

GEOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF FARM SERVICE CENTERS
IN CLINTON COUNTY, IOWA: 1941-1973

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ABSTRACT

The farm service center, which provides fertilizer for nearby farms, has been a feature of the cultural landscape of Clinton County, Iowa, since 1941. This study examines the farm service center industry of the county from the standpoint of geographical changes through time and considers the impact of the centers on the landscape. Information was primarily obtained by interviewing managerial personnel at the 28 farm centers and completing a standardized questionnaire. Some of the information collected has been recorded on maps and photographs.

Among the major aspects of the farm center industry under examination were ownership, product types, market area, and economic performance. There were identified three types of farm center owners: cooperatives, independent retailers, and corporations. Cooperatives owned most early farm centers in the county, but after the late 1950s, corporations (mainly petroleum firms) outnumbered other types of owners. This was an outcome of the growing practice of converting abundant natural gas into liquid fertilizer for sale to farmers by petroleum companies. Consequently, the appearance of corporation-owned farm centers resulted in the addition of liquid fertilizers to the more traditional dry types available from the centers. The typical farm center market

area, perceived by management as delimited by a circle with a 10-mile radius outward from the center, was confirmed as generally accurate by examination of the fertilizer application pattern of two sample centers. After steady growth following 1941, the number of farm centers in the county doubled during the 1960s. This rapid growth during the decade was followed by the economic failure and abandonment of several farm centers. Since it appears that a level of saturation has been reached, the establishment of new farm centers in the county is unlikely.

The chief impact of the farm centers has been the change in agricultural practice and crop yields. Increased crop volumes have been converted into animal protein by feeding grain to livestock. With added wealth, farmers have expanded operations by cultivating more land, purchasing larger machines, feeding more livestock, and purchasing greater amounts of fertilizer from farm centers.