
The Small-City Experience in the Midwest: An Introduction

James J. Connolly and E. Bruce Geelhoed*

The urban history of the United States is, for the most part, metropolitan history. Relatively few historians have explored the developments and human experiences associated with smaller urban settings. Yet it is in these smaller cities—particularly in states such as Indiana—that many Americans have experienced what they know as urban life. This issue includes four articles generated from papers presented at the first and second “Small Cities—Past, Present, Future” conferences, which were held at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, in 2001 and 2002.¹ Two of the articles—Timothy Mahoney’s introductory overview on “The Small City in American History” and John D. Buenker and Theodore Mesmer’s “A Separate Universe? An Exploratory Effort at Defining the Small City”—are broad considerations of what has distinguished small cities from both large urban communities and small towns. The remaining two articles—Jack Blocker’s “Building Networks: Cooperation and Communication among African Americans in the Urban Midwest” and Arthur Meyers’s “A Sturdy Core of Thinking, Fact Seeking Citizens: Courage and Public Learning in Terre Haute and Hammond, Indiana, in the 1920s”—explore particular historical developments in the small cities of Indiana and neighboring states.

The articles in this issue represent first steps toward both a general definition of the small city and a more particular understanding of some of its distinguishing characteristics. As Mahoney argues,

*James J. Connolly is associate professor of history at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, and the author of *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900–1925* (1998). E. Bruce Geelhoed is director of the Center for Middletown Studies and professor of history at Ball State. He is coauthor, with Anthony O. Edmonds, of *Ball State University: An Interpretive History* (2001). The authors wish to thank Blaine Brownell, who first suggested the idea of a small cities conference, as well as John Straw and the staff in the Archives and Special Collections office at Ball State for assistance with photographs.

¹The Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University and the Minnestrista Cultural Center have co-sponsored three Small Cities Conferences in Muncie, Indiana. The first Small Cities Conference was held on September 14–15, 2001, the second on November 1–2, 2002, and the third on September 12–13, 2003. These conferences aim to explore the unique challenges that have confronted and still confront municipalities with populations between 40,000 and 100,000. The idea for the institution of this series of conferences initiated with Dr. Blaine A. Brownell, president of Ball State University and a founding member of the Urban History Association.

these communities displayed distinctive spatial, economic, and political qualities that differentiated them from both the small town and the metropolis. Buenker and Mesmer add to this history by demonstrating how complicated it is to determine what these differences are. In the end, they conclude, historians need to explore less tangible aspects of small-city life, which is precisely what the remaining two contributors to this issue seek to do. Through it all, the exact definition of a small city remains an open question, and each essay in this issue uses a somewhat different definition of the term.

New inquiry into the history of small cities does more than fill a gap in urban history. It helps us to understand more fully the localized social, cultural, and political impacts of such global phenomena as industrialization and urban growth. In recent years, urban historians have increasingly treated individual cities as distinctive entities rather than as interchangeable backdrops for the emergence of modern society. In doing so they, like the contributors to this issue, have emphasized the concept of “place”: the history of the social, economic, political, and cultural interactions that create distinct identities for particular communities. As Charles Tilly has argued, urban history must show how local circumstances shaped the broad social trends associated with the rise of industrial capitalism. Studies of small cities offer especially manageable settings for such work. Further, as small cities differed significantly from large cities in political, social, and cultural terms, the people living in them experienced industrialization in fundamentally different ways from those residing in Chicago or New York.²

Though hardly typical, the Midwest is a good place to begin a study of small cities. As Buenker and Mesmer argue, while there was an extraordinary diversity among the economic functions, social profiles, and cultural characteristics of cities with populations between 25,000 and 100,000, the “ethnic factory towns” and “industrial suburbs” of middle America played a central role in the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the United States that occurred between 1880 and 1930. Exploring the ways in which such communities—particularly those not caught in the orbit of large metropolitan areas—experienced the process of industrialization can help refine and deepen the history of urban twentieth-century America.

A closer examination of the history of small cities also contributes to the history of Indiana and the Midwest. At the very least, the works presented here push us to move beyond caricatures of midwestern regional identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Far from the stifling, anti-modern backwaters described in a great deal of fiction and historical literature alike, small midwestern cities emerge as socially, politically, and culturally complex places. Blocker’s

²Charles Tilly, “What Good is Urban History?” *Journal of Urban History*, XXII (September 1996), 702-19.



BALL BROTHERS MANUFACTURING COMPANY, MUNCIE, INDIANA, C. 1960. MANY SMALL CITIES RELIED ON MANUFACTURING AS AN ECONOMIC BASE.

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account of institution building and the creation of social networks among African Americans in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio finds the roots of a modern black consciousness not in the metropolitan ghettos of the twentieth century, but in smaller urban settings beginning in the late nineteenth century. Meyers examines the Open Forum Movement in Terre Haute and Hammond, Indiana, during the 1920s and demonstrates that ideas derived from the Social Gospel and reform activism penetrated deeply into a heartland often portrayed as Klan-dominated.

The articles in this issue are beginning points in the study of small cities in the Midwest. Much work on the subject remains to be done. One might, for example, look more closely at the distribution of power—economic, political, and social—in small cities. While Mahoney claims that small cities were typically dominated by a handful of wealthy families, both Blocker and Meyers present evidence of substantial challenges to the status quo. These claims do not necessarily contradict each other, but they suggest that we need more research into the social and political dynamics of these communities and into the forms of resistance that were possible within them. Likewise, we



MAYORS OF RACINE, WISCONSIN, 1879–1911. LIKE MANY SMALL CITIES, RACINE WAS ETHNICALLY DIVERSE, WITH LEADING POLITICAL FIGURES OF ENGLISH, IRISH, AND GERMAN DESCENT.

Courtesy: Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University Libraries

know relatively little about class relations, cultural attitudes, spatial patterns of settlement and building, and a range of topics as they relate to the small city. It is our hope that this issue will encourage research that begins to address these and other questions.