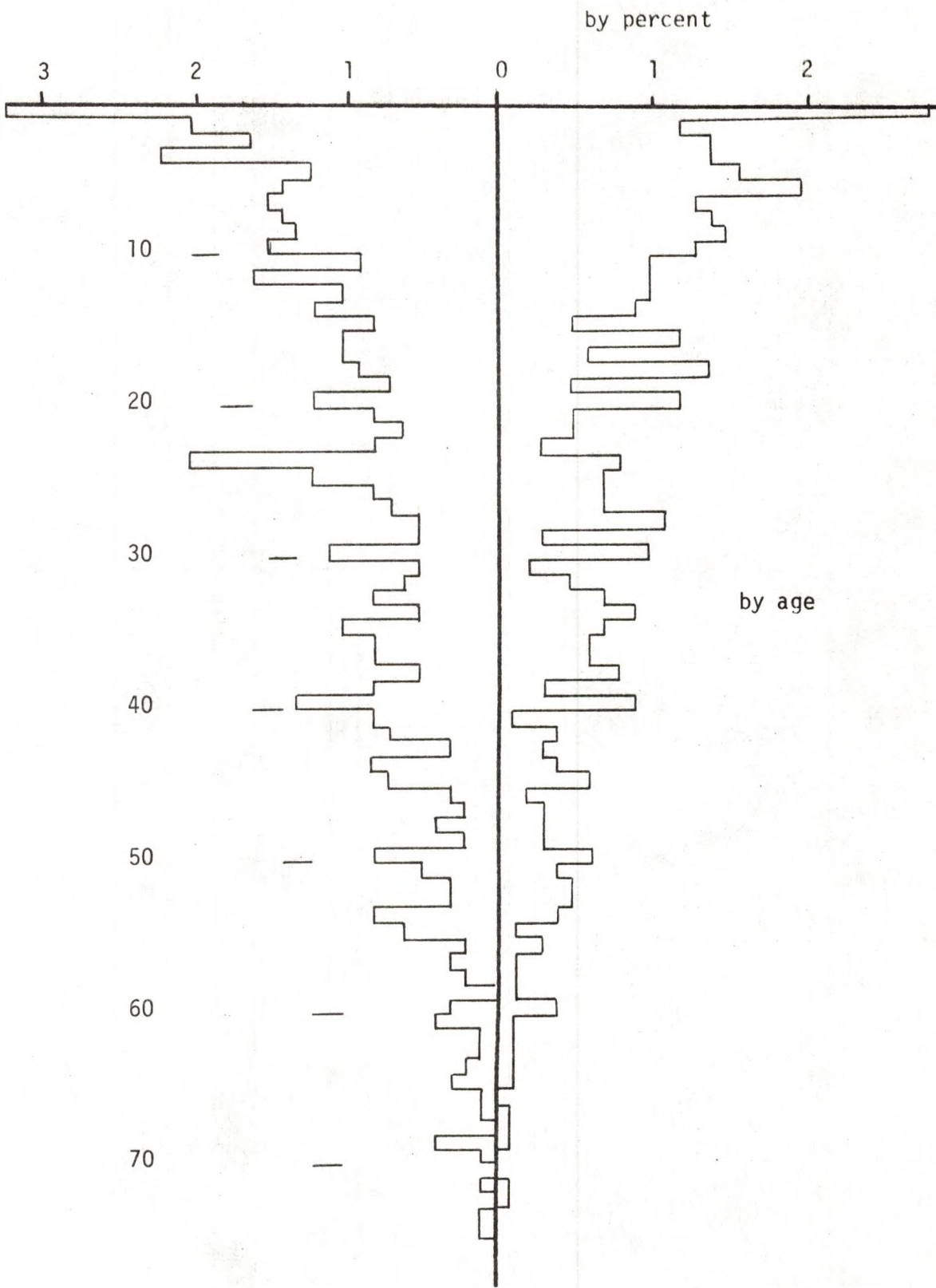


Fig. 7. Age Sex Distribution for Benton County in 1870

not really apply here. This community did not contain enough elderly people to make the extended family very common. As Peter Laslett found in pre-industrial England, the extended family was the exception rather than the rule.¹ Such a unit is founded more in wishful thinking than in fact. It is true that an occasional extended family in the classic mold existed; the Paraul family of 1870 is an example.² It consisted of Pierre, 70, and Josephine, 69, presumably the grandparents; Xavier and Celestine, both 46, the parents; and seven children, aged 23 to 2. All three generations lived in the same household. This was an immigrant family from Belgium and probably more closely knit than most families. While such a family was certainly the exception, just as certainly exceptions did exist. In addition to complete family units, numerous unmarried men lived in the county. This is not surprising considering the shortage of unmarried women. Some unmarried women also lived on the frontier. This was almost unknown in 1850, but by 1870, a small group of independent women had found their way to Benton County. Elizabeth Sweet, 46, was such a case.³ The census for 1870 listed her as a farmer and there was no adult male living in the household although there were six children aged 17 to 4. Presumably she was a widow who managed the farm with the help of her children. She represented the exception but she is a good example of the independent, enterprising spirit of the frontier.

¹Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1965, pp. 81-83).

²Records of the Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Manuscript, Minnesota, Schedule I, Free Population Record Group 29, (National Archives Microfilm, M593, roll 1).

³Ninth Census of the United States.

Perhaps the rarest social unit on the frontier were those couples that simply "lived together." The census of 1850 produced the only example.⁴ This couple consisted of a 26 year old woman with no listed occupation and a man also 26 and a tinner by trade. They lived in the same household and had different last names. Clearly, the concept of living together did not thrive in the wilderness. This may have been due to the fact that adult males always outnumbered adult females and most women were married. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the frontier was largely occupied either by families or unmarried men.

