

Career Patterns in Industrializing Wisconsin 1875-1920

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The Federal census statistics for Wisconsin during the years 1890-1920 record the economic development of the state, the shift of resources toward the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy, and the urbanization that accompanied the entire process. A neglected source makes it possible to document social and ethnic factors as well as career patterns of individuals who were associated with this economic growth. Around the turn of the century publishers commonly commissioned the writing of county and regional histories including the biographies of thousands of economically successful Wisconsinites who, presumably, bought the books. These biographies were standard in form, completed by the subject or a relative, and laid out the important antecedents and stages of each successful career. While revealing little about the subject's character or life-style, they provided significant information on career and family development. By reducing the data from 536 subjects active in the fields of farming, manufacturing, agricultural processing, and retail and wholesale trade by the use of a standard questionnaire, and by tabulating the "replies," culled from the biographies, it was possible to prepare a statistical profile of the group. (See Appendix of Biographical Sources.)

Since the great majority of the subjects were born between 1855 and 1880 and the average age of job entry was 15-20, the profile applies to the economic conditions prevailing in Wisconsin between 1875 and 1920. The 18 counties of Eastern Wisconsin chosen for the study included all the major ports, 56 percent of the firms, and about 67 percent of the industrial capital represented by building and equipment in 1900. (See Fig. 1 in [3], p. 958) Catholics and Lutherans of German background were the predominant religious and ethnic groups of the sample (Table 1). Germans of working-class origin were the most

numerous members in each of the career categories: farming, manufacturing, agricultural processing, retail and wholesale trade (Table 2 and Table 3). This was compatible with the proportion of Wisconsin population of German background, which was about 50 percent in 1880 and 53 percent between 1890 and 1910 (1, pp. 84, 691; 2, p. 572; 4, pp. 204-08). In the sample population, however, Germans constituted 43 percent of the total. The only fields in which Germans were over-represented were in farming and, later in the period, agricultural processing. In the other categories Anglo-Saxons appear more frequently than their proportion of the total sample would suggest (Table 4).

Other distinctions within and among ethnic groups may be made on the basis of religious affiliation. For example, German Catholics showed far more flexibility in choice of career than Lutherans. Anglo-Saxons of pietistic affiliation (Baptist, Methodist) were distinguished by over-representation in the retail and wholesale trades; Anglo-Saxons of liturgical affiliation (Congregationalist, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian) by their presence in manufacturing as well (Table 5). About 40 percent of the population changed career categories sometime during their working life. In general, the shift was from farming to the retail and wholesale trades (Table 6). Even so, farming was the occupation of one-third of the sample population at the measurable end of their careers. Another tendency, to which it is difficult to attach any significance, was one towards geographical movement so that about 20 percent of the sample changed their place of residence significantly between the beginning and the end of their working life. The explanation of these features of Wisconsin's economic landscape lies in the opportunities and values available to the subjects in making their career choices.

Farming offered the greatest economic opportunity, at least as an entry career, and this was the first choice of 48 percent of the subjects, primarily because most of their fathers were farmers. Farming strongly attracted subjects up to 1895, but the tendency to leave farming for some other occupation increased in 1880 (Table 7). In the cohorts born between 1871 and 1880 (which may be said to have entered farming between 1886 and 1896) the percent leaving was about 50 percent (Table 8). The decline in farm prices and the more favorable opportunities offered by urbanizing economies explain these tendencies. However, farmers of Lutheran affiliation did not respond nearly as strongly to these circumstances as other groups, showing a continuing preference for farming as an occupation. The Lutherans' increasing share of the farming population was complemented by under-representation in all other categories except agricultural processing.

Manufacturing constituted the early career choice for 26 percent of the sample but declined to 19.5 percent of the late careers. Germans were numerically preponderant though substantially under-represented in this field. Most notable for their preference for manufacturing were those whose fathers had industrial careers, especially among those who had migrated to Wisconsin from New England, Canada, and other parts of the United States (excepting New York). These Anglo-Saxons were Protestants of the liturgical affiliation and were frequently well-to-do. Even so, only 15 percent of those starting out in manufacturing did so as owners of their own businesses (Tables 9 and 10).

