The Small City in American History

*Timothy R. Mahoney**

As Bruce Geelhoed and James Connolly point out in their introduction to this issue, the field of urban history tends to focus on the development of large cities, and relatively few historians have considered the history of small towns and cities, particularly those in the Midwest. Yet in this region, as across the United States, there are hundreds of small towns and small cities that serve distinct local and regional functions. Some small cities grew and developed by connecting themselves to the national economy through the manufacture of specific products for national markets. Still, industries in small cities, lacking the depth of support and external economies of the metropolis,[1] often struggled to remain competitive, and the industrial base of these cities has been chronically fragile. Their histories are marked by a pattern in which a few industries arrive and depart in waves, based upon the availability of resources, movements of capital and populations, and national economic trends. Thus, more so than resilient and diverse metropolises, small cities have been compelled to reinvent themselves continually and to develop more diversified economies able to withstand the vagaries of larger economic forces.

The history of any town or city—especially the small ones—needs to be examined within a broader context of the regional and national economic systems in which it exists and tries to maintain or develop its economic functions.[2] Urban historians have generally shown that since colonial times, when the Atlantic mercantile system gradually penetrated American life, towns emerged as the places of exchange where market-oriented farmers sold their surplus goods into regional or international markets. As the production and exchange of agricultural products increased across urban hinterlands, seaports saw an increase in long-distance trade, and with it all the necessary ancillary activities—ship building, warehousing, rope making, etc.

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[1]External economies, or efficiencies generated from outside a business, increase when that business is located amid a cluster of various economic activities and resources in the metropolis.

[2]Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West*.

In the early republic, innovations in agriculture, undertaken in response to a rapidly increasing population but declining farm sizes and yields, intensified market competition among farmers and gradually increased the trade between coastal port towns and rural areas. To facilitate trade, towns and states improved roads, which further increased market activity and set in motion a shakeout of unsuccessful farmers. Merchants and craftsmen responded to increased local demand and greater competition. They increased production of craft goods by expanding shops or by adopting a putting-out system of production, employing rural laborers as well as many unsuccessful farmers who had migrated to towns and cities. Gradually market competition, from both home and abroad, encouraged producers, merchants, craftsmen, and processors to specialize. In centrally located towns some specialized producers benefited from limited external economies and achieved economies of scale which enabled them to out-compete smaller producers. By responding to market competition, dividing their labor, specializing, and rearranging or mechanizing production, they set in motion the industrial revolution.[3]

At the beginning of the industrial revolution small cities grew up along river fall lines in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.[4] By the 1830s, however, port towns, with their advantageous locations and economies based on a variety of firms, services, and resources, grew into major cities and acquired increasing shares of local and regional markets. These cities—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Chicago—emerged as regional entrepots or market centers, increasingly interconnected in an emerging national economy. City merchants and manufacturers extended their trade for produce and the market for their goods into their hinterlands, facilitated by the transportation revolution—first

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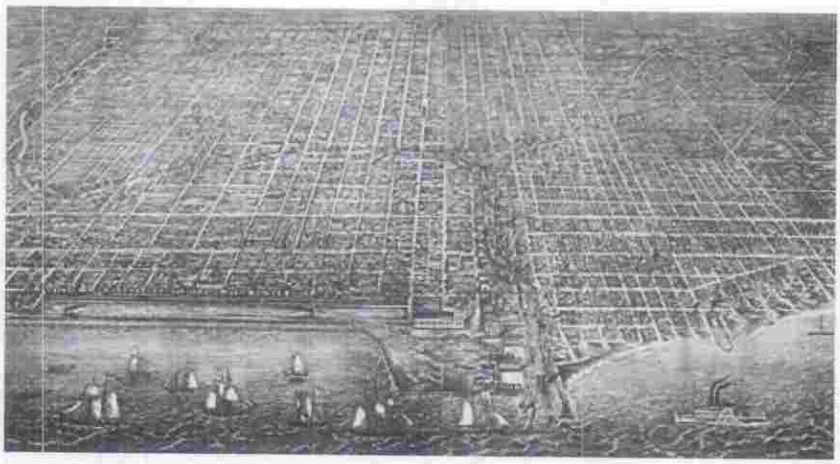
[3]Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, Md., 1972); D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, Volume I: *Atlantic America, 1492–1800* (New Haven, Conn., 1986); Thomas S. Wermuth, "New York Farmers and the Market Revolution: Economic Behavior in the Mid-Hudson Valley, 1780–1830," *Journal of Social History*, XXXII (Fall 1998), 179-96; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); James Henretta, *The Origins of American Capitalism: Collected Essays* (Boston, Mass., 1991); Gordon S. Wood, "Was America Born Capitalist?" *Wilson Quarterly*, XXIII (Spring 1999), 36-46.

[4]Christopher Clark, "The Consequence of the Market Revolution in the Antebellum North," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880*, eds. Melvin Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville, Va., 1996), 23-42; Jonathan Prude, "Capitalism, Industrialization and the Factory in Post-Revolutionary America," in *Wages of Independence, Capitalism in the Early Republic*, ed. Paul A Gilje (Madison, Wis., 1997), 81-99; Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (New York, 1983); Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-places to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750–1850* (Chicago, 1992); Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville, Va., 1992).