The status of women in general changed a great deal between 1850 and 1870. In 1850, they were few in number and counted for little outside the family. Twenty years later, they were more numerous, more independent, and present in more occupations. This coincides with the transition of Benton County from a wilderness to a settled community. Perhaps the status of women is a measure of the degree to which an area is civilized. While it appears that men were more useful than women in taming the wilderness, the finished community that they were building was a place women could live in. That task was done by 1870 and conditions in the county were much the same as in the rest of the nation.

As in 1860, the improvement in the status of women was accompanied by an increase in wealth. Two men in the \$10,000 to \$25,000 bracket were the wealthiest the county had seen. In the classification from \$3,000 to \$9,999, there were thirty-two individuals. The majority of those with wealth, 106 men, were in the \$1,000 to \$2,999 bracket. But most of the population still had less than \$1,000 or nothing to declare. This was

⁴Seventh Census of the United States.

a marked growth in both the number of people with wealth to declare and amount of wealth.

It is not surprising that with more capital in the community, construction projects should begin. The most important of these was a bridge and stone dam across the Sauk River built in 1870.⁵ This dam, which harnessed the fast flowing river, was the work of the Sauk Rapids Water Power Company. The booster press of the town was highly enthusiastic and could envision a great future for the town and the county as a result of the project. "The inevitable course of events," the newspaper editor wrote, "would make Sauk Rapids a commercial center that would rival Saint Paul."⁶ This construction as well as the arrival of the railroad gave substance to the editor's fondest dreams. The railroad and the telegraph broke down the isolation of the community; with the Northern Pacific at hand, the county could ship its produce to the rest of the nation. The county also had lumber yards, granite quarries, and a tannery that produced an offensive smell.⁷ Progress and Western Civilization had come to Benton County.

This must have made the region a more attractive place in which to settle, for nearly 15 percent of the 1860 population was found in the 1870 census.⁸ But it was still almost the same situation as before with a growing population and a low persistence rate. The total population more than doubled, growing from 620 in 1860 to 1543 in 1870, so that the

⁵Sauk Rapids Sentinel, 24 June 1870, p. 1.

⁶Ibid., 24 June 1870, p. 1.

⁷Ibid., 4 December 1868, p. 1.

⁸Ninth Census of the United States.

persistence rate only represented 94 people. The rapid migration had slowed only slightly.

People must have been infected with wanderlust. This is evident from the nativity of the populace as well as from the persistence rate. In this respect the community resembled the 1860 population with the greatest numbers coming from New England, the Northeast, and the British Empire (see Table 8). The foreign-born exclusive of the British Empire shows the greatest increase, 221 in 1870 as opposed to 30 in 1860 and only 3 in 1850. The only region which actually declined in total numbers was the Old Northwest. Settlers from nearby Wisconsin were outnumbered by those from distant Germany 72 to 90. Faraway Poland sent more than Iowa. Homesteaders born in Michigan were outnumbered by those born in Holland. As in 1860, people would rather travel thousands of miles to find a place to settle than travel a few hundred. Those families living closest to Benton County went elsewhere, there is no telling just where, while families living in distant Europe moved in.

Typical of this restless nature was Patrick Casey, who was born in 1847 on the ship Rover while it crossed the Atlantic from Ireland to America.⁹ Prior to settling in Minnesota, his family had lived in New York, Virginia, Kentucky, and Iowa. Perhaps the lamentable circumstances of his birth may have induced his family to get as far away from the ocean as possible. Here was a family that moved so often one of the children was even born in the midst of travel. Patrick Casey was certainly symbolic of Benton County for it had a population that was constantly in motion. The turnover rate must have occurred at a bewildering rate in this unstable community. However, in the midst of this

⁹Winchell, Mississippi Valley, p. 365.

TABLE 8

NATIVITY IN BENTON COUNTY IN 1870

<u>British Empire</u>		<u>South</u>	
England	25	Virginia	7
Scotland	10	Georgia	4
Ireland	89	North Carolina	5
Canada	152	Tennessee	2
Total	<u>276</u>	Missouri	4
		Kentucky	13
		Alabama	3
<u>Europe</u>		Delaware	1
Sweden	10	Texas	4
Holland	39	Maryland	3
Poland	17	Total	<u>44</u>
Germany	90		
Norway	9	<u>Old Northwest</u>	
Russia	1	Illinois	40
Belgium	35	Iowa	13
Denmark	2	Wisconsin	72
France	14	Ohio	50
Switzerland	4	Michigan	32
Total	<u>221</u>	Total	<u>107</u>
<u>New England</u>		<u>Northeast</u>	
New Hampshire	37	Pennsylvania	58
Vermont	41	New York	170
Rhode Island	1	New Jersey	1
Massachusetts	12	Total	<u>229</u>
Maine	60		
Connecticut	5	<u>Miscellaneous</u>	
Total	<u>156</u>	Red River Territory	10
		Kansas	1
Minnesota	420	Atlantic Ocean	1

confusion and change, the old nucleus remained. The tiny corps of frontiersmen who came to Benton County when it was wilderness were still there in 1870: Sherman Hall, Jeremiah Russell, Taylor Dudley, and David Gilman. These older men continued to provide the needed element of stability in this restless, mobile population. In a community that had no roots, that had been created from wilderness in only a short time, these men were the ones who would provide direction for the future development of the region. In contrast to most of the inhabitants, who were recent arrivals and would probably soon depart, these former frontiersmen had already put down permanent roots. They were the ones who had already come to have a vested interest in the development of the community and they continued to be elected to public office.¹⁰ During the decade, Jeremiah Russell was auditor and Registrar of Deeds; Sherman Hall was Superintendent of Schools, County Commissioner, and Probate Judge, Taylor Dudley was Clerk of the District Court; and David Gilman was County Commissioner. Others held office during this decade but these early settlers were almost always to be found in some public position. They had been in the county's politics since 1850 and this decade was their twilight. Looking ahead, all of their names disappeared from the roster of public officials by 1880. They had been men of mature years when the county was first organized and by 1870, twenty years later, they were probably not as vigorous as they once had been.

