Citizens’ Survey of Rural Social Conditions in Kenosha County, Wisconsin

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The Kenosha County Citizens’ Survey grew out of a desire to make the county a better place in which to live, to work and to rear a family. It developed out of the background of the Wisconsin Better Cities Contest conducted in 1925. This contest was a revelation in what urban people could actually accomplish in gathering information and then acting upon the basis of it.

The city of Kenosha won the Better Cities Contest. It rated eighth, however, with ten cities in its class in the town-country relations section. Naturally, both local people and those interested from a state point of view began to ask questions. Conferences of local people were held, at which representatives from state agencies were present. It was decided that a plan somewhat similar to the Better Cities Contest might be adapted to rural areas. Kenosha county volunteered to cooperate in working out some sort of plan.

Purpose of the survey — Three principles are involved in this experiment of rural citizens studying their own affairs. The first is that true advancement is based on a knowledge of conditions. The second is that learning starts with the familiar, the near-at-hand, the experienced. The third is that facts have more interest and motivating power when you gather them yourself. This is not presumed to be a research study or research publication. It is rather a technique in extension education as a result of which policies may be based on the facts gathered.

Some backgrounds of the county — Kenosha county, in the southeastern corner of Wisconsin, is bounded by Lake Michigan on the east and Illinois on the south, and is located about half way between Milwaukee and Chicago. The county is about 12 miles wide and 25 miles long. It includes one city, Kenosha, an industrial center located at the extreme eastern end with an estimated population of 54,500 in 1923 as compared with 40,472 reported in the United States Census for 1920. The only incorporated village is Silver Lake which is located in the southwestern part, and had a population of about 225. Other governmental units in the county are eight towns, two of which are smaller, and two of which are larger than the customary six mile by six mile townships as laid out by government surveyors. One representative from each of these towns, one from the incorporated village, and one from each ward in the city of Kenosha make up the County Board of Supervisors, the governing body of the county.

Early history — The era of Indian trade with the white man in this southeastern section of Wisconsin lasted about two centuries and has been estimated as 1634 to 1834.* What is now Milwaukee was the center of these activities, and the names of traders that stood out were Antoine LeClaire, La Framboise, Thomas G. Anderson, Jacques Vieau, and Solomon Juneau. The latter laid the foundations for the present city. The Indians remained in this general area until about 1838 when they were removed to the west side of the Mississippi.

The years 1833-1836 were a time of great activity so far as the land surveys were concerned. In addition to laying out township and section lines, the surveyors took notes on the quality of the soil, the drainage and water supply, and the kinds of timber. They also indicated where survey lines crossed trails or roads, and located Indian mounds and battlefields. Land offices were opened, and it was in 1836 that the movement of settlers into this region was well under way. A wagon road had been opened from Chicago in 1835. Most of the emigrants, however, came on schoons or steamers by way of the lakes, debarking at points that now mark Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha or Chicago, and traveling inland.

The census of 1840 was a means of measuring the new population. It revealed 3,475 persons in Racine County (which included what is now Kenosha county). Of this number, 981 were described as farmers. Practically all of these people entered the area during a period of six years, and by far the most of them in a period of four years. By 1850 Kenosha county (which was then reported separate from Racine county) had a total population of 10,785, of which 7,382 were American born.

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*This and other historical information here presented are from the Wisconsin Homestead Book, General Studies, Volume II, Four Wisconsin Counties by Joseph Schafer, and published by the State Historical Society, 1927.
Those born in New York or Wisconsin numbered 5,196. Of the foreign born, the Irish were in the lead with 1,209 persons, and the Germans second with 826.

Farming conditions—Most of the Kenosha county farmers are dairymen. The two eastern towns, and particularly the town of Somers, do considerable truck farming. Interspersed among the truck farmers and dairymen in the eastern part of the county and clustered in suburban areas such as South Kenosha and Lake Shore Road are quite a number of factory employees, who come outside the city limits to find homes where rents are somewhat lower.

Several small lakes in the southwestern and west central part of the county attract many summer vacationists. Land values are therefore considerably increased in these sections, and frequently city attitudes and concepts disrupt the customs and mode of living of the farm people.

The average size of the farms in Kenosha county is very near the average for the entire state of Wisconsin, and considerably larger than the average for the southeastern district comprising Kenosha, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Walworth, Washington, and Waukesha counties. The average number of acres per farm in Kenosha county is 107 (Table I) compared with 89 acres per farm in the southeast district, and 113 acres for the state average.

Table I.—Average Size of Kenosha County Farms, 1925

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kenosha county average</th>
<th>Southeast district average</th>
<th>State average</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acres</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>89</td>
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*The southeast district includes Kenosha, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Walworth, Washington, and Waukesha counties.

