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DECLINE OF ST. LOUIS AS MIDWEST METROPOLIS

Lewis F. Thomas

THE first store was built in St. Louis in 1764. Forty years later, in 1804, the first store was built in Chicago. St. Louis enjoyed prosperity and growth without a serious rival until 1836 when the first Great Lakes steamboat arrived at Chicago. So great was the momentum of St. Louis prestige that it was not until 1880 that Chicago passed St. Louis in population. Since then, Chicago has been consistently increasing its lead. Today, Metropolitan Chicago has approximately 5,000,000 inhabitants and Metropolitan St. Louis has approximately 1,500,000 (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4).

Early in the 1900's J. Paul Goode wrote a booklet to prove that Chicago was destined to be a great city because of a unique combination of superlative geologic and geographic features. His thesis indicates that the great contrast in population today is not result of simple competition between the qualities of two geographic areas but of contrasts in strategic location which have contributed to acceleration of Chicago's growth and gradual retardation of the growth of St. Louis. Aspects of contrast in location are fundamentally related to transportation but reflect physiographic, political, and economic conditions accruing to the respective cities.

St. Louis was founded in 1764 for the purpose of establishing a base of operations for development of fur trading in the Upper Mississippi River Valley for New Orleans, fur interests by way of the Lower Mississippi River.

The city grew slowly in numbers although its business grew rapidly in volume because of the vast territory made accessible to the traders by the streams of the Missouri and Upper Mississippi drainage basins.

After the Louisiana Purchase opened the area to American settlement in 1803, the city grew rapidly as business opportunities diversified and expanded. Introduction of steamboats to the major streams, Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi, beginning in 1817, accelerated growth of St. Louis and tightened its commercial grip on the Upper Mississippi Valley.

The hold on the Northwest was supplemented by the Oregon-California Trails. The Santa Fe Trail with its beginnings shortly after 1821 extended business activities over the Southwest.

Meanwhile, after 1778, unsettled political conditions along the Great Lakes as a consequence of conflicts between the Americans and the Indians under British influences, induced expansion of American interests from the East by routes converging on the Ohio River. Thus, St. Louis reigned undisputed gateway to the West, as the focus of routes along the Ohio from Philadelphia and Baltimore and the Lower Mississippi from New Orleans.

After conclusion of the War of 1812 in 1814, the Great Lakes route to the West was freed of Indian interference. The little settlement of Chicago became the principal terminus of the Great Lakes-Mohawk route. Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 provided an

