



EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

May 1, 2019

To: Carmen Maso, Central Office Manager, Illinois Geographical Society
From: Christopher R. Laingen, Associate Prof. of Geography, Eastern Illinois University
RE: Final report for 2019 IGS Research Award

Research summary: Twenty years ago, as an undergraduate geography student at South Dakota State University, I mapped abandoned farms in four townships in Watonwan County, Minnesota. Using aerial photography and ground truthing I compared the status of farms – lived in, abandoned, or demolished – with their status in 1950. In November of 2018 I revisited my study area and updated what I had first mapped in 1999. This paper will report what has changed over the past twenty years regarding the status of farms and farmland ownership. Local-scale patterns and trends will then be used to discuss regional and national trends in rural population change and Corn Belt agriculture.

Specific findings of the research:

Change in status from 1999 to 2018/19 for Odin, Township, Watonwan County, MN

- New farm sites created: 0
- Vacant to Demolished: -9
- Vacant to Occupied: +4
- Occupied to Vacant: -11
- Occupied to Demolished: -5

Overall “loss” (occupied farms being vacated or demolished) was 16. That was offset by 4 vacant sites being occupied. This amounts to an overall “loss” of 12 farm sites over two decades; this trend has slowed from loss of 52 sites over a 4-decade (1950-1999) period. In terms of overall population, rural Odin Township has seen a 73% loss in population from 1920 (629) to 2010 (170). Urban Odin Township has seen a 49% loss in population from 1950 (208) to 2010 (106).

Distance from Parcel to Owner in 2018 for Odin, Township, Watonwan County, MN

- 237 parcels of land in Odin Township’s 36 square miles
- 13,094 total “parcel to owner” miles
- 70% of parcel owners live <10 miles from land
- 20% of parcel owners live 10-100 miles from land
- 10% of parcel owners live >100 miles from land (4 live >1,000 miles)

This loss of population and change in ownership trends has been created by the overarching transition of Midwestern agriculture towards industrialization and large family farms managing a greater percentage of the area’s cropland. In 1925, 66% of Minnesota’s farms were between 100 and 500 acres in size; they farmed 85% of the state’s cropland. By 2017, only 19% of Minnesota’s farms (those >500 acres) farmed nearly 80% of the state’s cropland. And most of that nearly 80% of cropland was owned by farms >1,000 acres in size.

Respectfully submitted,

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