These men watched as the area changed from wilderness to civilization. They had witnessed this transformation from the beginning, and by

¹⁰WPA, Benton County, pp. 261-265.

1870 it was leaving them behind, like Jeremiah Russell whose partisan Democratic sympathies were distinctly out of place in a Republican county. Now Benton County, like Minnesota and most of the North, voted Republican. The frontier had passed and now the times were passing by the old frontiersmen.

CHAPTER VI

AN ANALYSIS OF THE POPULATION DISTRIBUTION OF BENTON COUNTY

In view of the low persistence rate the community may have seemed to possess a fluid population, one that was constantly in motion except for a few permanent residents like the Russells and the Gilmans. The stable element has been identified and described. They made the greatest impression on the county and the largest amount of information is about them. The majority of the population, however, was as anonymous as it was transient; such people did not stay long, they held no public offices, and they received little notice in the county's history. Nevertheless this apparently aimless movement does display a pattern, as the age frequency distributions for each census indicate. The graphs in Figure 8, page 50, utilizing a moving average, provide a rough idea of this trend. The concentration in the 20 to 40 age group, so conspicuous in 1850, gradually disappeared while the trail of the curve steadily extended itself to the right. A graph like this is a good method of identifying basic population characteristics, even though the people that composed that population were constantly changing. The moving average, an average of five year intervals, is one method of compensating for age heaping, a factor that is displayed in age frequency graphs that use one year intervals.

An examination of the age frequency distribution curves for the three censuses shows several trends. The usual statistics used to

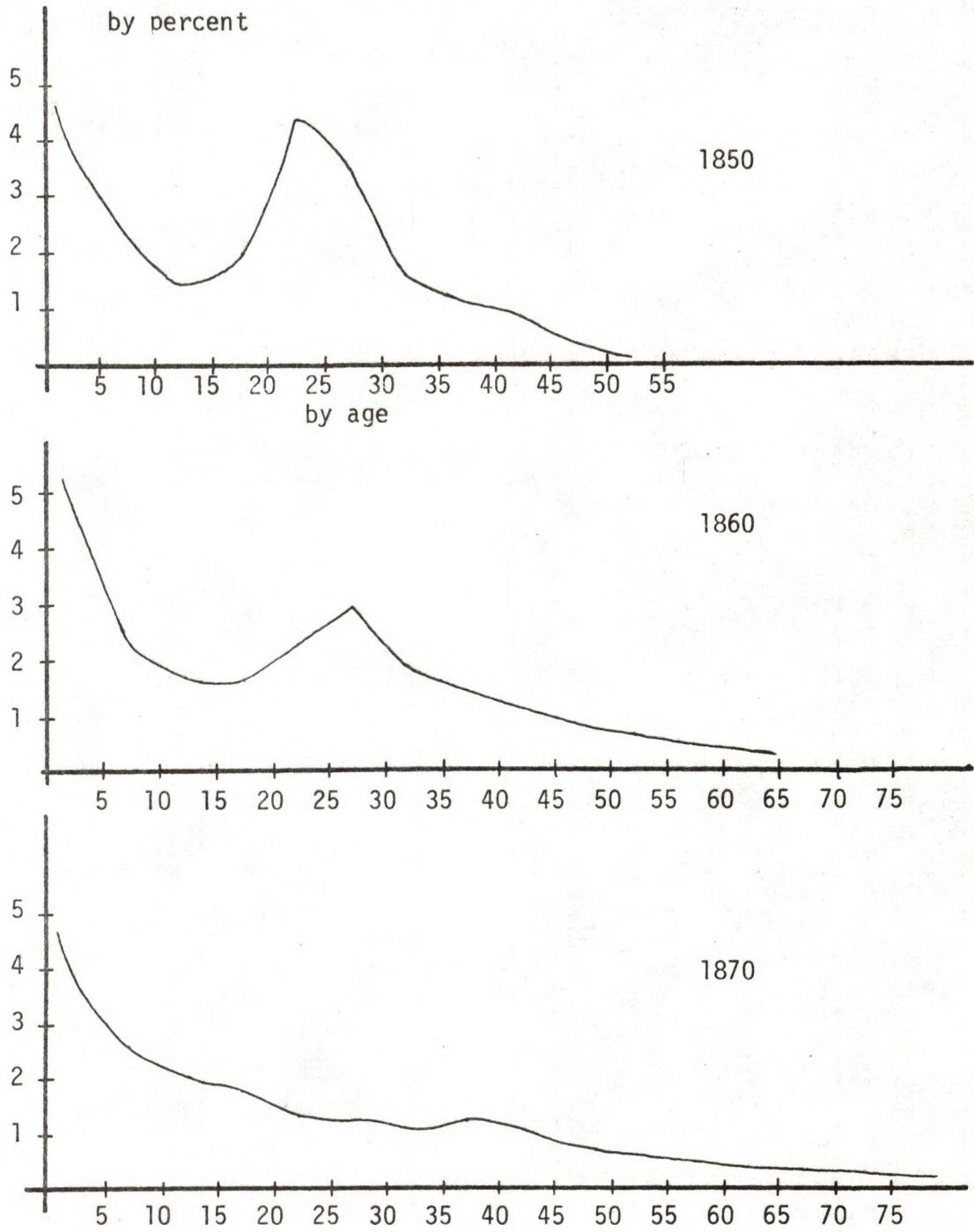


Fig. 8. Age Frequency Distribution Graphs Using Five Year Moving Averages

describe such curves, mean, median, range, variance, skewness, and kurtosis, are most helpful in comparing one curve to another. All these statistics tell the reader what his eye has already seen in Figure 8 and intuitively interpreted. They point out the characteristics of each and the changes which occurred from one census to the next. This is a central point in the examination of the census data. One enumeration means little; it is the comparison of the community from one decennial enumeration to the next that is most revealing.