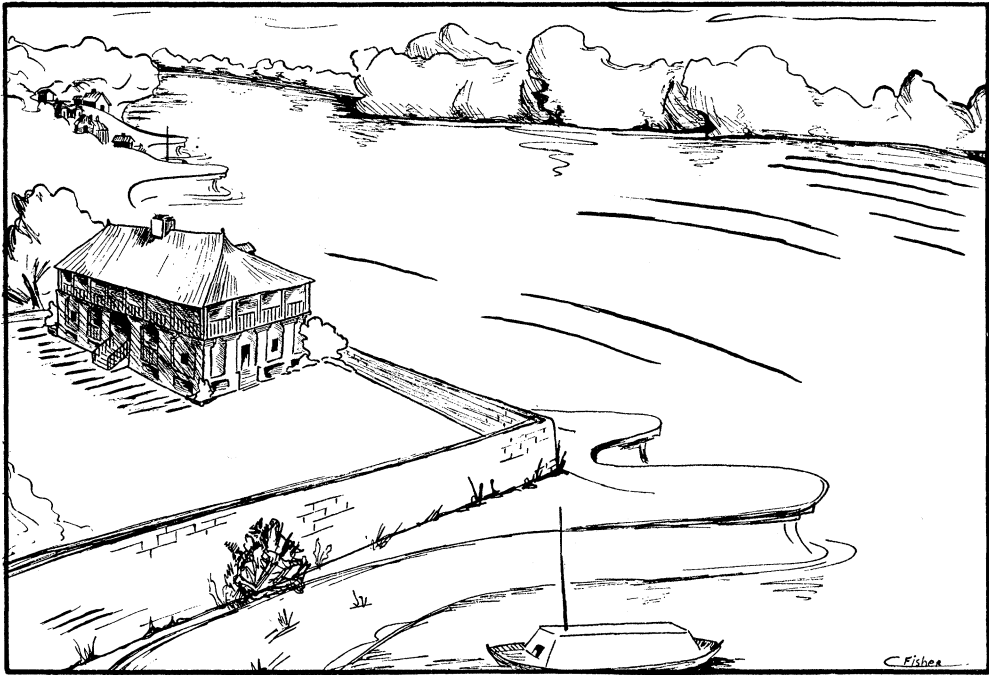


FIGURE 1.—St. Louis about 1790. The Chouteau mansion was not only a residence but also the center of business and social life. Note the proximity of the rock ledge which served as a natural wharf.

all-water route from Chicago to New York. The water-level route afforded two-way movement of goods by the most direct and cheapest means—sailing vessels on the Great Lakes and canal boats on the Erie Canal and Hudson River (Figure 5).

After 1836 the movement was greatly facilitated and accelerated by steamboats on the Great Lakes. In 1848 the Illinois-Michigan Canal connected Lake Michigan and the Illinois River. In 1854 the rate per ton of freight from New York to Chicago via the Hudson River, Erie Canal, and the Great Lakes was \$4.76. The rate from St. Louis to New York via the Illinois River, Illinois and Michigan, Great Lakes, Erie Canal, and Hudson River was \$6.29. The rate per ton from St. Louis to New Orleans was \$7.09. Thus it becomes obvious that Chicago had

become a greater magnet than St. Louis for drawing trade from the Middle West to the Atlantic Seaboard before establishment of effective railroad connections with the East. This fact determined development of the railroad pattern of the Middle West and in turn the outcome of the struggle for commercial supremacy (Figure 6).

Both cities have one feature in common—each was a goal to which eastern railroads were built and from which western railroads were constructed. It is undoubtedly true that each city viewed the situation differently. St. Louis, with its prestige based on river-borne commerce, at first doubted the capacity of railroads to compete successfully with steamboats. Chicago, without such geographical setting, was alert to the possibilities of railroads as superior means of transportation. The

first timid project in railroad building westward from St. Louis in 1852 was projected along a route over rather hilly terrain at some distance from the Missouri River because the promoters feared that the new railroad could not compete with the Missouri River steamboats. Chicagoans did not have any such fears.

The Chicago and Rock Island Railroad reached the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois in 1854 and purchased a railroad across Iowa to Council Bluffs in 1855. The Chicago-Northwestern; Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy; Illinois Central; and Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroads followed in rapid succession to Council Bluffs. In addition to quick, direct service to Chicago, these railroads benefited from two geographic situations. First, all crossed the Mississippi River above the rapids at Keokuk which were a handicap to navigation on the Mississippi, and hence favored deflection of Upper Mississippi Valley traffic to Chicago. Second, the Mississippi River crossings of these railroads

at Rock Island, Illinois; Clinton, Iowa; Burlington, Iowa; and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin respectively, did not require any great expense in bridge construction or elaborate engineering skill. As a consequence, there are not any breaks in the movement of traffic in line-haul movement and therefore, no extra charges at the river crossings.

At St. Louis the barrier effects of the Mississippi River during the first 25 years of the railroad era in the Middle West were disastrous to the commercial prestige of St. Louis. During those years, the railroads literally dumped their shipments on the eastern bank of the river and told the merchants of St. Louis to come and get them. Some 2,000 ferries did valiant service in attempting to minimize the handicap, but for a steep price. The charges, added to delays in movement and damage to goods by exposure, increased the barrier effects. The contrast with the situation at Chicago, where the terminal railroads merely hauled the cars from one terminal to another on terra firma (Figure 7) was significant.