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF CHICAGO, 1857, BY CHRISTIAN INGER

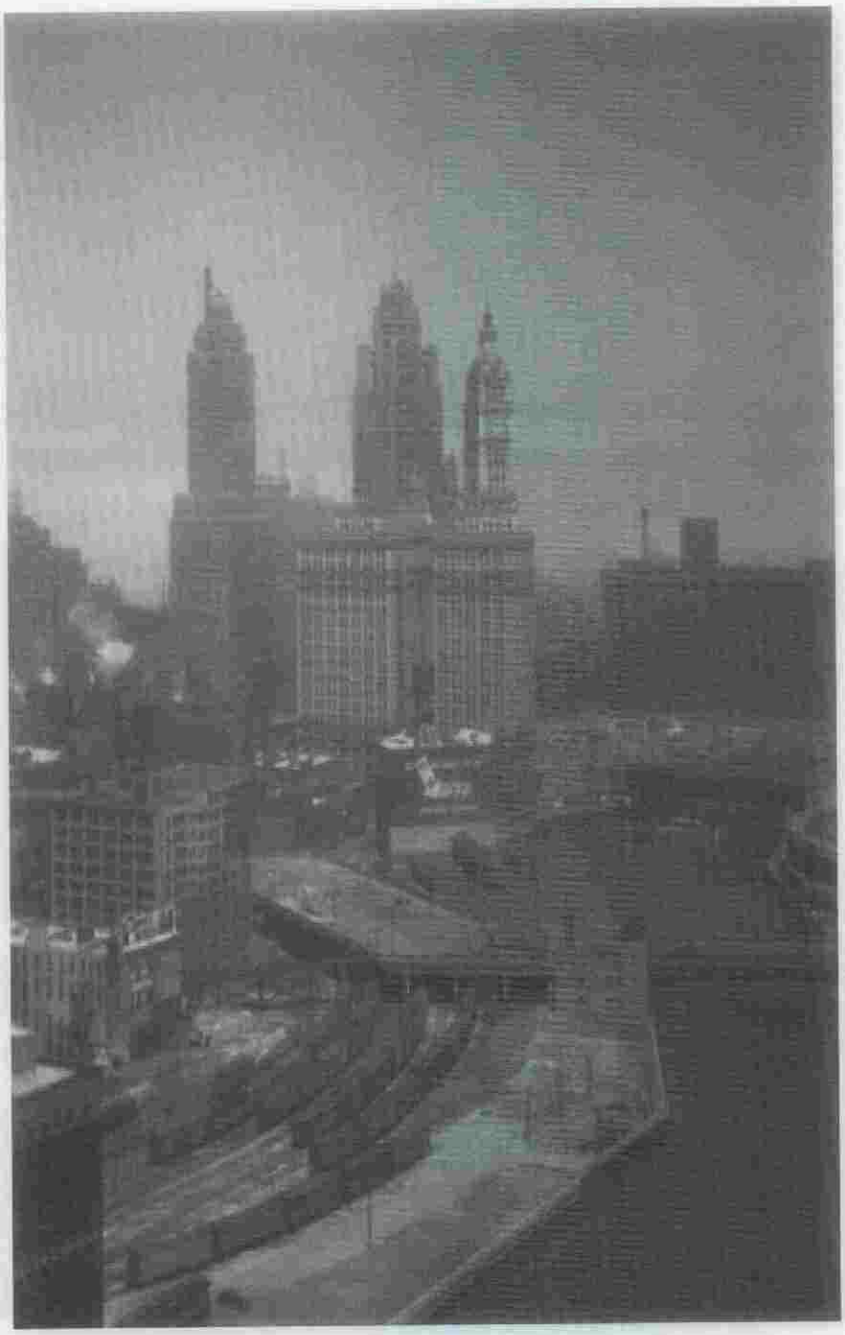
Courtesy: Chicago Historical Society

roads, then canals, and then railroads. Cities developed into regional metropolises that could exert control over the trade and production of people in smaller cities, small towns, and rural areas. Thus a key dynamic of urbanization was the emergence of a few large cities at the center of an economic system that controlled a network of smaller cities and towns serving secondary or peripheral roles in transportation and merchandising.

In the urban history of the United States, two predominant narratives have emerged: that of the metropolis and that of the small town. The former is the story of regional and national centers of economic development that enjoyed steady, even rapid, growth and became focal points of the emergence of the modern nation. The latter is the story of local or regional centers that played peripheral, secondary, or reactive roles in the national economy. The story of the rise and development of the metropolis is familiar.[5] Only somewhat less familiar is the story of the small town in America. This narrative portrays the small town as the refuge of community, a place where people who know each other live in a localized, entrepreneurial, organic society that is in its structure and quality nearly the opposite of metropolitan life.[6] What is missing, of course, is a story line for those urban places

[5]Robert Greenhalgh Albion with Jennie Barnes Pope, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815–1860* (New York, 1939); Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, 1999); Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790–1830* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); Eric H. Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban: the Development of U.S. Cities & Towns, 1780–1980* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988).

[6]Catherine Stock has called this ethos "producerist." See Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class On the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1992).



VIEW OF CHICAGO RAIL LINES AND DOWNTOWN, LOOKING TOWARD MICHIGAN AVENUE, 1945

Courtesy: Indiana University Archives, Charles W. Cushman Collection (P2995)

SULLIVAN STREET, CHICAGO, 1946. A WORKING-CLASS RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT OF THE CITY.

Courtesy: Indiana University Archives, Charles W. Cushman Collection (P3116)

in between the small town and the metropolis: the small cities of America. I would like to argue that the story of small cities, like the structures and dynamics of those cities, is a distinctive hybrid combining elements of the two dominant narratives. To explore the particularities of this story, I will briefly sketch the content of the two primary narratives, attempt to define small cities, offer a sketch of their narrative, and suggest a pattern that may guide their existence.

