Social Sciences

OKLAHOMA AND ITS PEOPLE

J. J. Rhyne, Norman, Oklahoma

The population of the State of Oklahoma increased 18.1 per cent from 1920 to 1930. Approximately two-thirds of the people were living either in the open country or in towns and villages under 2,500 in 1930. The farm population constituted 42.6 per cent of the total, while an additional 23.1 per cent was classified as rural-non-farm.

A study of the population changes by decades since 1910 revealed the usual cityward drift of the population. In 1910 only 19.3 per cent of the population was classified as urban. In 1920 the percentage had increased to 26.6. The cityward trend was even more pronounced during the last decade than during the two previous decades.

For the most part larger towns and cities tended to increase rather rapidly in population, during the last decade, while an unusually large number of smaller communities actually lost population. Two fundamental explanations come to mind in attempting to account for the tendency of the smaller places to decline and the larger places to increase. In the first place, the development of good roads and the increased use of the automobile as a means of conveyance has made it possible for rural people to reach the larger centers for trade purposes. In the second place, a large number of the smaller communities that lost population were started as oil boom towns. With the passing of the oil field many of these places were robbed of their chief means of existence and quite naturally suffered a heavy decline in population. There were 34.5 persons per square mile in the state in 1930 as compared to 41.3 persons per square mile for the United States as a whole. The population density varied considerably by counties. Cimarron County, with only 2.9 persons per square mile, was the most sparsely settled county; while Tulsa County, with 320.6 persons per square mile was the most densely populated county. An analysis of population increases and decreases by counties by decades indicates that the population of the state is highly mobile. The population of the southern half of the state is more subject to shifting than the population in the northern half of the state. This difference in mobility is, perhaps, due partly to the difference in the type of crops grown in the two areas. Whereas the northern half is largely devoted to grain and hay crops, the chief reliance in the southern half is cotton. Since cotton

is a ready cash crop, it would naturally tend to attract the cropper type of tenant many of whom move from one tenant farm to another year after year. Counties in the western part of the state, especially in the cotton growing section, almost without exception lost population from 1910 to 1920, whereas practically every county in the entire eastern, especially the southeastern part, gained in population during this decade. The population increases and decreases from 1920 to 1930 showed almost exactly an opposite trend from that of 1910 to 1920. During the past decade every southeastern county lost population, while every southwestern cotton growing county gained in population. In other words, whereas the flow was from the southwestern counties to the southeastern counties from 1910 to 1920, the flow from 1920 to 1930 was directly the reverse, indicating that those coming from the southwestern sector to the southeast during the first decade, reversed their paths ten years later.

Twenty-seven counties in the state actually lost population from 1920 to 1930. Two counties lost over a third of the 1920 population. Ten counties lost over one-fifth of the 1920 population. Without exception counties decreasing more than 20 per cent were in the cotton growing sections of the southeastern and eastern Oklahoma. Seven counties lost from 10 to 20 per cent of their population, while twelve others experienced a population decline of less than 10 per cent. Counties experiencing the largest population increases from 1920 to 1930 were those that had oil development. Seminole County, with an increase of 234.4 per cent, experienced the greatest growth in population. Oklahoma County came second with an increase of 90.6 per cent.

Although Oklahoma is a southern state the composition of the population by race stands out in marked contrast to all other states in the southern region Nearly nine persons in every ten in 1930 were white. The Negro race formed only 7.2 per cent of the population as compared with approximately 10 per cent for the United States as a whole. Oklahoma is unique in the number of Negro towns within its borders. There are more Negro communities in the state than in any other state in the country. Boley, Taft, Langston, Red Bird, and a number of smaller Negro villages readily indicate the extent to which the Negro has attempted to work out his own community life. Only in the agricultural sections, formerly held by the slave-owning Five Civilized Tribes, is the Negro found living interspersed among the rural white population as in the old South. Even within the area formerly occupied by the five tribes are located several Negro towns.

A study of the race distribution by counties for the last three decades, however, indicates a gradual breaking down of the more rigid form of segregation of the Negro into communities of his own. The Negro is at present penetrating the fertile southwestern cotton growing section of the state to a greater extent than at any previous time. This trend would naturally be expected with the development of larger towns and cities. The fact that farm tenancy is also on the increase would tend to open to the Negro some of the cotton farming sections of the state where formerly only whites resided.

The racial composition of Oklahoma population is peculiar in still another respect. Approximately one-third of the Indians in the United States reside in this state. At the present time the Indian population composes approximately 4 per cent of the population of the state.

The foreign-born white population of Oklahoma constitutes a very small part of the total population of the state. Only 1.5 per cent of the

population was of foreign birth in 1930. Furthermore, the foreign-born population has been declining both absolutely and relatively for each decade beginning with 1910. In that year 40,084 persons, or 24 per cent, were of foreign birth. In 1920, 34,107, or 1.5 per cent, were born in a foreign country. Mexicans and Germans stood first and second, respectively in point of numbers.