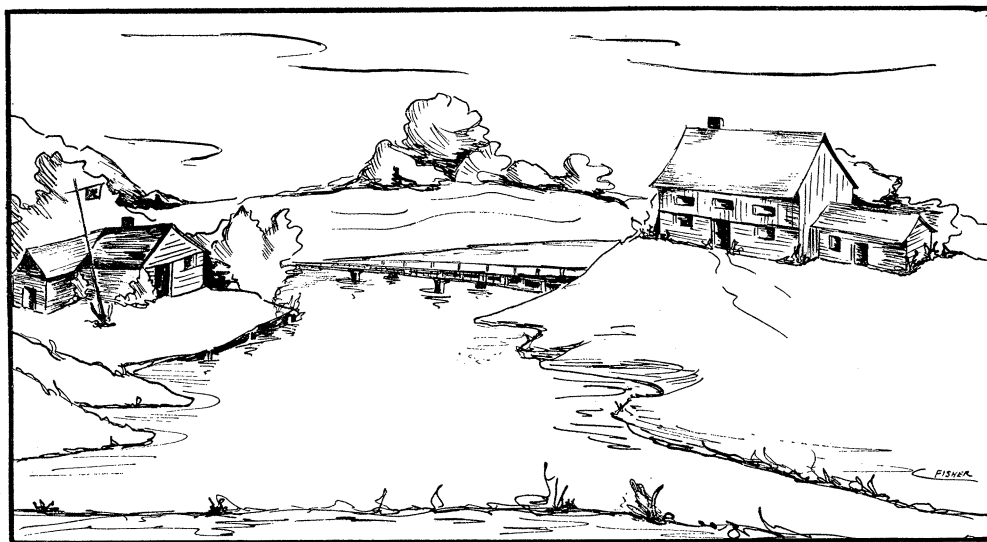


FIGURE 2.—Chicago about 1832. The unimproved, shallow Chicago River separates Wolf's tavern on the left from Miller's tavern on the right.

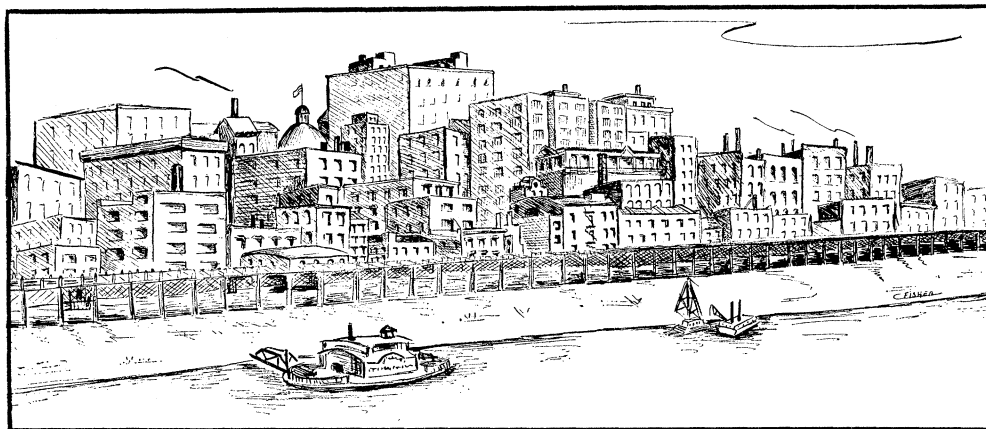


FIGURE 3.—St. Louis, 1930. The natural limestone ledge has been buried beneath the granite pavement of the levee. The congested wholesale and retail district covers the slopes of the bluffs.

Completion of Eads Bridge in 1875 relieved the bottleneck by expediting transit movement, but bridge charges replaced the ferry charges (Figure 8). The bridge cost approximately \$12,000,000 and was built in spite of determined opposition by steamboat interests and their friends and in spite of stupendous engineering problems. About 20 years later a second bridge was built to compete with Eads Bridge but was bought by the Terminal Railroad Association which owned Eads Bridge. The Missouri Pacific Railroad operated a car ferry in South St. Louis. In 1924, receipts of the Terminal Association for bridge charges amounted to about \$24,000,000 per year, according to trustworthy estimates. The contrasts between St. Louis and Chicago terminal interchange obviously worked to the advantage of Chicago as location for Midwest wholesale and jobbing businesses handling eastern goods. The advantages for Chicago were augmented by contemporary benefits accruing from easy connections with both the East and the West.