First the metropolis. As regional entrepots became the transportation and trade centers of the mid-nineteenth-century East and Midwest, more and more people migrated into them. The clustering of resources generated dramatic external economies that enabled manufacturers to expand the scale and scope of industrial production. Wealth and power concentrated in the large cities, increasing the ability of urban businesses to gain control over even more resources and markets. This concentration of development fundamentally transformed the large city's spatial and social arrangements. A specialized downtown of business, services, and entertainment developed, surrounded by manufacturing districts located near a seaport, a river, or railroads. Beyond these areas people moved into residential districts differentiated by wealth, class, ethnicity, and race. City government expanded its bureaucracy to provide a broader range of services and implement planning policies. Rings of suburbs and satellite cities, and later exurbs and "edge cities," also differentiated

by wealth and ethnicity, developed. Metropolitan life became crowded, fragmented, alienating, and sometimes pathological, but it was also dynamic, diverse, and full of opportunity. The ideal city, as envisioned by citizens of the metropolis, was cosmopolitan and world-class—an urban world within a world, a civilization in its own right, with all that modern life had to offer.

In contrast, this rapid centralization of economic activity in the metropolis left many small towns to serve as local centers for exchange, service, and transport. These economic functions connected towns to regions, but there was limited stimulus for further economic development. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, therefore, small towns in general experienced slower and less dynamic economic change than that which occurred in metropolitan and suburban America. This different economic experience was the foundation of the distinctive social and cultural character of small-town life. But only with the emergence of metropolises, and of a distinctive second tier of small cities—mostly state capitols, college towns, and industrial/service centers—did the urban places across the Midwest that stopped growing or grew very slowly become "small towns." Indeed, an important historical characteristic of the small town is that at one time, many, if not most, of its citizens imagined themselves to be living in a "future metropolis" or at least a significant regional center.

From 1800 through the 1840s urban economy, society, and culture were constructed within the framework of a "booster ethos" that Robert Wiebe has called the "way of the town."[7] This social and cultural construct posited an orderly society rooted in middle-size towns whose modest scale supported an organic social order sustained by a mix of cooperative and individualistic economic activity. Many boosters in antebellum towns understood "the town" as the ideal framework for their individualistic, republican, bourgeois political economy and social order.[8] In towns across the country a predominantly American-born middle-class elite articulated a local boosterism. According to this view one achieved success in work and enjoyed the satisfactions of family life through self-control, hard work, and religious faith. Middle-class citizens built a successful town by developing the town economy, establishing a system of law and order, founding institutions, creating a civic life, and formulating booster policy. They established a degree of social control through their institutions and cultivated gender-based subcultures designed to reform the working-class and transient residents of the town.[9]

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[7]Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York, 1984), 84.

[8]William L. Barney, *The Passage of the Republic: An Interdisciplinary History of Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1987), 182.

[9]John Jakle, "America's Small Town/Big City Dialectic," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, XVIII (Spring/Summer 1999), 1-27.

At the core of the booster ethos was a strong entrepreneurial impetus that distinguished most towns in the Midwest from those in the Upland South and New England. The construction of railroads across the region from the 1840s through the 1880s transformed the environment in which local businessmen operated. Many boosters over-invested in local improvements and railroads and were left exposed to financial reverses that in the Panic of 1857 undermined the booster ethos and threatened the economic viability of many towns. These towns, now far to the east of the frontier, could no longer claim some future greatness which would parallel the development of their region. The rhetoric of small-town boosterism did continue farther west, however, into Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and beyond into the 1890s. Boosters unwilling to accept lowered expectations left for the urban West to try to repeat their formula for success.

Those who stayed behind—and small town culture was pervaded from that time to now with an awareness that residents had chosen to "stay behind"—tried to forge new social identities. This effort would create the core notion of what was considered "small-town life" during the early twentieth century. The small town was the place many city residents had left behind; it became metropolitan America's "hometown." There residents maintained the old ways and lived more cohesive lives, even as they balanced limited local economic opportunities with a desire to modernize somewhat apace with the city. Small-town boosterism now heralded the values of smallness and modest growth. People living in a small society were more organically connected to each other and thus had stronger senses of identity, social responsibility, and morality. From the 1870s through the 1910s small-town life was mostly portrayed in this positive light. But many felt differently. To detractors small towns were provincial islands, out of touch with modern life. They were places in which residents lived frustrated and limited social, cultural, and intellectual lives. Indeed, many small-town colleges, academies, museums, hospitals, and government services struggled to remain competitive and eventually settled for being just viable.[10]

This dichotomy between positive and negative, rooted in the experiences of residents past and present, was the framework in which most people understood small towns in twentieth-century America. These contesting images followed the contradictory realities of small-town life. During good times, bursts of development and signs of progress seem to fulfill positive expectations. When times in the rural Midwest were bad—especially during the 1890s and again