The most common statistic, the mean (or arithmetic average) is a measure of the central tendency of a set of numbers. It is greatly affected by extremes and will be pulled in the direction of the largest value.¹ As shown in Table 9, the mean age steadily increased, from 20.5 in 1850 to 21.9 ten years later to 22.7 in 1870. This increase is the result of the growing number of old people. As indicated by the range (basically the age of the oldest person) and the graphs in Figure 8, the curves steadily extend themselves into the higher age brackets. When the range increased and the number of people in the older age groups grew, the mean was pulled after the range.

The median, on the other hand, declined. The median is the midpoint of the curve with half the ages above it and half below it.² Like the mean, it is a measure of central tendency, but it is less influenced by extreme scores. This decline reflects the greater number of young people and children. In 1850, the population had been concentrated in the 20 to 40 age bracket. As time passed, this bulge disappeared (see

¹Ralph Kolstoe, Introduction to Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1969), pp. 73, 76.

²Kolstoe, Statistics, p. 76.

TABLE 9
 STATISTICS ON POPULATION DISTRIBUTION
 FOR BENTON COUNTY

	Mean	Median	Skewness	Kurtosis	Age Range	Variance
1850	20.5	21.7	.507	.242	71	184.3
1860	21.9	21.3	.633	-.133	80	272.5
1870	22.7	18.7	.762	-.133	98	319.8
MINNESOTA						
1870	22.3	18.9	.737	-.145	100	916.3
UNITED STATES						
1870	24.1	20.9	.811	-.213	100	809.1

Figure 8) as the curve extended itself to the right and pulled the mean after it. But the number of children also increased, pulling the median down. In a sense, this meant that the population was growing younger at the same time it was growing older. The concentration of people in the 20 to 40 age bracket in 1850 and, to a lesser degree, in 1860 kept the mean and the median relatively close to each other. However, as the central concentration dispersed, the mean and the median were pulled apart. The only way these two statistics could resemble each other would be to have a large percentage of the population in the center of the curve, which, given the fact that young people generally outnumber old, that babies will always outnumber centenarians, would be impossible in a normal community. Thus, these changes presented a fundamental shift in

the population structure of the county. The community moved from a frontier-type society dominated by young adults toward a society that resembled the nation. Benton County was losing the demographic characteristics that made it part of the frontier.

Less obvious than the mean, but equally informative, skewness and kurtosis describe the shape of the curve. Skewness indicates the degree to which the curve resembles the normal bell-shaped curve.³ A positive value means that most of the values are clustered to the left of the mean with the most extreme cases to the right.⁴ All three values for skewness are positive and they become larger with time. This reiterates the indicator provided by the median and by the graphs in Figure 8: the population was concentrated in the younger age groups, and as the curve smooths out, the concentration increased. This process is also reflected in the value for kurtosis, which measures the degree of peakedness in the curve.⁵ A positive value indicates a curve that is more peaked than a bell-shaped curve while a negative value denotes one that is flatter than normal.⁶ This value is positive in 1850, reflecting the peak in the 20 to 40 age group. But this value changed to negative for both 1860 and 1870 as a result of the population shift out of the center. These two values are more testimony to the passing of the frontier. The most prominent feature of the frontier population, the great number of adults aged 20 to 40, resulted in an age curve that was peaked higher (positive

³Norman Nie, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 184.

⁴Nie, SPSS, p. 185.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 184.

value for kurtosis) than normal and centered to the left (positive value for skewness). When these numbers shrank, the curve became flatter (negative value for kurtosis) and centered further to the left (larger positive value for skewness).

Another measure of this change is variance, which gauges the dispersion of data about the mean.⁷ This value grows steadily larger denoting the extension of the tail of the curve to the right and therefore the greater dispersion about the mean. Since variance gives special consideration to extreme cases, it increased as the number of old people grew. Variance will be small for a set of numbers that are tightly clustered about the mean.⁸ But for this set of ages, which contains a great variety, the variance is large and becomes even larger as the maximum grows. In 1850, the population was most concentrated. In 1860 and 1870, it became progressively spread out. This trend mirrors the changing values for skewness and kurtosis and for the same reasons.

Surveying all of these statistics, it is meaningful to note that all of them decline or increase with consistency. The implications from one reinforce the others. Benton County, with its low persistence and transitory population, may have appeared to be in the midst of confusion. But these statistics tell a different story. Though people often changed places for unknown reasons so that one never sees the same population twice, the group which composed the county's population was moving in a precisely measured and quite predictable direction. It was aiming at a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nie, SPSS, p. 184.

configuration which would be congruent with the nation population curve. The national mean age in 1870 was 24.1 while in Benton County, it was 22.7. There was still a gap of 1.4 years but this was much closer than in 1850 when the gap was 3.7 years. This mean age in Benton County, however, resembled very closely the Minnesota mean. In like manner, the county median age was considerably larger. Skewness neatly progressed with each census until by 1870 it was very close to the Minnesota value and only a step away from the national value. Kurtosis also advanced in the same pattern. The steady increase in the county age range almost equaled the state and national age range. Variance in the county also increased in the direction of the state and national levels but in this Benton County had far to go. Since variance places special emphasis on extreme values, it is not too surprising that this value should fall short of the national figure. Benton County still did not have the proportion of elderly that were found in the nation, but the county was headed in that direction.