Due to the waterway competition afforded by the Great Lakes–Erie Canal–Hudson River route, the water-level

railroad route from Chicago to New York became the base for rail rates in the Official Freight Rate Territory which lies east of Chicago and St. Louis and north of the Ohio River. Thus, Chicago became the focus of railroad competition in the Middle West for business from eastern seaboard manufacturers and distributors.

The railroads constructed westward and southwestward from Chicago cut across areas formerly served by St. Louis by steamboats. Two of the railroads were especially significant, the Union–Central Pacific and the Santa Fe.

The opening up of the Far West by the California Gold Rush in 1849 fanned the desire for so-called Trans-Continental Railroads. Several surveys were made and choice for initial construction narrowed to the Kansas Pacific from Kansas City to Denver and the Union–Central Pacific from Omaha to San Francisco. The decision involved natural and political considerations. The Kansas Pacific route was brought up sharp against the massive complex of the Southern Rocky Mountains and had to be deflected northward or southward around it. Deflection to the north meant convergence with the route

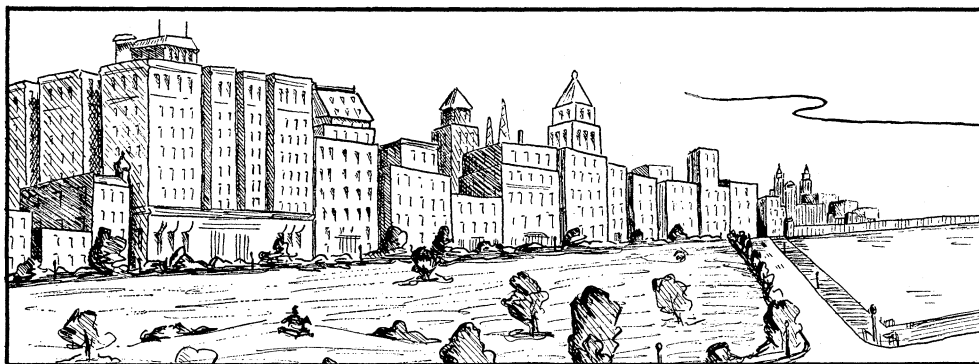


FIGURE 4.—Chicago, 1930. Grant Park is flanked by the towering row of skyscrapers along Michigan Boulevard, the eastern edge of the loop district.

of the Union Pacific through the Wyoming Basin. Deflection to the south meant an impracticably long detour across New Mexico and Arizona to reach California.

The route of the Union Pacific leads directly west from Omaha through the Wyoming Basin and over low passes to

Utah, Nevada, and California. Eastward, several railroads lead directly to Chicago and on east to New York.

In 1859 Abraham Lincoln visited Council Bluffs, Iowa and was convinced by Grenville M. Dodge, engineer for the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad, that the 42nd Parallel route,

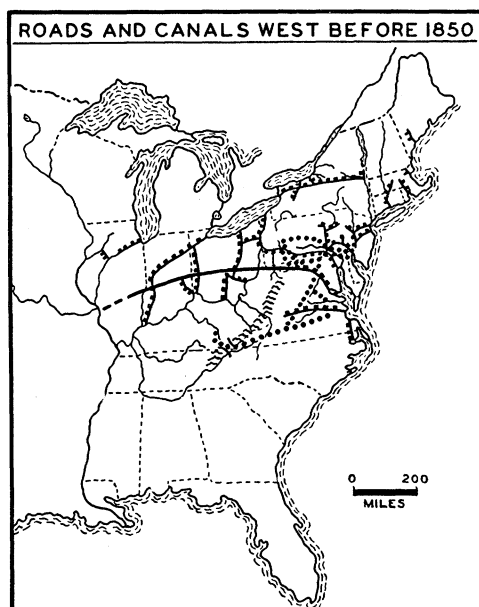


FIGURE 5.—Roads and canals east of the Mississippi before 1850. The canal pattern shows the great significance of the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. The national road cuts across the valleys and divides toward St. Louis.