Almost one-third of the farms of Kenosha county are operated by tenants. This is higher than the southeast district average and almost twice as high as the state average. Many of these tenants, however, are young farmers, frequently the owners' sons, who are cash or share renting as a preparatory step to farm ownership. The percentage of tenancy in 1925 was 30.8 per cent for Kenosha county as compared with 19.8 per cent for the southeast district average and 15.5 per cent for the state average.

However, when it comes to expressing the ratio of indebtedness to the total farm value, Kenosha county is about the same as the state as a whole. About half of the total farm value is mortgaged. Chart I shows that in Green county, the highest in the state, 69.1 per cent or over two-thirds of the total farm value is mortgaged, while Oneida county, the lowest in the state, 32.0 per cent or less than one-third is mortgaged. Green county is in the south central district of the state, and Oneida county is in the north central district.

Population—The total is reported as 51,284 in the 1920 United States Census. Of these 10,812 were reported as living outside of the city of Kenosha in what we, in this study, have called the rural areas of the county. A later 1925 United States Census of Agriculture reports 6,372 as actually living on farms in the county. The number of families, or groups living under one roof, outside of the city of Kenosha, was 3,210 according to the school clerks' reports in the county superintendent's office in 1928. This latter figure is used as a basis for many of the family estimates used in this circular.

Facts gathered by one of the committees about the heads of families living outside of the city of Kenosha show that in 1930 half of them were born in Kenosha county. Furthermore, about two-thirds of the heads of families were born in the United States and the remaining one-third were foreign born. The foreign born came from thirteen different countries, Germany being outstandingly first, but others including Denmark, Poland, England, Sweden, Holland and Russia contributed many.
Furthermore, about four-fifths of the heads of these families outside of the city of Kenosha had been born and raised in rural areas. About one-fifth were urban born and had moved to rural areas.

The survey revealed that less than ten per cent of the families outside of the city of Kenosha were without children. Over one-third of these Kenosha county families had children of pre-school age or five years of age and less; almost three-fourths of them had children of school age or ranging from 6 to 17 years; and one-third of them had children past school age or 18 years of age or older. These comparisons are indicated in Chart 2. Furthermore,

![Chart 2 - Percentage of Families with Children in Various Age Groups, 1930](image-url)

Source: Information obtained from a study of 442 families in Kenosha County by the social welfare committee, 1930.

* By this classification “pre-school” includes children five years and under, “school children” those six years to 17 years inclusive, and “past school” children 18 years and over.

about one-thirteenth of these families had pre-school children only, one-eighth had only children past school age, while about one-fourth of them had children of school age only. Less than one out of twenty had children in all three groupings. It is apparent that the age distribution of children in these families in 1930 was seldom more than eighteen years, and usually not more than twelve years.

The analysis showed that slightly over half of these children were of school age. Furthermore, a little over one-fourth of them were past school age, and slightly less than one-fifth were of pre-school age.

Road system—Kenosha county has one of the finest systems of roads in the state. There are approximately 86 miles of hard surface road, 45 miles of which is in the towns of Somers and Pleasant Prairie. All other roads which are traveled to any extent are surfaced with gravel. Roads in the entire county, maintained jointly by the county and state highway departments, are kept open for travel all winter.

Organization of the survey—An executive committee consisting of one person from each of the eight towns in the county was appointed. This group then selected a chairman and a secretary. Numerous meetings of this executive committee with such county people as the agricultural agent, superintendent of schools, supervising teacher, county nurse, probation officer, and members of the county board of supervisors were held. People from the State University, State Conference of Social Work, and various state departments were present.

It was decided to divide the survey into five fields of inquiry with a corresponding number of committees. The fields were education, recreation, health, social welfare, and farm and home. The committee responsible for each was composed of representatives from each of the eight towns. For each of these committees, the county executive committee named a county chairman.

A small state committee for each of the five fields of study was then organized. It was the function of this state committee to counsel with the local county committee relative to fertile fields for study and to methods of gathering information. The rural sociology extension representative from the state College of Agriculture acted as a convener and as the field secretary for each committee. His further function was to draw together, and, with the aid of the members of the local and state committees, to discuss and interpret the findings in terms of things that could be done about them. There was no formal affiliation with any county or local organization, political body, or religious sect. The committees were made up of citizens, and acted only in that capacity.

### Educational Conditions

**ONE OF THE MOST important factors in the welfare of a people is the adequacy of its educational opportunity.** This survey indicates that Kenosha county is well above the average in that respect. However, there is still much to be desired.

Most rural schools small and have one teacher—Kenosha county has 63 rural school districts. Most of these are small, and have but one teacher. Only seventeen of these districts, all located in the eastern, central or southwestern part had more than one teacher (Chart 8). Of these, only three, all of which were rather close to the city of Kenosha, had more than two teachers.

On the other hand, while the figures indicate that there are a large number of one-room schools, 40 of