The statistics for Benton County resemble Minnesota values more than the nation but they were approaching those values. The county was very nearly a miniature reproduction of the state population, and very soon both the state and county would be a likeness of the nation. The census of 1880 would probably have seen these trends continue. One more step was all the county would have needed to melt into the general configuration of the nation.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Several themes have emerged over the course of this study. They include an irregular population distribution, the tendency of settlers to come from states not immediately adjacent to Minnesota, the low persistence rate in a growing population, the growth or the foreign-born element, and the vocal loyalty of the newspapers. These themes, rather than being unique to Benton County, characterized other frontier counties, as similar studies reflect.

An excellent example is found in Michael P. Conzen's investigation of Blooming Grove Township near Madison, Wisconsin.¹ Conzen frankly admits what is apparent not only to his readers but to anyone doing demographic research. "To explain these trends," he remarked, "is more difficult than to describe them."² This remarkable confession, the accuracy of which is more than borne out by this writer's experiences, applies to Benton County, Minnesota, as well as to Dane County, Wisconsin. It is always very difficult to determine exactly why a group of individuals acted as they did, especially when one deals with a largely inarticulate mass, as demographic studies necessarily do. We know something of Jeremiah Russell, for he told us the highlights of his life himself and

¹Michael P. Conzen, Frontier Farming in an Urban Shadow: The Influence of Madison's Proximity on the Agricultural Development of Blooming Grove Township (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971), p. 6.

²Ibid., p. 34.

his newspaper preserved accounts of many of the leading citizens of Benton County and Sauk Rapids. But others have left us little or no trace. Names appear once or twice in the newspapers, and outside of the information provided by a corroborating census entry, we know nothing. Orin B. Day was proprietor of the Hyperborean Hotel in Sauk Rapids around 1860.³ The census of 1860 reported that he was born in New York in 1820, and was married with two small children.⁴ When he arrived and when and why he left is unknown, but that he did leave seems certain for neither his name nor his family were found in the next census. For others we know even less. The single black man to have been found in this study was born in Alabama about 1805 but he too came and left without a trace and was mentioned in no newspapers.⁵ There is still another category of unknowns, for many came after one census and left before the next. O. D. Weeb, a flour miller advertising in the Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, is mentioned in neither the 1850 census nor the 1860 census.⁶ Others left no entry at all and we have no trace of their journey through life. We only know they were there and we can only look in awe at their varied comings and goings of the little mass of humanity which made Benton County its home, if only briefly. Doubtless the historical participants themselves did not know why they behaved as they did, and if they were confused it should not be surprising that we are too. The historian, working at a distance of a hundred years or more, must use both imagination and candor when he attempts to explain these demographic trends.

³Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 3 November 1859, p. 1.

⁴Eighth Census of the United States, Manuscript.

⁵Seventh Census of the United States, Manuscript.

⁶Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 5 June 1857, p. 3.

We nevertheless discern those trends which are common to Benton County and the other counties. Conzen, for example, found that the population structure of Blooming Grove Township in 1850 had a preponderance of young adults and a shortage of people over 55.⁷ By 1870, this had evened out and there were more old people and fewer young adults, as Blooming Grove Township went through the same demographic transition as Benton County. Conzen explains that the large number of young adults were necessary to develop the resources of the area. This region of Wisconsin also had a very low persistence rate in the midst of a growing population. Most of the settlers were from the Mid-Atlantic states or New England. In the words of one author, they would "skip a state" and maybe even an ocean, for during the period studied the foreign-born-element increased greatly.⁸ Immigrants formed a much larger percentage of the population in 1870 than in 1850, much the same as Benton County.⁹ The development of Blooming Grove Township closely parallels that of Benton County.

Jack E. Eblen also studied frontier populations of this era.¹⁰ In a survey of sample frontier counties, he found that such areas typically contained fewer elderly, more young adults, and more--slightly more--men than women than in the nation as a whole.¹¹ In this respect both

⁷Conzen, Frontier Farming, 34.

⁸William Bowers, "Crawford Township, 1850-1870: A Population Study of a Pioneer Community," Iowa Journal of History 58 (January, 1960), 24.

⁹Conzen, Frontier Farming, 53.

¹⁰Jack E. Eblen, "An Analysis of Nineteenth Century Frontier Populations," Demography 2 (1965), 399-413.

¹¹Ibid., 412-413.

Benton County and Blooming Grove Township resemble Eblen's study, but the features were far more pronounced. Manistee County, Michigan, also complements these studies. Its population structure seemed to be about the same as Benton County, with an 1850 population that contained more men than women, few children, and few elderly.¹² In general, Manistee County had a male dominated society with few women in the labor force.¹³ This was much the same as Nueces County, Texas, in 1850, which had no women employed outside the home.¹⁴ Butte County, California, presented much the same image in 1850, although it was a mining community and could be expected to have few women. The area had very few females (the sex ratio was 3329!) and 73 percent of the population was between 20 and 40.¹⁵ Thus, the mining frontier, Butte County, the lumbering frontier, Manistee County, the southwest cattle frontier, Nueces County, and the agricultural frontier, Blooming Grove Township, present much the same picture: more men than women and more young adults than other groups. They resemble the popular image of the frontier far more than the areas Eblen studied.

Low persistence rates and "skipping a state" were features found in studies of other counties. Cass County, Minnesota, received most of its settlers from New England, the Old Northwest, and the Northeast.¹⁶

¹²George Blackburn and Sherman Ricards, "A Demographic History of the West: Manistee County, Michigan, 1860," Journal of American History 57 (December, 1970): 615-618.

¹³Ibid., pp. 609-618.

¹⁴Sherman L. Ricards and George M. Blackburn, "A Demographic History of the West: Nueces County, Texas, 1850," Prologue 4 (Spring, 1972): 15.

¹⁵Sherman L. Ricards, "A Demographic History of the West: Butte County, California, 1850," Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters 46 (1961): 474-78.