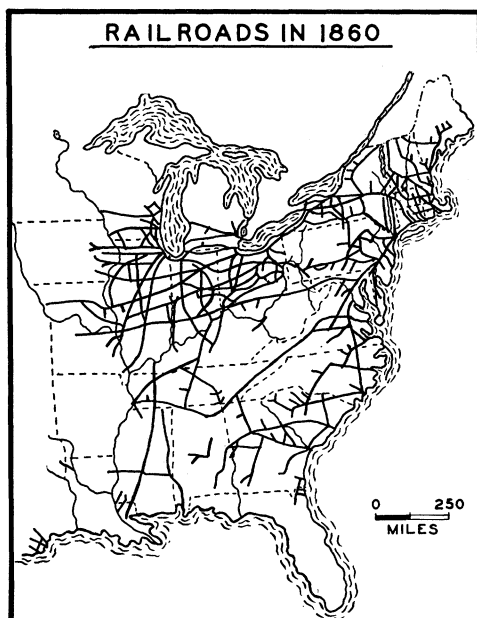


FIGURE 6.—Railroads of the United States, 1860. The railroad net focuses from the East on St. Louis and Chicago. The greater significance of Chicago as the eastern terminus of western railroads is obvious.

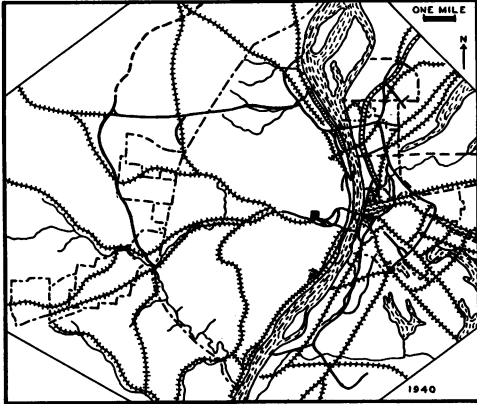


FIGURE 7.—The railroad pattern of Metropolitan St. Louis. The width and depth, the volume and regimen of the Mississippi River constituted a serious barrier between the terminals of the eastern and western roads.

the Union Pacific, was most practical and economical. Lincoln was also aware keenly of the political significance of the Union Pacific route. If the Kansas Pacific route should be selected in spite of its natural handicaps, it would channel to St. Louis a great flood of commerce to enhance the prestige of a city nearly twice the size of Chicago. St. Louis was considered a southern city with strong sympathy for the slave owners of the South. It was believed that by increasing the importance of St. Louis strength would be added to the forces of the South.

The Union Pacific route and its connections with Chicago were solidly Northern territory and its selection would give great impetus to Chicago. The Kansas-Nebraska Act passed in

1854 permanently blocked the Southern Pacific route favored by the southern states. The Union Pacific Railroad was chartered by Congress July 1, 1862 and selection of its eastern terminus was left to the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. The Civil War was in progress, and Lincoln's choice of Omaha opposite Council Bluffs was a foregone conclusion. Thus, the most direct route to the Far West and intermediate areas was opened up for Chicago.

The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad began as a local road between Atchison and Topeka, Kansas in 1859. In 1863 the railroad was included in the Congressional land grants and expanded to the western border of Kansas. They also provided for a southern branch and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe was chartered, of which the rails eventually reached into southern California. The railroad attempted to extend its rails eastward to St. Louis but was blocked by St. Louis railroad interests which wished to prevent competition with the Missouri Pacific Railroad serving much of the Kansas area. The Santa Fe then extended its rails to Chicago. The very efficient Santa Fe Company deflects to Chicago a vast amount of traffic which by propinquity should go to St. Louis. So complete is this deflection that St. Louis changed its slogan from "The Gateway to the West" to "The Gateway to the Southwest." Even

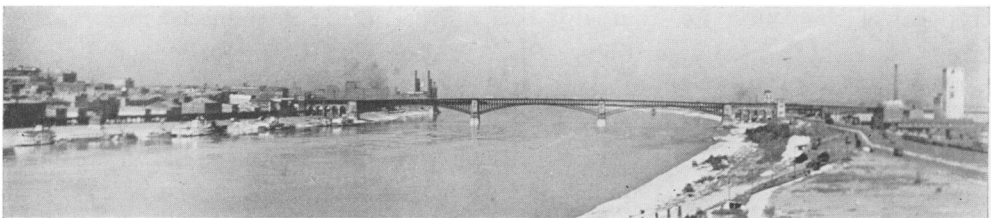


FIGURE 8.—Eads Bridge, completed in 1876, was for twenty years the only bridge across the Mississippi in the vicinity of St. Louis. The river as shown is approximately one-fourth mile wide.

