

The Functional Evolution of Seminole, Oklahoma

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The geographical study of an urban settlement is concerned with three main problems; first, the physical and cultural conditions that were involved in the origin of the nucleus of the settlement; second, the reaction of this nucleus, in its functional and morphological development, to the impact of historical events; and third, the life and organization of the contemporary settlement viewed areally, both as a whole and with respect to the differentiations within it. The purpose of this paper is to describe, evaluate, and suggest possible solutions to these three problems as they apply to the urban settlement of Seminole, Oklahoma.

The characteristics of the site, including both the surface and subsurface conditions, have been important factors in the development of Seminole. The physical characteristics of the surface site led to the establishment of a settlement. The subsurface character of the site provided a rich mineral resource—oil. The discovery and development of oil provided the most outstanding event in the history of the city. Since the discovery of oil and the subsequent decline of production, Seminole has mainly concerned itself with adjusting its form and character to the performance of functions other than those relating to the production of oil. The methods attempted to produce these adjustments and their relative success is illustrated by the functional character and land-use patterns characteristic of the present-day city.

The city of Seminole occupies a position approximately 6 miles northwest of the center of Seminole County (Fig. 1). It is located 55 miles southeast of Oklahoma City, 91 miles southwest of Tulsa, and approximately 200 miles north of Dallas. In terms of both area and population, Seminole is the largest city in the county.

The physical site of the city possesses several undesirable features which limit further development. Development southward and eastward is retarded since these areas are hampered by the occasional flooding of two creeks. Since 1940, much of this marsh or swampland has been effectively reclaimed and is now the site of a spacious city park and golf course. Additional reclamation programs could bring much more land in this area up to a suitable condition for increased urban development.

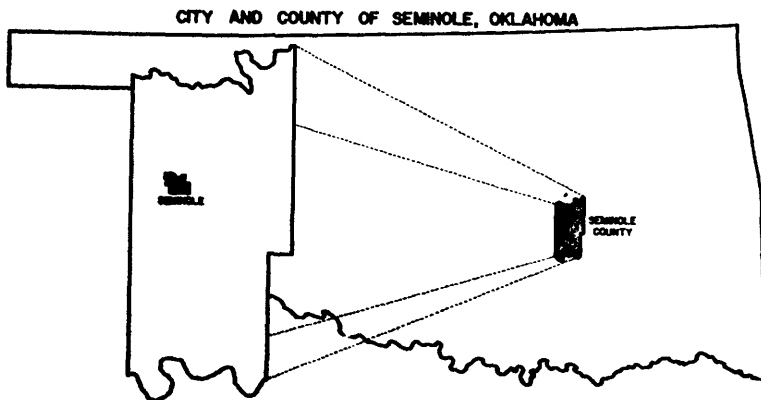


Figure 1

Expansion of the city northeastward has and will continue to be limited by a bluff or low ridge. In order for any development to occur here, a water and sewage system employing pumps would have to be installed at a considerable expense to the city. It is therefore, unlikely that any development will take place here in the near future.

A remnant of the oil boom days that effectively restricted expansion westward has now been partially overcome. During the time of high oil production, storage facilities were in great demand and "tank farms" dotted the landscape. The area west of Timmons Street met these demands, the result being a concentration of oil storage tanks. Since the 1940's the "tank farm" has been eliminated and approximately one-third of the area has been converted to residential use with the remaining two-third providing a site for a significantly blighted open junk yard.

The effective hinterland of any city is dependent, to a large degree, on the adequacy of its highway, railway, and air transport lines. Seminole is relatively well endowed with highway transport lines. The revenue and job opportunities that result from those activities which provide goods and services to the highway traveler add substantially to the economic life of the city. U.S. Highway 270 and Oklahoma State Highways 3 and 99 follow routes through the principal business district of Seminole. One of the main east-west roads in Oklahoma, State Highway 9, lies two miles north of the principal business district.

The volume of traffic on these highways has been fairly constant in the last 10 years. Passenger cars account for approximately 75% of the total number of vehicles using these roads. Trucks and buses comprise the remaining 25%. With the completion of Interstate Highway 40, located approximately 10 miles north of the city, the volume of traffic on State Highway 99 has increased. On the other hand, the volume of traffic on State Highway 9, which runs parallel to the route of Interstate Highway 40, has decreased.

The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad serves the city with daily freight service and two passenger trains each way every day.

Seminole does not have scheduled airline service. The nearest commercial airline service available is at Ada, 38 miles south of the city. Driving time of 1 hr and 20 min. brings one to the air service facilities offered by Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City. Seminole Municipal Airport, north of the city, is a suitable landing field for most propeller-driven airplanes.

The city of Seminole had its beginning in 1893, when the Seminole Indians established the Mekusukey Academy for boys approximately 3 miles southwest of the present city. The small settlement which developed near the school was named Tidmore; it consisted of several small stores and functioned only as a service center for the Indians and few whites in and around the mission.

In 1895 the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad (now the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad) built a line through the Seminole Nation that passed by the present site of Seminole. A combination of factors account for the rail line by-passing Tidmore. Physically the town occupied a low-lying, often muddy site which was undesirable for a rail location; also the railroad company preferred a spacing of approximately 10 miles between towns and Tidmore was too close to Earlsboro; thus the higher ground of the present site was chosen. A station fashioned out of an old passenger car was set up, and soon after most of the community of Tidmore moved to the new townsite to take advantage of the rail location.