¹⁶Stephen J. Schilling, "Frontier in Transition; Cass County, Minnesota, 1860-1880" (unpublished Seminar Paper, University of North Dakota, 1974), p. 31.

Crawford Township, Iowa, was settled from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana.¹⁷ Pioneers from the South and the Old Northwest moved into Wapello County, Iowa.¹⁸ In all these studies, a low persistence rate was coupled with a growing population. This feature has continued to be prominent in rural life. The turnover rate for farm laborers in Kansas during the 1930's was very high regardless of economic circumstance or location.¹⁹ A study of Clarence, Iowa, over a twenty-year period, shows the same pattern, although this was for a town rather than a county. After it had been founded, the population grew rapidly, from 400 in 1859 to 1400 in 1870, but by 1880 it had declined to 600. All during this period the turnover rate was high, even when the town prospered and grew.²⁰ The study of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, shows much of the same. This region had an extremely high growth rate combined with a low persistence rate for all groups in the county.²¹ Benton County resembles all of these studies.

Geographic mobility seemed to be a conspicuous feature of life in the nineteenth century. A study by Stephen Thernstrom and Peter R. Knights

¹⁷Bowers, "Crawford Township," pp. 5-7.

¹⁸Mildred Throne, "A Population Study of an Iowa County in 1850," Iowa Journal of History 57 (October, 1959): 315.

¹⁹James Malin, "The Turnover in Farm Population in Kansas," Kansas Historical Quarterly 4 (November, 1935): 354.

²⁰Rodney O. Davis, "Prairie Emporium: Clarence, Iowa, 1860-1880, A Study of Population Trends," Mid-American 51 (April, 1969): 130-139.

²¹Merle Curti, The Making of an American Community (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), pp. 61-62, 443-45.

found that lower class Bostonians moved frequently.²² They observed that "Americans have long been a restless, migratory people, a facet of life which has left a deep impression on our national folklore, if not yet on the writing of history."²³ They also felt that the very lack of community which this migration produced paradoxically resulted in the strong loyalty felt by these people for their locality. Their basic uprootedness led them to reach for anything that would give them a sense of identity and belonging, a security that was constantly threatened by their movement.

This sense of belonging and loyalty was evident in a community like Sauk Rapids, with its vociferous newspapers dreaming of a great future that never happened. "Sauk Rapids must, in the lapse of a few years, become an important commercial and manufacturing town," dreamed one editor.²⁴ "We are convinced," said another fifteen years later, "that the manufacturer, the merchant and the artisan, with the multitude that follow in their train of enterprise and capital must, by the inevitable course of events, establish their domestic abodes and seats of industry within her limits."²⁵ These statements reflect the fondest hopes of a small town newspaper editor. Their loyalty to their little town and their ambition were unbounded. Such wishful thinking did not make that future happen. This was evident even in 1855 when one visitor remarked "this paper is doing

²²Stephen Thernstrom and Peter R. Knights, "Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Mobility in Nineteenth Century America," Journal of Inter-Disciplinary History 1 (Autumn, 1970): 7-35.

²³Ibid., p. 7.

²⁴Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 24 May 1855, p. 2.

²⁵Sauk Rapids Sentinel, 24 June 1870, p. 1.

an excellent job for Benton County, but if it does not prove to be a losing job to the publisher then we are no judge of the printing business."²⁶

The visitors, who were from the St. Paul Weekly Times, noted "a general dullness" about the area.²⁷ Their observation on the newspaper was quite apt, for in 1860 it went out of business. The editors let their loyalty and ambition blind them to the reality of the situation. As Boorstin observed:

A quick growth city, founded and built by the living generation, lacked monuments from the past. It was overwhelmed by its imaginary greatness and debt to the future. The very existence of the Upstart city depended on the ability to attract free and vagrant people. The strength of ancient metropolises came from the inability, the unwillingness or the recitence of people to leave, but the New World cities depended on new-formed loyalties and enthusiasms, shallow-rooted, easily transplanted.²⁸

Sauk Rapids, with its booster press and short history, could easily qualify as one of Boorstin's Upstart towns. The town's apparent determination and confidence was rooted in the insecurity that such a town must feel in the midst of a very mobile population. Men like Jeremiah Russell, although he was no historian, could see what kind of society he lived in. Perhaps he tried to inspire the loyalty that the town needed even though he could see that it would not do too much good. Such people had very little real loyalty and the success of an Upstart town depended upon developing that emotion. Attracting allegiance from a transient population was difficult, for such people are in search of opportunity and not easily satisfied. Ray Billington found that "the relative ease with which individuals could better themselves in the West bred a habit of moving about,

²⁶Sauk Rapids Frontiersman, 26 July 1855, p. 2.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Boorstin, Americans, p. 113.

for physical mobility is only a manifestation of social mobility. With progress the order of the day, men were tempted to shift their homes often as they sought more abundant opportunity."²⁹

Benton County had no white population in 1844, but it was soon filled with people. Apparently, they were a people who were in the habit of moving for the low persistence rate indicates that few of them stayed. And when they did move they were not content with short moves, as their pattern of "state skipping" shows. Some of course remained, but they were more significant in influence than in numbers. The vast majority moved often and over great distances.

This suggests a scene of instability verging on chaos. Although some writers like Robert Wiebe have suggested that the "island communities of the nineteenth century were very stable, most authors have tended toward the view of a fluid population and instability."³⁰ Benton County, with its nucleus of patriarchal frontiersmen in the midst of a migratory population, seems to be both. This is not as unreasonable as it might first seem. For if the community were to prosper at all, someone had to provide leadership. A certain degree of continuity must be maintained in order to sustain civic organization. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick found that when newly founded communities are faced with common problems, a power structure soon develops out of a desire to solve difficulties and create an element of stability.³¹ This was especially apparent when a

²⁹Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 751.