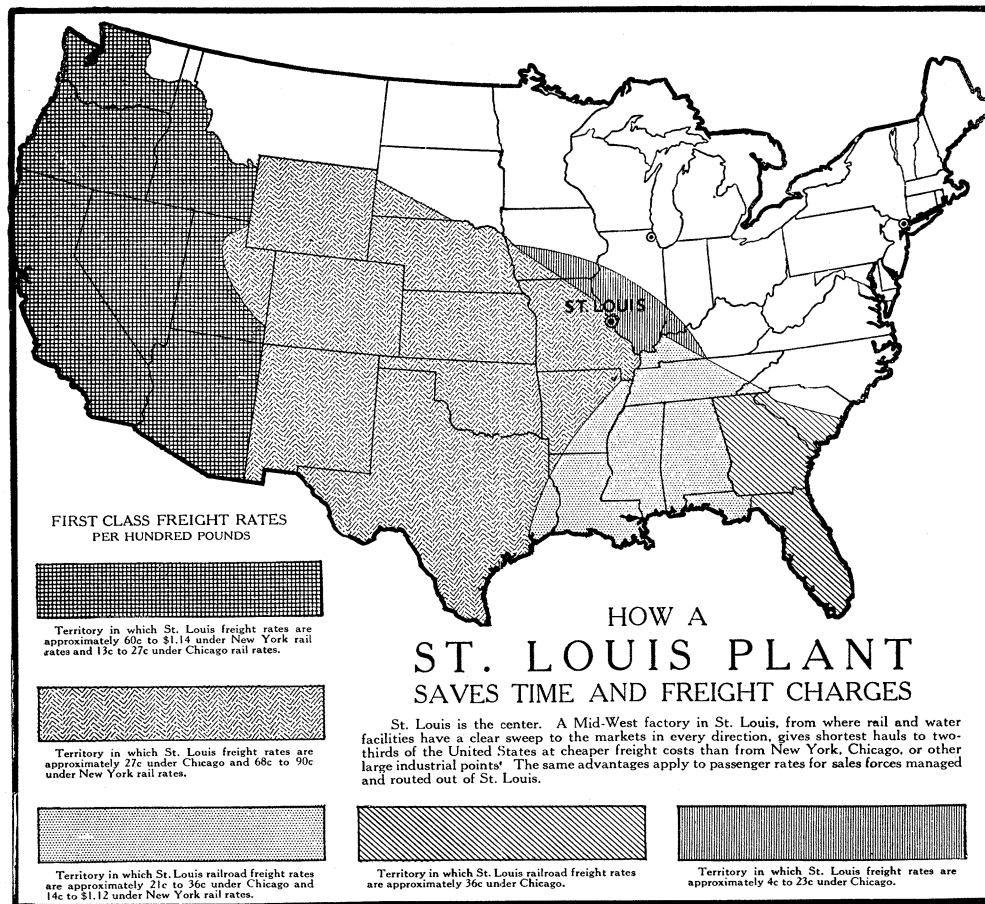


FIGURE 9.—This map showing the freight rate pattern of St. Louis shows why St. Louis in its commercial prestige of the early 1900's dominated the Southwest.

so, St. Louis benefits chiefly from the eastern part of the Southwest which is served by its own railroads: Missouri Pacific; Missouri, Kansas, and Texas; St. Louis-San Francisco; and St. Louis and Southwestern. In 1947 St. Louis railroads again bitterly opposed the proposal of the Santa Fe Company to extend its rails to St. Louis (Figure 9). In spite of the shrinking tributary area, St. Louis commercial business kept growing because of the great increase in wealth in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and eastern Texas. The area is served by all-rail transportation facilities.

