

POPULATION CHANGES IN THE GREATER SEMINOLE AREA, 1920-1940

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The Greater Seminole Area, of east central Oklahoma, has been the region of greatest relative change in population within the state especially during the past twenty years. Because of the unusual conditions under which the western part of the Area was originally settled, plus the discovery of one of the world's greatest oil-producing regions, two periods of mushroom growth have occurred. The first period was when that part of the Area lying in Pottawatomie County was opened for settlement in 1891 and 1896. The second and more important period, for it affected the entire Area, was between 1925 and 1932 when the large oil pools were being opened.

The data in Table I present a vivid picture of village, town, and city population changes between 1920 and 1940. In 1920 the population density of the Greater Seminole Area was much like that of the territory which immediately surrounded it. There were no densely populated rural regions. The central part of the Area in Seminole County was sparsely settled. This lack of settlement was caused by poor drainage conditions along the lower courses of Salt Creek and Little River. In the north central part of the Area the lack of population was caused by extremely rough land. The absence of farm homes between Francis and Allen was also caused by hilly land.

In 1920 the three largest settlements within the Area were Shawnee, Ada, and Holdenville, each more or less at a corner of the region. Each was largely dependent upon its surrounding agricultural population for support. Shawnee, being in the best agricultural section, had become the largest. Wewoka was the largest settlement in the old Seminole Nation with a population of only 1,520. Seminole and Maud were about the same size, the former having a population of 854, the latter 637. Tecumseh, although only six miles from Shawnee, was the fourth largest agglomeration.

The population density in the territory immediately surrounding the Greater Seminole Area was, in 1920, about the same as that within the Area. The better farming lands west of the Area naturally supported a denser population than the hill lands to the east. The nearest large agglomeration was Okemah, with a population of approximately 2,100, a little less than that of Holdenville. The other settlements in the surrounding territory were about the same size as the smaller settlements within the Area.

It takes many hundreds of people to carry on the necessary work in the production of petroleum. Thus, when the period of rapid oil development started in 1926, there came hordes of migrant workers. As the discovery of one oil field followed another in rapid succession, the population increased by the thousands. These people made up the strange conglomeration that is characteristic of any "boom" country. Quiet country lanes became busy highways. Roads crossed the farmer's corn or cotton field

TABLE I
Village, town and city population changes in the Seminole Area, 1920-1940

Agglomeration	1940	1930	1920	Change 1930-1940	Per cent of change 1930-1940	Change 1920-1930	Per cent of change 1920-1930
Villages							
Asher	507	653	370	-146	-22.3	283	76.5
Bowlegs	308	464	---	-161	-23.7	---	---
Earlsboro	486	1,950	317	-1,464	-75.0	1,683	515.4
Francis	370	607	911	-237	-39.7	-304	-33.3
St. Louis	326	493	---	-167	-33.9	---	---
Sasakwa	532	781	355	-249	-31.8	426	120.0
Towns							
Allen	1,389	1,438	1,377	-49	-3.4	61	4.4
Konawa	2,205	2,070	896	135	6.5	1,174	132.1
Maud	2,036	4,326	637	-2,290	-52.9	3,689	579.1
Tecumseh	2,042	2,419	1,429	-377	-15.7	990	69.2
Cities							
Ada	15,143	11,261	8,012	3,882	34.5	3,249	40.6
Holdenville	6,632	7,268	2,932	-636	-8.6	4,336	147.9
Seminole	11,547	11,459	854	88	0.8	10,605	1,241.8
Shawnee	22,063	23,283	15,348	-1,230	-5.3	7,935	51.7
Wewoka	10,315	10,401	1,520	-86	-0.8	8,881	584.3

to where the derricks were being built. Homes made out of boxes, sheet iron, cardboard, or any other available material were built wherever the builder could find a place. The builders very seldom, if ever, asked permission of the property owner, and in most cases the owners were too busy to notice the shacks being constructed. Accordingly much fertile farm land and many vacant city lots were soon occupied.

Villages expanded into towns and towns into cities almost over night. No source gives the exact population of the agglomerations during these uncertain years; no source can. Various estimates place Wewoka between 20,000 and 25,000; Seminole between 30,000 and 40,000; Earlsboro between 4,000 and 5,000; and Maud at 10,000. One source estimates Bowlegs at 8,000. Naturally, as soon as the fields were brought to a steady production, large numbers migrated, this time from the Area to east Texas and the Texas panhandle region where new fields were rapidly being brought in.

As a result of the oil developments, the population map of 1930 is in almost direct contrast with that of the previous decade. The greatest changes of population density were within the rural sections, being largely within the areas of oil development. The largest changes in rural population were in the regions of the Seminole, Bowlegs, Searight, Earlsboro, Little River, and St. Louis fields, although changes were discernible in the regions of the Allen, Sasakwa, Holdenville, and Wewoka pools. The drainage system of the smaller streams and the rougher sections still show a marked influence upon the settlement pattern. The region to the northeast of the Greater Seminole Area also increased in population owing to oil discoveries. The population of the agricultural and hill areas to the west and south remained about the same as in 1920.

Between 1920 and 1930 every agglomeration in the Area, with the exception of Francis, gained in population. The largest gains were in those settlements which adjoined the oil-producing areas. The population of Seminole gained 1,241 per cent, the largest percentage or numerical gain within the Area. Wewoka, Maud, and Earlsboro each had gains in population of over 500 per cent. One new settlement of importance, Bowlegs, came into existence, and St. Louis was incorporated. The 1930 census showed Shawnee to be the largest settlement, with a population of 23,283. Seminole had jumped into second place, followed closely by Ada. Wewoka had passed Holdenville, thereby leaving it, the former third city, in fifth place. The settlements outside the Greater Seminole Area changed little in population unless they, too, were near active oil developments.

Since 1930, the decline in population within the Area has been rapid, although not nearly so rapid as the increase from 1920 to 1930. Many minor fields have been opened, but these have not been sufficient to employ the population. Declining mineral deposits naturally lead to a decline in population. In population losses between 1930 and 1940, Seminole County was first and Pottawatomie County second in Oklahoma, with losses of 18,420 and 12,195 respectively. These losses are from the oil fields rather than from the agricultural sections.

The greatest decline in population has been in the incorporated places and the crossroad settlements. Many of latter have ceased to exist. The incorporated settlement of New Lima has given up its charter and twelve of the remaining fifteen show losses in population amounting to as much as

75 per cent. Ada, Konawa, and Seminole continue to show gains, although the population of Seminole increased only 0.8 per cent in ten years. The continued growth of Ada was aided by the opening of the Fitts field, about fifteen miles south, in the Arbuckle Mountains. Konawa continued to gain because of its unusual interest in agriculture. Shawnee remains the largest city in the Area, with Ada now in second place. Seminole, Wewoka, and Holdenville follow in the order named. The population of Maud declined from 4,326 to 2,036, or 52.9 per cent. Many of the villages, such as Earlsboro and Sasakwa, have declined almost to their 1920 population. Most of the incorporated settlements just outside the Area also declined, but not to the extent of those within the Area.