

CLAYVILLE RURAL LIFE CENTER AND MUSEUM

Pleasant Plains, IL 62677

Publications Series III

Popular History

CLAYVILLE HISTORY:
TRADITION AND CHANGE
IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

Edward L. Hawes

Sangamon
State
University



Springfield, Illinois 62708

CLAYVILLE HISTORY:

TRADITION AND CHANGE

I. The Transition Era, 1840 to 1860

A. An Introduction to the Transition Era, 1840 to 1860

The interpretive program in the Broadwell's inn and farmhouse and Clayville school programs are focused on the two decades before the Civil War. This was an exciting twenty years. The pioneer days had passed. Log cabins were being improved with clapboard siding and enlarged with porches and frame additions. Prosperous farmers were building large frame or brick houses in one of the popular styles. Substantial barns were constructed, often on the Yankee pattern with large doors on one side and three bays or sections inside. People were using cast iron stoves for cooking and heating, and were buying factory-made fabrics and ready-made clothing.

The popular culture encouraged change and innovation. At that time, the printed page spread the popular culture; today it is spread by TV, radio, records, and cassettes as well. In the 1840s, for the first time in the Midwest, journals on agriculture and the home were published. These told readers how to farm more efficiently and successfully and how to raise

a family properly. The Prairie Farmer, which appeared from 1841 on, was one of the first. During this decade the popular culture began to replace the traditional cultures which were spread orally and by example.

This is not to say that either early settlers or more recent arrivals immediately discarded their traditional or folk cultures in order to take on the new. Much more complex changes took place. People held on to many of the traditional tools and ways that they had carried with them from the regions where they or their parents started. But Easterners from New England or from Pennsylvania and New Jersey, like the Broadwells who built the inn, probably learned some Southern ways. Likewise, people of the two Southern backgrounds, Lowland and Upland, very likely learned a few things from their Eastern neighbors. And people of all backgrounds were probably learning even more from the popular press.

Change was in the air. Out of the interactions of people, their cultures, and the environment, a Midwest landscape and mindscape began to emerge. The diversity of values and lifeways which owes its origin to people of various backgrounds was apparent during these two decades. So was the diversity in the landscape with the varying patterns of prairie and woodland, pastures and meadow, field and garden. Technological innovation, part of the popular culture, was creating some uniformity in farming patterns; but in this area of life and in others, traditional ways were still apparent.

This section of the publication is designed to help you understand the change that took place during the Transition Era, its roots, and character. It is also designed to enable you to recognize that traditional patterns persisted. The school programs now deal mostly with the little-changing patterns of life of Easterners and Southerners who settled here. We

hope, eventually, to do as much with the phenomenon of change. At the very least, this means we would use accurate reproductions of cast iron stoves and of garden and farm tools which were invented during the twenty-year period.

In the next section, the basic elements for understanding the roots of the 1840s and 1850s will be discussed; then the nature of the earlier pioneer years will be examined. Finally, we shall look in greater detail at the twenty-year period we call the Transition Era.

B. Basic Historical Themes

In order to understand the Midwest throughout the 1800s, it is important to consider four basic themes which were evident in the landscape and in everyday life.

The first is that the natural environment was a rich resource to the early settlers and their descendants. The second is that people brought their traditional cultures with them from their regions of origin. These cultures contained patterned ways of thinking and doing. Inevitably, these cultures shaped the new environment. The third theme relates to the popular culture: During the 1840s and 1850s, for the first time, new techniques developed for farm and household were part of a culture which was spread by the printed page. This popular culture affected people's lives, and the natural environment as well. The fourth theme explored is change, both social and environmental. Let us consider each of these more fully.