One of the significant factors in the decline of the steamboat business on the Mississippi was the Illinois Central Railroad from Chicago to New Orleans. The quicker, all-year service on the railroad was superior to the seasonal, hazardous service on the river. The railroad route is about 60 miles east of St. Louis thereby depriving the city of one of its ancient and valuable functions, as middleman between New Orleans and Chicago. St. Louis does not have any direct railroad connections with New Orleans. St. Louis-New Orleans traffic joins the Chicago-New

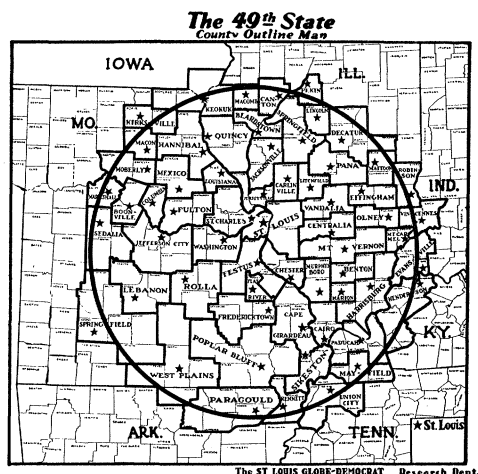


FIGURE 10.—The size and shape of the St. Louis trading area has resulted from the competition of surrounding cities including Chicago, Indianapolis, Louisville, Memphis, Kansas City, and Des Moines.

Orleans line at Carbondale, Illinois. It is the irony of fate that the Lower Mississippi River which served as a bond to nourish the infant St. Louis, was severed.

Another significant trend in the transportation net in the Middle West was revival of waterways. Again, the geographical psychology of river-mindedness in St. Louis thinking had unfortunate results. During World War I, when the railroads groaned under tremendous loads, the Federal Government authorized the Mississippi-Warrior Rivers Barge Lines. After the war, great pressure was brought by Mississippi Valley cities to continue and expand the services. The joker in the deal is the arbitrary right of the barge line to transport goods for 20 per cent less than the all-rail rate. Provision was made for combination rail-water rates which are less than all-rail and more than all-water rates.

St. Louis served its Southwest on the basis of all-rail rates. St. Louis is so situated that it requires a longer rail

haul than cities downstream, notably Memphis and New Orleans. Memphis has had a bridge crossing to Arkansas for many years, but as an all-rail route it was of little significance. However, with waterway rates to Memphis from Kansas City, St. Louis, St. Paul, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, the water-rail combination rate to Arkansas and Oklahoma became of great significance. Goods to the rich Mid-Continental Oil fields could float right through St. Louis on the Mississippi River or by-pass the city on the Ohio River. Thus, St. Louis was shorn of its prestige in its own Southwest by Memphis and its business has been curtailed accordingly. In spite of the Memphis invasion, a great deal of business was for a time retained in Texas, but not for long.

Opening of the Houston Ship Canal in 1914 did not immediately affect the all-rail movement of goods from St. Louis to Texas. But after World War I, goods began to move down the Mississippi to New Orleans then by coastwise routes to Houston. Furthermore, goods from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania which had moved all-rail through St. Louis began to go coastwise directly to Houston. As a consequence, the St. Louis-Dallas teamwork has been overshadowed by rapid growth of Houston which has abetted Memphis in robbing St. Louis of its own Southwest.

The commercial trading area remaining for Metropolitan St. Louis is roughly a circular area some 300 miles in diameter with St. Louis somewhat off-center to the north (Figure 10). This area reached its agricultural and agricultural town maturity about 1880. Thus the commercial potential for St. Louis is not exciting. St. Louis commercial businesses have contracted to fit the present scene. A few companies have