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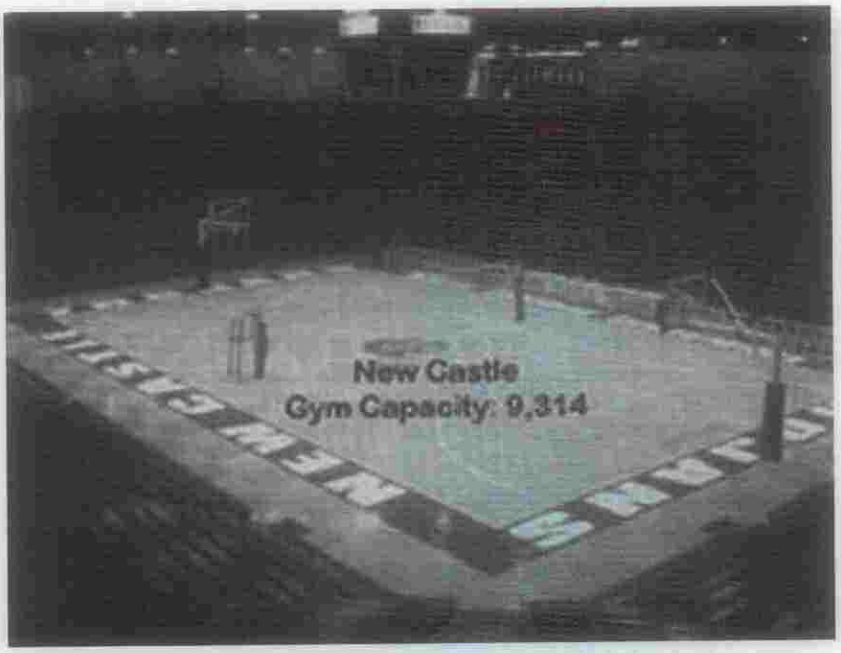
[10]Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967), 4; Dwight Hoover, "Social Science Looks at the Small American Town," in *The Small Town in America: A Multidisciplinary Revisit*, eds. Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen (Amsterdam, 1995), 19-29.



NEW CASTLE HIGH SCHOOL, NEW CASTLE, INDIANA, BOASTS THE LARGEST HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM IN THE NATION.

Courtesy: Ron Tower

in the 1920s and 1930s—and small towns were particularly hard hit, they became the locus of an array of social pathologies and frustrations. As small towns were increasingly drawn into the national system by modern communication and transport, their differences from metropolitan America narrowed, though even today, the spatial, economic, and social context of small-town life remains distinct. For some, the integration of the small town into mass culture has marked a gradual erosion of local control over community life and thus local identity. For others, it has allowed small-town people to live fuller lives, thus enabling small towns to maintain population and attract newcomers. This is especially true of towns near a metropolis that have been gradually subsumed into "edge cities" since the 1970s.[11] For such places wealth and investment have rejuvenated local resources and facilities, intertwining the suburb and small town into a new configuration of the American dream.

The ideal of the "small town life" still lives. Its characteristics include a distinctive focus on high school life and sports (in lieu of

[11]Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York, 1991); David R. Contosta, *Lancaster, Ohio, 1800–2000: Frontier Town to Edge City* (Columbus, Ohio, 1999).

collegiate or professional sports), on the culture of the Main Street chamber of commerce, on the personalized system of law and order at the court house, and on the various social groups that operate within the town's churches, civic associations, clubs, and taverns.[12] Caught between being considered a social utopia by its supporters and a dystopia by its detractors, the small town in twenty-first century America has been examined as a sociological laboratory, heralded as a social ideal, and pilloried as a social wasteland. The reality, of course, lies somewhere in between. The small town remains caught between very real divergent forces. Its increasingly contradictory image reflects the deepening predicament of being small in a mass society.

The story of small cities lies somewhere between these two narratives. A small city is basically a small town that has grown to a larger size by the selective transference of metropolitan industrial activity and/or large public institutions. Even though a small city may grow beyond the scale of a small town and begin to acquire some metropolitan elements, it does not necessarily outgrow its small-town structures and patterns of interaction.

The small city was a creation of two distinct periods within the industrial revolution: the first from the 1830s to the 1860s, and the second from the late 1890s through the 1930s. During these periods, for a variety of reasons, the forces of centralization that had given birth to the nineteenth-century industrial metropolis began to face diminishing returns and a variety of diseconomies. As a result, some industries began to specialize in making one thing or a few things (for example iron, steel, consumer goods, processed foods, or automobiles) within a regional industrial complex. Through this type of specialization companies were able to achieve the efficiencies necessary to be competitive, and because of improvements in transportation they were able to locate away from the metropolis in smaller towns across the East and Midwest. These towns emerged as secondary or tertiary economic centers for small regions (still within the economic orbit of the metropolis), and they began to provide a wide ranges of services for that region. They could offer "economies of agglomeration and scale," and "many specialized functions," but could not support the wide range of services available in a large city. Following this pattern, a number of small towns across the country (especially in the East and Midwest) began to develop into small cities.[13]

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[12]Richard O. Davies, *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (Columbus, Ohio, 1998).

[13]D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, Volume III: *Transcontinental America, 1850–1915* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 227-44; Peter Temin, *The Iron and Steel Industry in Nineteenth Century America: An Economic Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); David R. Meyer, "Emergence of the American Manufacturing Belt: An Interpretation," *Journal of Historical Geography* IX (April 1983), 145-74; David R. Meyer, "Midwestern Industrialization and the

As they did this, however, no concomitant vision or ideology of the small city developed with them. Even today one struggles to define a small city. Is it a big small town of 50,000 to 70,000 people (2000 Census) like Muncie, Terre Haute, and Bloomington, Indiana; Canton, Ohio; Lawrence, Kansas; Oshkosh, Wisconsin; and Dubuque, Iowa? Or is it a city of 100,000 people such as Springfield, Peoria, and Joliet, Illinois; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Topeka, Kansas; Evansville, Indiana; and Green Bay, Wisconsin? Or should larger places with 200,000 residents—places like Lincoln, Nebraska; Madison, Wisconsin; Akron, Ohio; and Little Rock, Arkansas—be considered the real small cities? Aside from population size, what characteristics do small cities have?