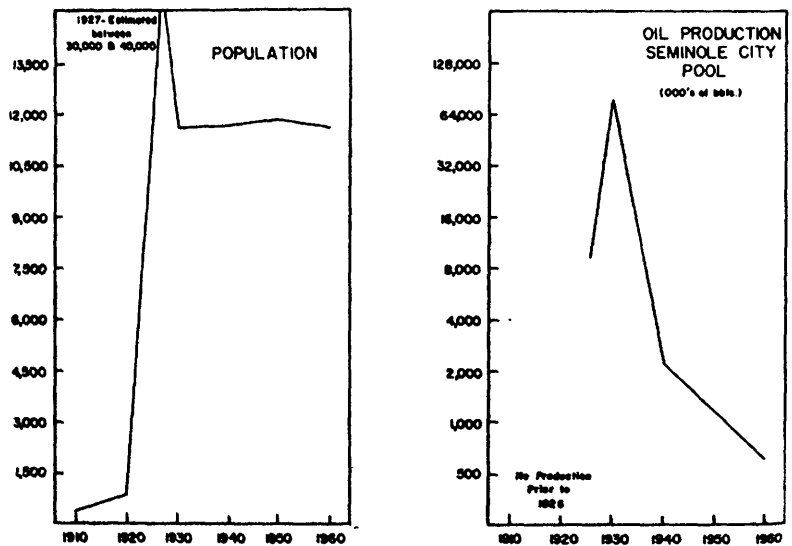
The name of the town was officially changed to Seminole in 1906, and it was incorporated as a city in December, 1924. During the first 20

years of its existence, Seminole experienced gradual growth and changes characteristic of most small agricultural communities. The business district and the surrounding residential areas focused on the train depot. The town provided goods and services for both its own inhabitants and the farming population in the immediately surrounding area. The first census of Seminole, taken in 1907, showed a population of only 206; three years later the population stood at 476 (Fig. 2). When the 1920 census set the population at 854, it was generally agreed Seminole was destined to remain as nothing more than a small country town. Only a few foresaw any future growth and certainly no one envisioned what was to take place after July of 1926 when oil was discovered in the Seminole City Field.

The discovery well, located about a mile northeast of Seminole, came in a gusher on 26 July 1926. This discovery precipitated a spectacular "boom." As the news spread, hundreds, then thousands of people flocked into the city. Speculation, buying and selling of royalty rights and leases, and drilling were carried on day and night. Within 6 months a total of 211 wells were producing an average of 263,192 barrels of oil a day.

Seminole, the agricultural village with a population below 1,000, was changed drastically almost overnight to a wild, roaring, oil boom city with a population estimated between 30,000 and 40,000 persons by July, 1927.

A combination of factors account for the relatively rapid decline of production in the Seminole City pool. The limits of the pool had been generally determined, and as new fields came in elsewhere many workers soon left Seminole. Undoubtedly the most dominant factor was the initiation of a proration plan, the goal of which was to attempt to conserve the petroleum resource and halt the skidding price of the rich mineral.



POPULATION GROWTH and OIL PRODUCTION
SEMINOLE, OKLAHOMA - 1910 to 1960

Figure 2

Due to the decline in oil production, Seminole was forced to make a tremendous adjustment. Activities related to oil production and processing remained as a dominant feature in the function and land use patterns of the city, but it was realized these were declining. In order to remain prosperous and retain its population, the city began to develop and encourage activities focused on serving the agricultural activities in the surrounding area. Emphasis was placed on the development of existing farm stores, cotton gins, and blacksmith shops. The land use in Seminole during this time indicated a transition of function was in process—an emerging retail service center, providing goods and services for agricultural activity was beginning to replace a declining oil production center.

Between 1940 and the present, growth in numbers has not materialized, but development and some physical expansion has been characteristic. The area of the incorporated city has nearly doubled in size. Since 1940, man has influenced another change of the physical environment which has led to a further alteration of the functions of Seminole. Land that was once cultivated has been turned into pasture. With this development, Seminole no longer functions as an agricultural center. But the oil industry has not forsaken the city. A large number of establishments concerned with providing services and supplies to the oil industry are located in Seminole. These, added to other establishments, provide a wide range of the usual goods and services required by a concentrated settlement of people. This has led to the development of Seminole as a multifunctional retail service center dominated by activities related to the oil industry.

Seminole is also a residential city and this function should continue to increase in importance in the years to come. Many people who came to Seminole during the period of the city's rapid expansion have tended to remain to spend their later years. The merchants and businessmen of the city and their families have established homes in Seminole. Many persons employed by the oil field service and supply companies have settled in the city. These men spend much of their time traveling to various areas where their services are required, but their families are located in Seminole. In recent years an increasing number of residents of Seminole have acquired jobs in Oklahoma City. At present nearly 500 people living in Seminole commute to work in the Oklahoma City area. Future road improvements in the surrounding area will further increase the number of citizens employed in the Oklahoma City area.

The prospects for the development of industry in Seminole appear relatively bright. Various organizations have been established to promote the desirability of the city for industrial location. A number of prime sites are available to accommodate industry. Of far more effect is the realization by the community leaders of the benefits to be derived from good planning practices. Even with all of these favorable factors, it will require a tremendous effort and many years to transform Seminole into an industrial center.