Manufacturing attracted a disproportionately higher number of first entries only after 1900. Overall, turnover was high: 30 percent to 50 percent who entered left for other occupations. Moreover, few were attracted to manufacturing from other career categories. These circumstances resulted in a net decline of manufacturers as a proportion of the total sample. Early entries usually possessed grade school or high school education, but the group was notable for the high incidence of business school or apprenticeship as a means of preparation, especially for those who were successful in the field in their later careers (Tables 11 and 12). Family connections and/or superior access to capital were probably important to success in manufacturing since those from more humble origins or with family associations other than in manufacturing were less well represented in the industry in their later careers and may have been less able competitors for those reasons. Those from well-to-do manufacturing families were over-represented. The high ratio of executives to ownership (second only to wholesale trade) suggests the continuing importance of capital in this field (Table 13).

Agricultural processing, like manufacturing, used machinery but of a less complex and expensive kind, to add value to materials. Because of differing capital requirements the profile of those active in agricultural processing was substantially different from those in manufacturing. While the lumber, flour and grist mills, cheese and dairy plants, tanneries and canneries, which produced for the rapidly expanding field had increased their total output, they were small. The capital represented by buildings and equipment in lumbering or flour-milling establishments averaged around \$10,000 [3, pp. 206, 290]. For cheese and dairy operations it was substantially less. At the same time, 1900, the capital in buildings and machinery in foundries, iron and steel manufacturing, or paper-making ranged from \$144,000 to over \$1,000,000 [3, pp. 210, 234, 254]. The lower capital requirement for agricultural processing accounts for the entry of persons of more humble background into the

field. The preponderance of Catholics among the early entries and of Lutherans among those who were successful in it in later career indicate a close relationship to farm background. This was one of two fields in which the last born were over-represented and may have been a natural outlet, early in the period, for the youngest sons of large farm families, one which would provide the young man with a start and maintain his geographical proximity to the family. The low ratio of executives to ownership (.31) reinforces the conclusion that relatively low capital requirements influenced access to this career.

There was a high rate of turnover: on the average 59 percent of each five year cohort which entered agricultural processing left it for some other occupation (Tables 8 and 14). Entrants, notably German Catholics with farm backgrounds, often had grade or even high school educations but the field was distinguished by the frequency of apprenticeship or by lack of formal education compared with those in other career categories. Moreover, there was no indication that the apprenticeship led to success or even to survival in agricultural processing.

After 1900 Anglo-Saxon Protestants of the pietistic affiliations (Baptist and Methodists) and of middle-class and well-to-do family backgrounds increased their share in this occupation due, perhaps, to the increasing capital requirements. Other groups with tendencies towards this occupation may have lost their position in this competitive environment which was revealed by the rise in capital requirements towards the end of the period, especially in flour and grist mills, lumber and timber, food preparation, and leather processing [3, pp. 960-62; 4, pp. 515-20].

Because of their variable capital requirements, which depended on the size of the firm, the retail trades offered the greatest attractions as a career category. In later career, 26 percent of the subjects in retailing were still small entrepreneurs; 46 percent owned medium or large firms, but only 20 percent were executives (Table 13). Hence, capital requirements and/or educational achievements could vary, allowing access to the widest range of subjects. Twenty-five percent of those starting owned their own businesses. Business school or college was a significant factor only for those who gained executive status in a larger company. Moreover, the turnover of subjects in retailing was very low, and increasing proportions of each age group entered the field after trying some other occupation. Under these circumstances retailers increased in number and proportional importance, growing from 6 percent to 26 percent of the sample population. In later career, all ethnic

and religious groups except German Lutherans were over-represented to some degree in retailing.

The wholesale trades, though a rapidly growing and distributive career category, compared in profile more closely to manufacturing than to retailing in the types which were attracted to it. German Catholics were numerically superior to all others but Anglo-Saxon Protestants, generally a more prosperous group, were significantly over-represented (Table 4). The wholesale trades showed a distinct tendency towards middle-class or even well-to-do origins in families with wholesaling backgrounds. Only 17 percent of those who began careers in the category did so as owners. The continuing importance of capital this suggests was also indicated by the high ratio of executives to ownership, (1.0) at the end of the period. The wholesale trades were the only other category besides agricultural processing in which the activity of last-born sons was significant.

As Catholics from farm backgrounds increasingly entered this field, the profile changed. After 1910 pietistic Protestants were infrequent while Congregationalists (the wealthiest group in the sample) remained an important presence (Tables 2 and 3). Educational standards, which had been high, increased in importance, indicating that those from farm backgrounds found schooling a necessary means to advancement in the wholesale trades.