Most small cities are autonomous places with a distinctive urban history. Most have, in spite of some urban sprawl, a clear edge between the city and the country (usually no more than a twenty-minute drive away). Most small cities have relatively few major suburbs surrounding them. Instead they have annexed large areas on their fringe, sometimes absorbing nearby villages and small towns. As a result of physical separation from any metropolis, most small cities have a coherent identity as a separate place, and residents view their city as an urban whole containing all the elements of both the small town and the metropolis. This tends to create a divided image which is reflected in policy. Describing one's city as a "big city with a small-town feeling" or exclaiming that the acquisition of a certain institution, facility, or team means no longer being "small-town" are staples of the chambers of commerce and mayors of small cities. A small city aspires to be a metropolis while priding itself on maintaining aspects of the small town. It is both, and, as such, is inevitably described as having the "best of both worlds." For example, a predominantly residential suburb interspersed with office parks, malls, and highways may have all that city life has to offer, but it does not have a downtown, a heavy manufacturing district, a main railroad station, or a stadium. Perhaps small cities can be defined as urban places that have an evening or morning newspaper that reports national or international news, a local television station, a public transit system, at least a few tall buildings or "skyscrapers," an interstate highway that goes by or around but not necessarily through, a separate airport served directly by a nearby hub, bridges, stadia, regional malls, some urban sprawl, and most national chain companies and stores—even those at the higher end of merchandising. Small cities usually have institutions or programs like a symphony, a zoo, a state university or college, a

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American Manufacturing Belt in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* XLIX (December 1989), 921-37; Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban*, 46-49; Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, Md., 1995), 21-45, 102-17; Jon C. Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993).

CONCORDIA COLLEGE, FORT WAYNE, INDIANA, 1905

Courtesy: Indiana Historical Society

park or trail system, or a minor league sports team. These all improve what local boosters often term the "quality of life," making the city "livable" and a "nice place to raise a family," in contrast to the metropolis. At the same time, these institutions contribute to the small city's up-to-date, "metropolitan" appearance and symbolize its big-city aspirations.[14]

But most small cities also share many of the characteristics of small towns. Both feature less consumer choice, a middle-range restaurant scene, less population and cultural diversity, less density, less crowding and traffic, lower housing and land costs, as well as smaller government, better services, better schools, and lower crimes rates. Small-city residents aspire both to become more metropolitan and to maintain a small-town feel; they seek to maintain a balance and regard that balance as an urban ideal. Maintaining the ideal of both growth and maintenance of a small-town atmosphere is difficult, and many small-city residents and boosters are caught between two urban visions. This struggle to navigate the vagaries of regional and national economies constitutes a story as distinctive as that of either the small town or the metropolis—a story that could form the basis of an ideology of the small city as an ideal urban place.

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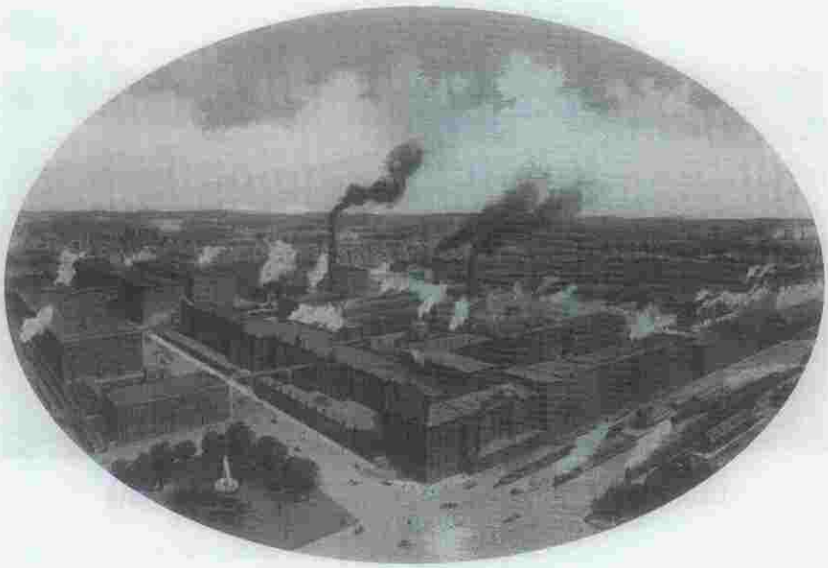
[14]Chamber of Commerce booster rhetoric is ubiquitous in many histories of small cities. For a few examples among many see Frederick Hampton Roy, *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City* (Little Rock, Ark., 1984), 183-85; Ken Bloom and Marian Wolbers, *Allentown: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, Va., 1984); Barbara Herrick, *Boise: A Global Community in the West* (Montgomery, Ala., 1996); Jane Hieb, *Eau Claire, Heartland of the Chippewa Valley: An Illustrated History*, (Northridge, Calif., 1988); William E. Wilkie, *Dubuque on the Mississippi, 1788–1988* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1987); Edward J. Russo and Karen Graff, *Prairie of Promise: Springfield and Sangamon County* (Woodland Hills, Calif., 1983).