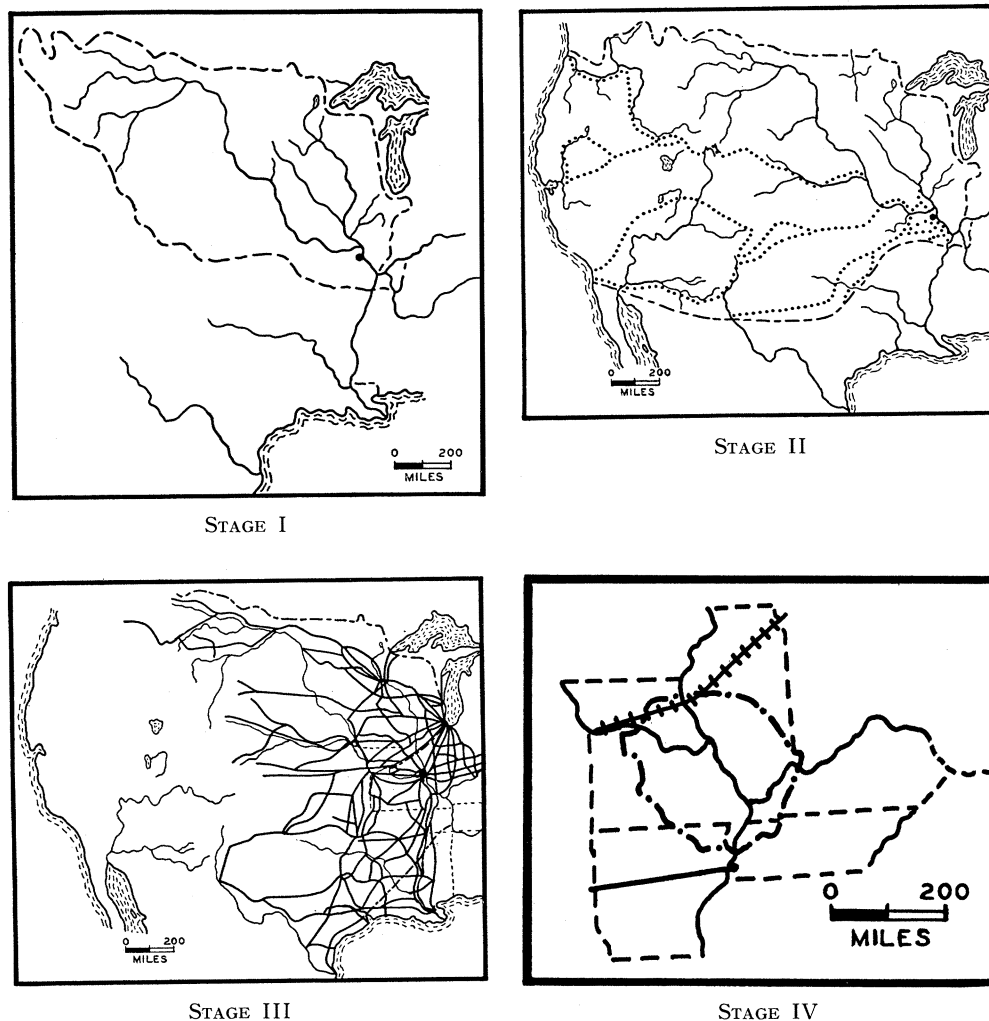


FIGURE 11.—The evolution of the St. Louis trade territory. Stage one shows the significance of the Missouri and Upper Mississippi drainage basins as the basis of the fur trade of St. Louis. Stage two shows the areas added to the trading area by means of the overland trails. Stage three, the development of the railroad net in St. Louis' sharing the West with Chicago. Stage four, the present trade area shown contains some good agricultural land but also much low-grade subsistence farming areas. The continual growth of St. Louis has been dependent upon the growth of towns and cities chiefly based on manufactures.

retained national importance and those few entered allied manufacturing fields.

So far analysis of the great contrast between the populations of Chicago and St. Louis has dealt with commercial and basic transportation activities (Figure 11). A realistic corollary is that manufacturers of the merchandise type localize at the commercial centers.

Consequently, as Chicago's commercial prestige has grown its manufactures have kept pace. With increase in consumer goods manufactures, there is increased demand for products of primary manufactures. For example, it is the gigantic market in Chicago that attracts the blast furnaces and steel mills. Value added by manufactures

has enhanced the wealth of the city. Wealth has made possible cultural, financial, educational, and professional opportunities. Like a rolling snowball, each turn adds greatly to the volume of the whole. To quote Matthew in the Bible, "For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away."