

SHEEP PRODUCTION IN WEST CENTRAL ILLINOIS  
1860 TO 1985--A GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

The historical geography of sheep production over the past 125 years has been characterized by alternating periods of boom and bust. Rapid expansion in the mid-nineteenth century, swift retrenchment after 1870, brief surges in the 1920s and 1950s and, ultimately, low production were documented.

County-based maps demonstrate distributional changes during the study period. Initially sheep production was concentrated in the southern study counties and emphasized fine-wooled breeds such as the Merino. Although production levels climbed markedly during the Civil War era because of lucrative wool prices, this "boom" was short-lived. With the turn of the century, flocks came to be concentrated in the northern reaches of the study area where producers emphasized mutton breeds because burgeoning urban populations offered a nearby market for lamb as meat. Although brief "boom" periods were reported during the 1920s when agricultural depression encouraged flock enterprises because of their low overhead expenses and the late 1950s, when producers concentrated on feeder lambs that they fattened on cropland residue and stubble, the modern patterns include greatly diminished numbers of sheep and reveal few historical links with the ascendant period of production during the mid-nineteenth century.

The mapping of study area township data for the years 1965-1979 disclosed that, although the absolute number of sheep has diminished, a wider distribution of small flocks is evident. Responses from questionnaires returned by 17 percent of sheep producers in the study region indicate that nearly half are part-time farmers who have flocks numbering less than 50. Most are motivated to maintain flocks for enjoyment or as a hobby, or to provide lawnmowing and weed control; income potential was usually a secondary consideration.