STUDEBAKER VEHICLE WORKS, SOUTH BEND, INDIANA. STUDEBAKER VEHICLES WERE SOLD NATIONALLY AND OVERSEAS.

Courtesy: Indiana Historical Society

Small cities are vulnerable to volatile cycles of growth and decline. From the 1880s through the 1950s small cities acquired their industrial bases, even if only from one or a few industries in each city, and grew in population beyond 50,000 and sometimes beyond 100,000 and toward 200,000. Such population growth naturally eroded the small-town quality of local life. Specialization, diversity, impersonality, all things associated with the metropolis, transformed places like Davenport, Elgin, Peoria, Akron, Dayton, and Muncie in the Midwest; Billings, Spokane, Topeka, and Pueblo in the West; Worcester, Lancaster, Scranton, and Syracuse in the East; and Winston-Salem, Birmingham, and Mobile in the South. The development of local industries that produced for a national market integrated small cities into the national urban system. Naturally, as these cities grew, they were economically, socially, politically, and culturally affected by metropolitan development and increasingly took their lead from the metropolis.

The economic and industrial development of smaller cities, however, was often one-dimensional, dependent on major industries. When those industries declined, or relocated closer to the metropolis or to the West or South, the local economy contracted. In prosperous times, small cities acquired a proportional realm of diverse manufacturing to supply local needs, in addition to the major industries that produced goods for the national market. But in good times or bad, these smaller producers of goods for local markets found themselves outcompeted

by larger outside producers. While industries that produced for a national market rose and fell, the local industrial base that sustained many small cities gradually eroded, and many smaller local industries failed. Hence, in spite of industrial development, a kind of two-tiered economy evolved. The industries in small cities generated few external economies, reducing economic feedback and limiting local development. Entrepreneurs and managers faced lower returns, and, as a result, were further exposed to outside competition. They achieved some economies of scale, but not as great as those generated by metropolitan competitors. Therefore, the margin between revenues and costs was always narrower and more precarious. Such pressures could divert investment from the city, suppress local development, and, at any time, undermine local industry. Because of such risks, local industries adopted defensive, cautionary, and conservative stances vis à vis other industries. Prosperity, when it occurred, arrived later and departed earlier than in the metropolis. Local economies were exposed to national forces and, in some ways, at their mercy. This created instability in local economic activity. Those small cities that acquired major public funds by becoming home to a state capitol or state university were, of course, cushioned from some of the pressures of deindustrialization or industrial relocation, but vagaries in public spending and the mobility of a college-age population could also contribute to economic fluidity and fragility.[15]

The social and political development of small cities reflected their economic dynamics in distinctive ways. In small towns a mercantile elite, often called the "old middle class," supported an entrepreneurial booster ethos. In small cities the heads of local industry, often from a few families or a single family, acquired a disproportionate amount of wealth and thus gained substantial power and control over local society. While remaining connected to the metropolis, and living within a national social system, they cultivated the values of place that spoke to an older small-town vision. Rather than moving to the suburbs and distancing themselves from political and social life, many industrial owners and managers stayed in the small city and established themselves as an oligarchic elite within the larger business class. Because city government was small and underfunded, this elite group, like the old mercantile elite of the mid-nineteenth century, became a private source of capital—often a kind of shadow government—for local institutional and infrastructural development. For industrial leaders the small city became "their" city, just as the company was "their" privately held company. They became proprietors or stewards of the town and its people. Though they expressed a sense of noblesse oblige and acted out of generosity,

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[15]Meyer, "Emergence of the American Manufacturing Belt," 145-74; Meyer, "Midwestern Industrialization and the American Manufacturing Belt," 921-37; Licht, *Industrializing America*, 21-45, 102-17.

FRANK C. BALL ESTATE, ONE OF SEVERAL LARGE HOMES BUILT BY THE BALL FAMILY IN MUNCIE, INDIANA. THE BALLS FIGURED PROMINENTLY IN THE BUSINESS, CIVIC, AND POLITICAL LIFE OF THE CITY.

Courtesy: Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries

they expected thanks and admiration from their workers and from townspeople, even though these groups were rarely consulted on matters which affected their lives and welfare. The business elite ruled the city, and sometimes the city government, as an oligarchy. Nevertheless, some of these leaders, while strongly associating themselves with the small city and its business class, also lived within a regional or national elite society. They acquired a metropolitan style, intermarried with the national elite, vacationed at the "right" destinations, and summered and wintered in fashionable places on the East Coast, in California, or in Florida where members of the regional or national elite gathered.

Even a partial list of the small-city business elite includes some of the wealthiest and most famous manufacturing tycoons of the twentieth century. In Nebraska City, Nebraska, for example, the Mortons assumed control; in Tacoma and Rock Island the Weyerhausers; in Battle Creek the Kelloggs and Posts; in Akron the Sieberlings (of Goodyear) and Firestones; in Dayton the Pattersons; in Muncie the Ball family; in Moline the Deeres; in Racine the Johnsons; in Winston-Salem the Reynoldses and Dukes. Where several families prevailed, instead of one, a group of elite men and women, most of whom were members in several exclusive clubs as well the Board of Trade or Chamber of Commerce, played a similar proprietary role.