CONCLUSION

The study shows the pattern of career development during a period of rapid growth in the secondary and tertiary stages of an economy under special circumstances. Of all the states only Minnesota had a higher proportion of residents of foreign birth or with foreign-born parent(s), and no state had so large a proportion of residents of German background. Moreover, Wisconsin had a higher ranking as an industrial state and almost twice as many industrial establishments as Minnesota. The results of the study show the steady assimilation of the Germans from farming into material processing and distribution though at levels somewhat less than expected from their numerical importance. The major exceptions to this economic assimilation were the German Lutherans whose pronounced preference for agriculture (and somewhat less for agricultural processing) made them substantially under-represented in all other areas. The competitive vigor of the old stock Anglo-Saxon Protestants may be explained by superior access to skills and/or capital associated with a relatively privileged position in the population.

APPENDIX

Biographical Sources

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2. William Bruce, History of Milwaukee City and County, Vols. 2 and 3 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1922).
3. Louis Falge, History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, Vol. II (Manitowoc: Manitowoc Geneological Society, 1976), Reprint of 1912 ed.
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11. Thomas J. Ryan, History of Outagamie County (Chicago: Goodspeed, 1912(?)).
12. Fanny Stone, Racine, Belle City of the Lakes and Racine County, Vol. II (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1916).
13. Jerome Watrous, Memoirs of Milwaukee County (Madison: Western Historical Association, 1909).

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14. Commemorative Biographical Record of the Counties of Brown, Kewaunee and Door (Chicago: J. H. Beers, 1896).
15. Commemorative Biographical Record of Prominent and Representative Men of Racine and Kenosha Counties, Wisconsin (Chicago: J. H. Beers, 1906).
16. Commemorative Biographical Record of the West Shore of Green Bay (Chicago: J. H. Beers, 1896).
17. History of Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, Past and Present, Vol. II (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1912).
18. Memorial and Genealogical Record of Dodge and Jefferson Counties, Vols. 3 and 4 (Chicago: Goodspeed, 1894).

19. Portrait and Biographical Record of Walworth and Jefferson Counties (Chicago: Lake City, 1894).
20. Portrait and Biographical Record of Waukesha County (Chicago: Excelsior, 1894).
21. Washington County, Wisconsin, Past and Present, Vol. 2 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1912).

NOTE

1. The 536 were selected on the basis of occupation from a random sample of 776 biographies. The principal occupational groups excluded from the study were professionals and artisans. Students of the American history survey class at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay completed the questionnaires in the workrooms of the Area Research Center for Northeast Wisconsin in the Spring of 1980. The data was analyzed with the assistance of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, a standard computer program. The class was divided into the same number of groups as there were biographical volumes. To avoid duplication, a group supervisor divided the available biographies among the group, 10 to each student.

REFERENCES

1. 10th Census (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1883).
2. 11th Census (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1895).
3. 12th Census of the United States, 1900 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1902).
4. 13th Census (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1913).