1. The Natural Environment: The pioneers of the 1820s and the 1830s found and made use of an environment which was composed of intermixed woodlands and prairies. The Clayville area presented a typical environ-

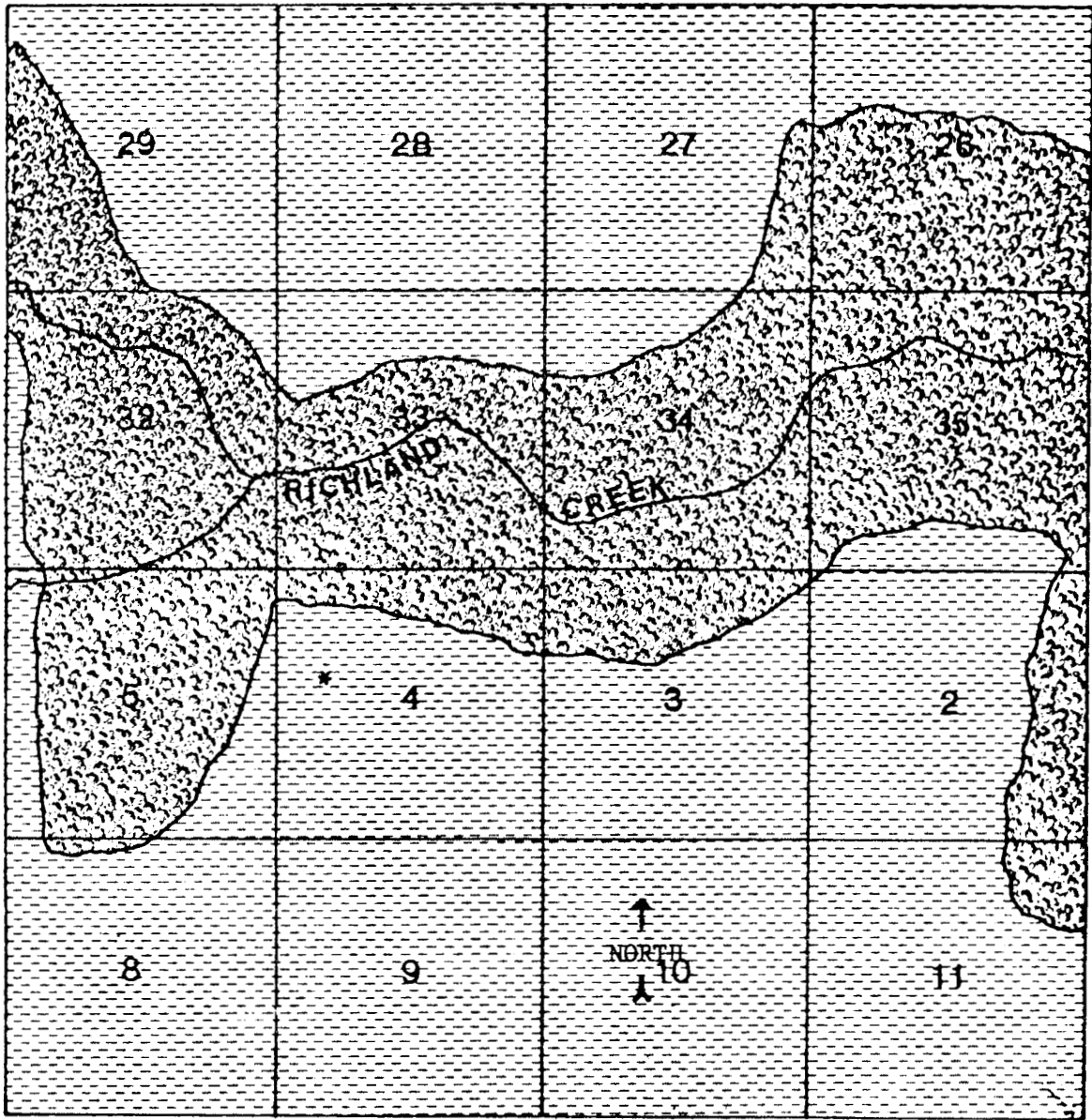
ment of that time, as shown in Figure 1 which is based on the notebooks of the federal surveyors who laid out the section boundary lines in the 1810s. In the 1850s these natural resources were still vital on farms of the descendants of the pioneers and of later settlers. The woodland provided building material, fuel, and food; the prairies provided pasture, meadows, and food. Land which had been or was being cleared or broken retained essential properties of soil fertility and water-holding capacity related to the former ecosystems of woodland and prairie.