The degree to which members of these families associated themselves with the town varied. In the 1870s and 1880s John Deere served as mayor of Moline, was an active booster, and contributed

to a "wide range of local educational, religious, and charitable organizations." Later family members lived increasingly in Chicago or New York. The Kelloggs of Battle Creek, likewise, were natives of the city and not only built up a national corporation, but also exerted considerable influence on local government, provided funding for local schools, libraries, community centers, and auditoriums, and even helped bail out city banks during the depression. Yet later in life, William K. Kellogg had a palatial home in Florida and a horse ranch in California and traveled the world. In Akron in the 1920s and 1930s, C. K. Sieberling, who always remained a city resident, established company hospitals, restaurants, schools, and playing fields, developed residential neighborhoods near his plant, and served in the Chamber of Commerce. Harvey Firestone supported "the City Planning Commission, the Municipal University, a housing project, the Community Fund, the churches, and sundry civic programs." In Dayton, John H. Patterson, who considered Dayton "his city," lived in a modest home and eschewed a "society" life, supported the construction of city parks, a public country club, and city beautification projects, formed a citizens' relief association, and a bureau of municipal research, and advocated progressive reform of the city government. The members of the Ball family of Muncie, Indiana, were particularly benevolent. They invested in other major industries, revived the local university that later became Ball State University, contributed funds to build hospitals, the YMCA, and other institutions, and exerted control over the economy far longer than did wealthy citizens in most small cities.[16]

The nature of the business elite's influence shaped their interactions with the old producerist middle class (or the Main Street local component of the business class) and the working class in a variety of intriguing and understudied ways. The old middle class on Main Street and the local industrial elite occupied different social realms. The entrepreneurial middle class lived in a more local world. Their lives were centered on Main Street and the homegrown culture of the chamber of commerce, the bench and bar, fraternal organizations (Jaycees, Kiwanis, Rotarians, Masons, Odd Fellows, Elks, Eagles, Moose, Red Men, Knights of Columbus, etc.), local churches, schools and colleges. Situated between

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[16]Works Project Administration, *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State* (New York, 1941), 224-25; Horace B. Powell, *The Original Has This Signature—W. K. Kellogg* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1956); Hugh Allen, *Rubber's Home Town, The Real-Life Story of Akron* (New York, 1949); Alfred Lief, *Harvey Firestone: Free Man of Enterprise* (New York, 1951), 217; Hugh Allen, *The House of Goodyear: Fifty Years of Men and Industry* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1949), 176-79; Hugh Allen, *The House of Goodyear, A Story of Rubber and Modern Business* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1943), 290-97; Charlotte Reeve Conover, *The Story of Dayton* (Dayton, Ohio, 1917); Samuel Crowther, *John H. Patterson, Pioneer in Industrial Welfare* (Garden City, N. J., 1923), 310, 302-48; Wayne G. Broehl, *John Deere's Company: A History of Deere & Company and Its Times* (New York, 1984), 250-55; John Hauberg Papers, Augustana College (Library, Special Collections, Rock Island, Illinois).

DOWNTOWN RACINE, WISCONSIN. AN EXAMPLE OF THE ONCE-THRIVING SMALL-CITY DOWNTOWN.

Courtesy: Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries

the translocal industrial elite and the often transient working class, the old middle class viewed themselves as the foundation of a local society that was independent, homegrown, and conservative. Even as they welcomed developments that modernized the city, they tried to sustain the culture of small-town neighborliness that forged the bonds of an organic society. In the stores, newspaper office, barbershop, opera house, courthouse square, clubs, and saloons, at church, in the local park, or at the baseball diamond supporting the high school team, this local middle class created the independently owned, entrepreneurial, laissez-faire economy that supported the booster ethos and made the city work efficiently. Members of this Main Street society, firm in their parochial beliefs, strove to be up-to-date on Main Street and in their homes and yet maintain local political and social control over their lives. They accepted the limitations of slow growth and the frustrations of limited opportunities that defined their small-city life and cultivated a cautious, conservative worldview.

Even as the local middle class joined in the industrial elite's aspirations and efforts to improve their small city, they did so with ambivalence. Such ambivalence produced a cautiously progressive conservatism at the core of middle-class life. Those members of the old middle class who joined moral reform movements, law and order

leagues, vigilance committees, and prohibition parties, and instituted progressive institutional reforms, did so only periodically and achieved limited results. More often than not, they ended up deferring to the industrial elites who provided the funding for so many city projects. Often ambivalence translated into resistance against modernization. Increasingly from the 1920s through the 1950s, the disparaged old middle class resisted big government, big business, and modernism by turning culturally inward and adhering to a "way things were done" mentality, which tried to ensure conformity among "right thinking," "middle of the road," "regular guys" who stood for "power and purity" and "100% Americanism." Some occasionally turned simmering anger and resentment against modern immorality, diversity, and labor into support for nativism—and, in the 1920s across the urban South and Midwest, the Ku Klux Klan—but in most small cities outbreaks of radically aggressive conservativism were short-lived and infrequent. The small-city middle class sought, for the most part, to accommodate modern life by maintaining a "healthy balance between conservative core values and a progressive spirit" and by adopting a laissez-faire viewpoint toward public policy. As they did so, a complicated friction with the industrial elite evolved.[17]

In more recent times, the old middle class of the small cities has been besieged by the same economic forces that undermined the economies of small towns. The advances of modernization and centralization undermined the viability of independently owned local retailers and producers and threatened citizens' local control over their own affairs.[18] Though much of Main Street life managed to survive intact through the 1950s, the loss of local control had been underway since the 1920s. First went the independently owned retailers, and, in time, local banks, professional offices providing law, financial, and insurance services, as well as hotels, movie theaters, and restaurants followed. With each wave, especially since the 1970s, national corporations bought out local owners and operators and established branch operations. Small cities were especially sought out as locations for restaurants, retail stores, gas stations, and auto service shops, most of which were located by the interstate or on a major thoroughfare in malls or along the strip. This process eroded some of the vitality of downtown and of the old middle class that ruled it, even if the city experienced some modest growth and development. Urban sprawl, once characteristic of the metropolis, became another phenomenon of the small city and further evidence of the loss of its vibrant local economy.