³⁰Robert Wiebe, The Search for Order (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 47.

³¹Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier, Part I: Democracy in the Old Northwest," Political Science Quarterly 69 (September, 1954): 335-39.

town could not wait for any higher authority to help. A similar situation faced Benton County with similar results; with its fluid population and host of problems attendant to a newly founded community, a stable leadership element was absolutely necessary.

This view is shared by Richard Alcorn in his study of an Illinois town in the nineteenth century. In a community with a low persistence rate and a growing population, there existed an elite group of leaders who had been in town longer and would stay longer than most.³² The high mobility of the general population seemed to reinforce the stability of this elite. He concluded that "stability could exist in the midst of apparent chaos."³³ This statement could apply to Benton County as well as Paris, Illinois.

Thus, the study of Benton County reinforces the findings of many other historians of the mid-nineteenth century American Frontier. It is a case study that expands the validity of their conclusions about Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, California, Texas, and Kansas. The scale of such studies is admittedly small: a county, township, or village. But this is the level at which most of the people in the world live. It is valuable to have an understanding of how the people of Benton County would have seen the passing of the frontier. A study like this is the ground level of history. Only by understanding the ground level can we appreciate the loftier heights.

³²Richard Alcorn, "Leadership and Stability in Mid-Nineteenth Century America: A Case Study of an Illinois Town," Journal of American History 61 (December, 1974): 701.

³³Ibid., p. 702.

But aside from the case study of yet another frontier county, what is the point of examining a little Minnesota community? As Conzen said of Blooming Grove: "It deserves no fanfare" for, in truth, it did not really do much.³⁴ Few people have heard of Benton County, then or now; and it never did become a thriving commercial center. It is now as it was then, a small backwoods community. So is there any value in studying its unspectacular settlement one hundred years ago? Historians like Frederick Jackson Turner thought so, for he believed that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement, explain American history."³⁵

The settlement of the frontier was the primary task of America from the founding of Jamestown to the twentieth century. As Walter Prescott Webb pointed out:

It made no difference what other task the Americans had on their hands at a given time, there was the additional one of moving into and settling new country. They did it while they hammered out the principles of a democratic government shaped to the needs of frontiersmen; and they did not cease to do it in the period of civil strife. They never reached the limits of the vacancy they owned before they acquired another vacancy, by purchase, by treaty, by conquest, and in every case the frontiersmen had infiltrated the country before the nation acquired it. Like locusts they swarmed, always to the west and only the Pacific Ocean stopped them. Here in this movement beat the deep over-tone of the nation's destiny and to it all kept step unconsciously.³⁶

The image of the frontier became deeply ingrained in the American character. The log cabin of the frontiersman has been transformed into a symbol of

³⁴Conzen, Frontier Farming, p. 148.

³⁵Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), p. 1.

³⁶Walter Prescott Webb, "Ended: 400 Year Boom, Reflections on the Age of the Frontier," Harper's Magazine, 203 (October, 1951): 26.

American ideals and virtues. Such an image is part of our national mythology. It represents an immediately recognizable image to all Americans.³⁷ Benton County, however humble it was in reality, was part of that heritage. The log cabin symbol was born in such places. The county was even named for that great spokesman for the frontier, Thomas Hart Benton.

A meaning even deeper than this is to be found in the settlement of Benton County. For at the root of the humble story of Jeremiah Russell and the rest is the biblical command "to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth," and that was just what they did.³⁸ The modest history of Benton County could be considered a minor campaign in the subjugation of the earth following that command. In 1840, Benton County was devoid of western civilization. Twenty years later, there were towns, railroads, and farms. The restless inhabitants moved in and out but in the process paradoxically established a permanent community and developed the area's resources which is the essence of the war against nature and the command to subdue the earth. Eric Hoffer wrote that "the contest between man and nature has been the central drama of the universe."³⁹ In the same vein, Turner observed:

What did they represent, these spreading zones of population? First of all they represent war, war against nature and against nature-people whom civilization pressed before them. This far-flung line of the frontier was a line of fire, its advance guard

³⁷ Henry Nash Smith, "The West as an Image of the American Past," The University of Kansas Review 18 (Autumn, 1951): 29-32.

³⁸ Genesis 1:28.

³⁹ Eric Hoffer, The Temper of Our Time (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 95.

attacked the forests from the days of the palisaded forts at Jamestown and Plymouth onward.⁴⁰

The struggle against nature has been more momentous and longer running than any war among men. Benton County was part of that struggle, for in such places was the war fought. The character of this war has largely gone unheralded and even in the Americas, where the battle is most recent, it does not receive the attention it deserves except from historians like Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb, and Henry Nash Smith.

Why has this been so? The defenders of nature from Thoreau to the ecology lobby have been and remain extremely vocal. The frontier did generate a habit of wastefulness that has yet to be reformed.⁴¹ As many have recognized, such a habit is badly out of place in a world of limited resources and growing population. The command to subdue the earth did not mean the destruction of the earth; it meant control, not obliteration. A great many industries are guilty of just such a misunderstanding. If such an attitude is an outgrowth of the frontier experience, then the time has come to leave the frontier behind. But this should not detract from the legitimate achievements of the men and women who settled and civilized it. They accomplished this difficult task in a magnificent fashion, yet they do not receive the attention they deserve. Why? Men who settle a new land simply for profit or to find a better place to live without consideration for an all-consuming ideology do not win the heart of the intellectual. The rural environment, the small town, and the minor

⁴⁰ Wilbur R. Jacobs ed., America's Great Frontiers and Sections: Frederick Jackson Turner's Unpublished Essays (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 173.

⁴¹ Billington, Westward Expansion, p. 750.