2. Traditions: People who came here, Easterners, Southerners, and Europeans, brought their traditional cultures with them. With variations dependent upon what was usual in the region from which they came, they believed that barns and houses should be built with certain customary shapes and layouts. They believed that foods should be chosen, cooked and eaten, crops raised and harvested, religious services conducted, and life organized and lived in certain ways. And those were the ways they followed, at least for a while. First to settle in this part of the country were people from the southeast. Some of these families had lived for several generations in the Southern Lowlands within 100 miles of the Atlantic coast, others in the mountains, or in the Piedmont, the hilly areas between sea and mountains. Some came who had lived in one of the rich valleys of Virginia or Kentucky for a generation after leaving Pennsylvania or New Jersey. All these settlers are often lumped together as "Southerners", in the case of the Pennsylvania and Jerseyites, erroneously. The latter two groups were really Yankees in culture who probably had acquired some Southern ways.

A good example of Southerners was the Gum family from Kentucky. Originally from Virginia, Jacob Gum developed a farm in Kentucky, sold

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT


FIGURE 1: CLAYVILLE IN THE 1810s



Woodland 

Prairie 

Future Site of Clayville Inn •

Toward Springfield 

it to Abraham Lincoln's grandfather in the 1780s and then started another farm. The son, Jesse, grew up there. In 1820, Jesse, his wife, and children came to Menard County, purchased more than 800 acres and built a log house on their homestead. Jesse Gum was one of those who bought enough land to be able to give some to his sons when they came of age. The family prospered, and by 1850 the log house was improved with clapboards and probably occupied by a tenant family. Their house, now stored at Clayville, is to be put up and restored for our educational programs.

The Easterners, "Yankees," generally came later, in the 1830s and 1840s. There were two distinct streams: one from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, lower New York and Delaware and another from New England and upper New York. In addition, there were Germans, Scots, Englishmen, Norwegians, and others who came directly from Europe before 1860. Many brought not only their traditional ways, but also ideas on how to improve farming and living in a new environment.

The Broadwells who built the inn are a good example of an Eastern family. They left Morris County in northern New Jersey for Ohio in 1794. There they prospered, but decided to move on. Arriving from Cincinnati in 1819, earlier than most, Moses Broadwell acquired at least 560 acres, including the area on which the Clayville brick inn was built during the 1820s. In the vicinity were several of the Broadwell enterprises, including a tannery, and homesteads of other families. By the end of the 1850s, and house and some of the land had come to another Yankee, William Carson, a man married to Moses' daughter, Cynthia.

3. The New Farm Technology and Popular Culture: It was in the Midwest, especially Illinois, that technologies were worked out for using large land areas where labor costs were high. Deere and McCormick are the big names with their plows and harvesters. But there were literally hundreds of inventors and small businessmen who worked out and financed the making of not only complicated machines for reaping, mowing, and threshing, but also simple devices which were labor-saving and more mechanically efficient for various farm and household operations.

They spread their ideas and advertised their products through local newspapers like the Sangamo Journal and the Illinois State Register, both published in Springfield, and journals like the Prairie Farmer. Here was a developing popular culture of innovation, one which depended upon the printed page for transmission instead of the hand, the eye, or the spoken word as the traditional cultures did.

4. Change: The coming of this popular culture of innovation along with the informal learning and exchange of tools and ideas taking place among the traditional cultural groups brought environmental and social changes. In the section after next, "Why the 1840s and 1850s," we shall look at several aspects of these changes. But first we must look closely at the pioneering years to obtain a sense of the realities of that time.