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[17]Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (New York, 1967); Mari Sandoz, *Capital City* (Boston, 1939); Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street And Babbit* (1920 and 1922; reprint, New York, 1992), 646-57; Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown, A Study in American Culture* (New York, 1929); quotation from Herrick, *Boise*, 20.

[18]Davies, *Main Street Blues*; Contosta, *Lancaster, Ohio*, 201-29.

Meanwhile, as this process of erosion continued into the 1960s and through the 1980s, the industrial cores of many small-city economies were hit by a series of manufacturing plant closures, as companies relocated or went out of business. As local plants closed, the process of economic decline and readjustment was accelerated by disinvestment and out-migration that undermined local demand for goods and services. Finally, as the provision of governmental services became increasingly centralized at the state and federal levels, local administrators and politicians lost a substantial degree of control over their own affairs. From school consolidation to local welfare programs, small-city officials were forced to respond to an endless series of federal and state directives, regulations, and policies for the provision of public services. As these demands increased while tax revenues declined, local government was asked to do more with less and was spread increasingly thin, forcing either an increase in per capita taxation or further cuts in government services.

Not all small cities have suffered and declined during the last half-century. Small cities across the South and West were the beneficiaries of relocated branch manufacturing plants.[19] Other small cities across the country prospered because of their status as a state capital or the home of a large private or public university or institution. The number of small cities which are home either to a state capitol or a major college or university is remarkable, and these cities are able to maintain relatively high "livability" ratings. Indeed, small-city state capitols and college and university towns—for example, Lincoln, Nebraska; Eugene, Oregon; and Madison, Wisconsin—may be a special type of small city, one that has avoided many of the vagaries of the previously described small-city experience. Even in these cases, periods of decline in state budgets, such as occurred during the 1930s, 1980s, and 2000s, could have a sobering effect on the economies of smaller cities reliant on public spending.

In recent decades social changes have reflected the volatile dynamics of small cities. Increasingly, the upwardly mobile young, the local "best and the brightest," have left the small city after high school. With fewer professional jobs available in branch offices, the number of young people in the professional middle class also declined. Those few professionals who entered town to work for branch banks and offices were members of a regional or national professional/managerial class with few local ties. These people lived in the new suburbs, shopped in nearby malls, joined suburban health or country clubs, and ate in regional and national chain restaurants; few became involved in local affairs or had any contact with the remaining members of the old middle class. They were concerned with local

[19]Carl Abbott, *The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West* (Tucson, Ariz., 1993).

services and local people only to the extent that these directly affected their daily lives.

When the members of the benefactor class died or moved away after the closure of local industries, their names remained on institutions, buildings, and parks, but fewer and fewer native residents or new middle-class locals recognized or cared who they were. Hence a community of strangers, in cities with an eroding sense of identity and community, were left to navigate the problems associated with maintaining local viability in a national economy. And so small cities remain much as they have always been—neither small town nor metropolis. Their identities, societies, and policies are pulled between cultivation of the virtues of smallness and community and aspiration toward the services, amenities, and ideas of the metropolis.

How can small cities more effectively navigate between the ideals of the small town and the metropolis? Though the answer seems unclear, what should be apparent is that if small-city residents and their elected officials strive to combine these two ideals without formulating a much clearer idea of what they aspire to, their predicament will only deepen. Small-city residents need to develop new policies rooted in clearer thinking about both the advantages and disadvantages of the small city. A divided self-image, based on two opposing urban visions, works against any unified policy formation. This leaves small cities passively exposed to national forces, which are resisted by those residents who miss the small town, welcomed by those who would like local life to be more metropolitan, but responded to by most with a "what else can we do?" attitude. And because policy formation requires commitments of time and other resources that few city residents are willing to contribute, one wonders if the trend can be reversed.

What might the ideal small city look like in a world that favors large-scale centralized production and provision of services? The core of such a vision would be accepting the reality of the small city as a distinctive city type with problems, issues, and dynamics peculiarly its own. We need to move beyond thinking of small cities as "big small towns" or "outposts of the metropolis." We need to think of small cities as just that, *small cities*. In Germany such urban places are referred to as *kleinstaedte*. In very complex ways such small-city places are sustained and cultivated by a very different demographic, economic, social, cultural, and historical context than that necessary for the growth of either small towns or big cities. The vitality of *kleinstaedte* is supported by aggressive urban planning that restricts land use, taxation policies that encourage development in the center of the city, subsidies that support and stimulate local economic development, and restrictions that limit capital mobility from one city to the next. Though it is difficult to imagine any such policies being implemented in the American political, economic, social, and cultural context, some urban historians have suggested that these efforts be made.

In general, however, what sustains a small city is a rooted local population and a notion of the place as a small, distinctive urban world unto itself with a full range of local institutions, services, and cultural venues that cultivate a strong sense of locality and identity—a sense that, in turn, helps to sustain the city. A small city is neither a small town nor a metropolis. It is a distinctive urban place that strives for an ideal balance between the two.