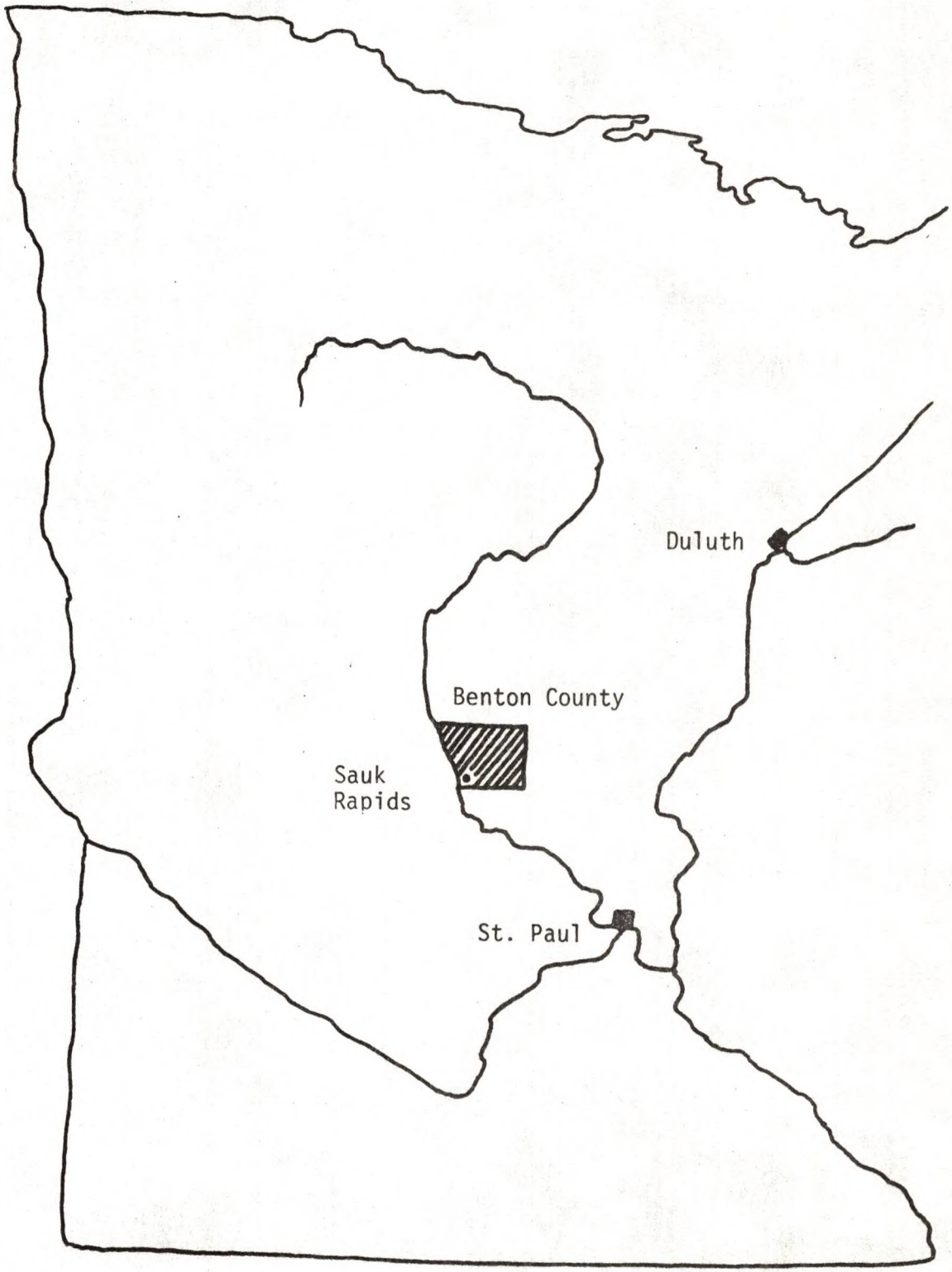
entrepreneur do not lend themselves to great ideologies. All of that is much too ordinary, which is another facet of this age-old war. Hoffer observed that "one of the strangest features of this war with nature is its undeclaredness. The men who are in the forefront of the battle are as a rule unaware that they are fighting a war."⁴² The events of this war, the simple, ordinary process of setting up farms and establishing families, are so subtle and so frequent that many who do not have a deep interest in American history are liable to miss the significance of them. For in these events is the basis of the war against nature that has been going on since the Neolithic Age when man discovered agriculture. Turner was aware of this problem when one of his Harvard colleagues dismissed the study of American history as being too narrow. Turner noted that "it is easy to see the reasons for such a view. America's chronology is brief; her story at first sight seems to lack in color, in richness and complexity."⁴³ It is the first sight that would make the Middle Ages of Europe seem more attractive than the dreary settlement of the frontier. Many who do not have a keen eye will not go beyond the first look. They would pass up the subtlety of the frontier with its deep significance for the obvious interest of the Crusades. So it is really the subtlety of American history that has deceived many historians like the Harvard colleague of Frederick Jackson Turner. They simply do not see the war against nature. It is so obvious that it is invisible. Another factor in this disregard for the frontier is the feeling of inferiority that many rural residents

⁴²Hoffer, Our Time, p. 100.

⁴³Jacobs, Great Frontiers, p. 155.

have for their state and the history of their state. Elwyn Robinson found that some rural North Dakotans "felt alienated from the mainstream of American life as if they were looked down upon as inferior by the rest of the American people."⁴⁴ Unfortunately, this is indeed the attitude of many residents of urban states. With such an outlook, the study of the frontier suffers for the frontier was a rural phenomenon. Such factors have blinded some historians to the importance of the frontier, which was really the process of turning wilderness into civilization. This process, whether it is in the Stone Age or on the American frontier, is probably the most important in history.

⁴⁴ Elwyn B. Robinson, History of North Dakota (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 550.



Map 1. Minnesota and Benton County

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