C. The Pioneering Years: 1820s and 1830s

Many of the people coming to Illinois in this period had to know "pioneer skills," those needed to build a cabin, to gather and prepare foods from the wild, to start a farm and garden, and to clothe and take care of a family. The traditional cultures of Easterners and Southerners contained this knowledge.

People who "pioneered" did so for three reasons. First, many were too far from markets to easily sell their products to satisfy their needs. Secondly, there were those who simply did not have the cash to live another way. Out of necessity they lived from what they produced or exchanged with neighbors. Finally, some who had brought or acquired cash chose to put their money into land purchases with the intent of building capital through their labor. The Gums seem to have taken this third course of action.

But there were others who did not need to "pioneer." These people, like the Broadwells, came with enough capital to buy land and engage in business enterprises and speculations. After a year or so of subsistence farming, these people were able to establish a more prosperous lifestyle. Their ways were still traditional, but their cultures contained much more than so-called "simple" pioneer skills and ideas.

There were still others, people who lived at a lower economic level than these prosperous ones but who did not need the subsistence skills of pioneers. These were carpenters, sawyers, millers, brickmakers, masons, and other craftsmen who were able to sell or trade their skills to acquire the necessities of life. These men worked for others, often for small business firms run by people with capital or management skills. These workers also followed the folkways of the regions from which they had come and used traditional tools and techniques.

Thus, right from the start in Illinois, there was, in addition to the diversity rooted in the varied traditional cultures, another kind of diversity. This was based on economic and social factors, the money and skills one had and the social status one attained.

D. Why the 1840s and 1850s?

We cannot re-create the whole 19th century at Clayville. That would be too much to do. So we have chosen a key period, one which will enable visitors to learn about the origins and evolution of the Midwest. The twenty-year period before the Civil War is important for two related reasons. The first is that these two decades show quite clearly the interactions of the four basic themes: the natural environment, traditional cultures, farming technology and the popular culture, and environmental and social change. The second reason that the period is transitional is that it clearly reveals patterns which existed before and those which prevailed afterward.

This was not a pioneer era! That time in central Illinois, the 1820s and 1830s, is well portrayed at New Salem Village near Petersburg, Illinois.

The traditional folk cultures were still present in the Transition Era. People were very conscious of the differences between themselves and their neighbors, and they actively voiced prejudices against those of other cultural backgrounds. The newspapers and farm journals of the time reveal this. So do the books by early settlers and travelers. Perhaps the distinctions were even more noticeable during these two decades than during the pioneer years. Then the need for survival may have forced most settlers to adopt subsistence patterns of life which were traditional, especially among those with experience in the Upland South. Further investigation is needed in this area. It is clear that there were still distinctions in the kinds of structures people built, their foods and ways of life which were related to the regions from which they came. Later in the 19th century the prejudices of

Yankees and Southerners began to fade; however vestiges of the distinctions remained, and even today they can be observed.

The 1840s and 1850s saw a conscious development of new technologies for farm and household. Brown of Peoria developed a two-person corn planter, which for central Illinois may have been as important as the reaper since corn and wheat were the chief crops. With the planter, one person drove the horses from a seat and the other pulled a lever at the appropriate spots to drop and cover seeds. In Springfield, Kuhn developed and sold a wheat drill. Estate inventories of persons who died in these years do not indicate that these were common.

An Eastern innovation of some years before was used for greater efficiency in hay harvesting, the flip-flop rake. For harvesting corn, farmers used the traditional knives, and for grains many still employed the cradle scythe. There was a spirit of innovation in the air, but traditional implements and ways continued to occupy an important place in farming and household work.

The natural environment was being transformed in the 1850s, but the prairies and woodlands in their natural states remained vital for the farm economy. Society was being transformed, too. Complex marketing systems dependent upon the railroad and navigable waterways were being developed. Yet drovers and teamsters still stayed at country inns like Clayville. Stagecoaches carrying mail and travelers still connected many towns with rural areas. The railroad had not yet come to the immediate Clayville area and would not for nearly twenty years. New ideas came to farmers, rural tradesmen, and business people via the Prairie Farmer and the newspapers. Development of a free public education system began during the decade. Along with churches and schools,

country inns were social centers where people discussed traditional ideas and ways and those they regarded as progressive ones.

City and country were being brought together. Rural entrepreneurs as well as urban ones were important in the process. There were stock raisers like James Brown of Island Grove, who brought in Shorthorn and Devon cattle from England and the East to improve their own stock and, for a price, that of other farmers. They developed marketing connections with the Eastern cities. There were those who laid out new towns, as Jacob Epler did in the early 1850s with Pleasant Plains a mile west of Clayville. The older settlements, sometimes called "groves," began to disappear. The importance of Clayville as an economic and social center may already have begun to lessen by the end of the decade. The ties with Springfield were close. Inventories and other items in probate records show that area farmers did their shopping for equipment, food, and other supplies in Springfield.

These were Abraham Lincoln's maturing years. The young man who had surveyed land for Jesse Gum in 1834 and had served as attorney for the Broadwells in the 1840s was now a politician of note. The political institutions of rural areas like Clayville had matured also. County politics offered a fascinating scene of conflicts of various interests. The frontier had long since moved on westward. The Sangamo Country, as it was known to the first settlers, was now a center in the movement of people and goods in all directions of the compass. Illinois was part of a growing nation.

II. Roots of the Midwest

A. What is Traditional Culture?

By the 1850s, central Illinois was populated largely by people who came as part of two broad movements generally speaking, one from the northeast and the other from the southeast. They brought with them and still lived by varying regional traditions and ways of doing things in the household and on the farm, but were aware of new ideas from the popular press. From houses, barns, and other pieces of material culture, students of ethnology or folk life have identified patterns of form and technique which are associated with different areas. The presence of similar forms and techniques over a wide area makes it possible to call that area a culture region. For instance, in Massachusetts a type of heavy frame clapboarded house with a central chimney serving four or five fireplaces was common. The main doorway was in the front center and led to a tiny entrance hall with a room off to either side and cramped stairs to the second floor. Barns were constructed with sills on stone foundations and with wide doors in the center of one side. One side of the interior was used for stalls, the other for hay. These forms, techniques, and functions repeat themselves in Maine, Connecticut, and Vermont. Together they constitute patterns of shelter which define a region, the New England culture region, which thereby has a unity.

Analogous situations exist in other American culture regions. Scholars call the area from which the Broadwells came the Mid-Atlantic region. There the common housing pattern was to have two internal chimneys, one on each of the two gable ends, and sometimes a kitchen wing with fireplace and bakeoven. Moses Broadwell built his inn using the patterns

he knew from New Jersey and Ohio. Examples of the patterns can be found in England, where the Broadwell family originated. The Gums lived in the Virginia Lowlands where exterior gable-end chimneys were common. They built according to what their traditions told them. Examples of this pattern also exist in England.

Why people in each American region found a different pattern useful is not clear. The patterns were not learned in schools or in books. People found out how to make houses and barns by working with others who showed them the forms and techniques. The placement of the chimneys may have been determined by methods practiced and learned where the builders or their ancestors originated in England. It may have been determined by the environment, the climate of the region in which they settled in this country. Scholars wonder about this, and no one has turned up the answer. There may not be one final answer.

B. Traditional Cultures and Clayville

To make the story at Clayville comprehensible, we simplify it and say that each of the broad movements of people to central Illinois drew from two culture areas. That from the northeast drew from New England and from the Mid-Atlantic region composed of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and parts of New York and Delaware. That from the southeast drew from the Southern Lowland culture region, including parts of Virginia and North Carolina, Kentucky, and possibly Tennessee and from the Southern Uplands. We are not sure just how much impact the experience of the Southern Uplands had on some of the people who came from there. Some came here from Kentucky after a stay there of only a year or so, perhaps in a broad valley good for farming similar to the area of Virginia in which they originated. These families may have learned little of the Upland folk culture.

These were not the only people who had arrived by the 1850s. There were Europeans who came directly to the area, and others who had lived for a generation or so in the East. Germans came to the southern portion of central Illinois in the 1830s and settled around Belleville. They also settled in the Petersburg and Beardstown areas. They brought with them their building traditions and other customs, their religious beliefs, and their folklore. They actually carried seeds or plant stock of their favorite flowers and vegetables. Other Germans came to the northern and eastern parts of central Illinois after several generations in Pennsylvania and Ohio. They had been reared in the New World folk culture often called Pennsylvania Dutch, or more properly, Pennsylvania German. The Mennonites and the Amish bear this culture in Illinois today.

Other Europeans came. People arrived from different parts of Britain bearing various regional folk cultures and the popular culture of that island. Others journeyed from Holland and Switzerland. Swedes settled in the northwestern part of central Illinois. A few Norwegians settled in the Springfield area and many more in the Fox River Valley.

III. Some Questions We Want to Answer

There was considerable diversity in the American regional cultures and the ethnic European cultures of the people who settled in this area. Connections exist between the types of building traditions mentioned, ways of gardening, farming and doing household work, and religious values and beliefs. These relationships are being investigated at the Clayville Rural Life Center and Museum. We still do not know exactly how much of their folk cultures these people brought, how much they retained in

the 1850s, or precisely what they had to change or discard in the new environment of the prairie-woodlands.

We also do not know just how social class was related to folk cultural background. A common picture emerges from sources such as travelers' accounts and early settlers' recollections. The Southerners were lazy, and by implication, slow to adopt better farming practices of the popular culture; Yankees were "sharpies," eager to get ahead and quick to take advantage of others. A more sophisticated interpretation states that the Easterners were the improvers, the ones who adopted new farming and gardening ideas and prospered. The book of William Oliver, Eight Months in Illinois (Ann Arbor, 1968), gives a taste of this view. He was a British traveler, a farmer who came here for a study tour in 1841. In the few localities which we have studied in detail, parts of Menard and Sangamon Counties, these attributes are not verified. Therefore, we want to communicate the presence of both the traditional and the popular, improving elements in both the Eastern and the Southern cultures.

You can see that we have many questions about social and economic realities for which the answers are not easy to find. Furthermore, the diversity which existed would be difficult for children in the school programs or the casual visitor to understand. Thus, you can see why we say simply that there were Easterners and Southerners in this area of the Midwest, each of whom had their own traditions and ways.

Folk cultures exist today and are overlaid by a popular culture which exhibits agricultural "progress" and mechanized, urbanized life. Many people are not aware of the existence of the folk cultures, and some think little of them or want to forget them. Yet elements of these partially submerged cultures could be brought out and examined to see

what is useful in them. There are log cabins hidden behind modern siding and wallpaper, and old barns now seemingly in the way. There are family and social traditions, ways of behavior, and patterns of belief which linger on in individuals who fancy themselves very much up-to-date.

Some aspects of these cultures are negative. In the 1850s there was belief in the limitless fertility of the prairies. This led to patterns of land use which from today's vantage point seem exploitive. Yet we continue the belief and the behavior. They are deeply rooted in largely unconscious folk traditions reinforced in part by popular culture.

There are positive aspects, as well. It was that voice of agricultural improvement, the Prairie Farmer, which in the 1850s warned farmers against exploitive practices. In the folk traditions reside much of what we regard as valuable in this country, the balancing of the needs of the community with those of individuals which we strive so hard to make real again. The facilities and programs at the Clayville Rural Life Center and Museum are directed toward making people aware of all of this.