Figure 1. Distribution of Subjects by County

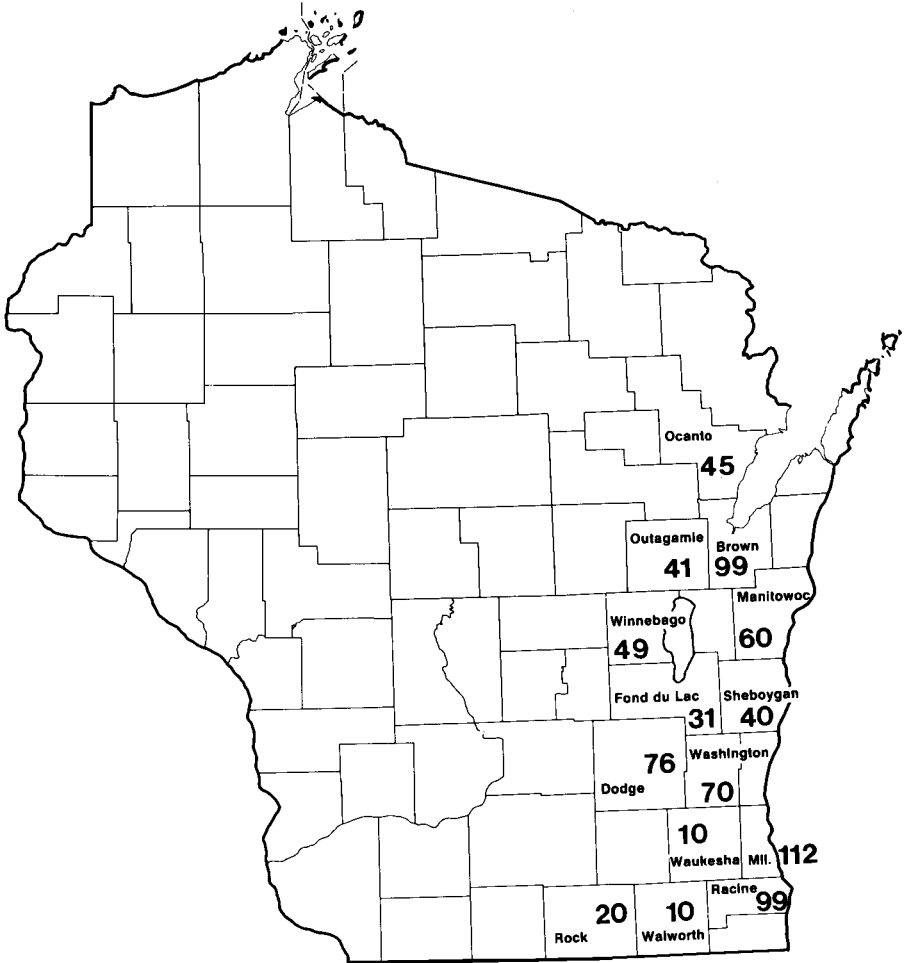


TABLE 1

FATHERS' BIRTHPLACE AND SUBJECTS' RELIGION

Religion	FATHER'S BIRTHPLACE									Row Total
	WI	NY	N. Eng.	US	Ger.	Ire.	U.K.	Other		
	1.	2.	3.	5.	6.	8.	9.	10.		
Catholic	1.	14	5	2	7	50	12	1	26	117
Presbyterian	2.	0	0	1	2	2	0	2	5	12
Congregational	3.	0	5	3	2	4	1	2	2	19
Lutheran	4.	5	0	1	2	68	0	0	10	86
Methodist & Baptist	5.	6	4	4	3	8	1	6	4	36
Episcopal	8.	4	6	1	2	4	2	6	3	28
Other	10.	1	1	0	1	11	0	0	5	19
Not Stated	11.	18	15	10	9	65	7	11	27	162
Column Total		48	36	22	28	212	23	28	82	479

Number of Missing Observations = 57

TABLE 2

FATHERS' BIRTHPLACE AND SUBJECTS' EARLY ECONOMIC STATUS

Early Background	FATHERS' BIRTHPLACE									Row Total
	WI	NY	N. Eng.	US	Ger.	Ire.	U.K.	Other		
	1.	2.	3.	5.	6.	8.	9.	10.		
Poor Working	1.	5	1	2	5	23	4	3	15	58
Working Class	2.	28	20	15	16	142	14	17	46	298
Middle Class	3.	12	9	7	7	41	2	9	20	107
Well-To-Do	4.	4	9	0	3	8	1	2	7	34
Column Total		49	39	24	31	214	21	31	88	497

Number of Missing Observations = 39

TABLE 3

SUBJECTS' RELIGION AND EARLY ECONOMIC STATUS

Early Background	RELIGION								Row Total	
	Catholic	Presbyterian	Congregational	Lutheran	Methodist & Baptist	Episcopal	Other	Not stated		
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	8.	10.	11.		
Poor Working	1.	17	1	0	10	3	0	0	24	55
Working Class	2.	75	10	10	59	24	15	14	90	297
Middle Class	3.	15	3	6	18	9	12	4	37	104
Well-To-Do	4.	6	0	5	2	1	3	0	18	35
Column Total		113	14	21	89	37	30	18	169	491

Number of Missing Observations = 45

TABLE 4

FATHER'S BIRTHPLACE AND SUBJECTS' LATER CAREER

	FATHER'S BIRTHPLACE									Row Total
	WI	NY	N.	Eng.	US	Ger.	Ire.	U.K.	Other	
Later Career	1.	2.	3.	5.	6.	8.	9.	10.		
Farming	16	11	5	5	72	8	12	27		156
Manufacturing	12	9	7	9	44	6	9	14		110
Ag. Processing	7	4	1	1	16	2	1	3		35
Retail Trade	9	9	8	3	53	7	11	24		124
Wholesale Trade	3	3	0	5	17	3	2	14		47
Column Total	47	36	21	23	202	26	35	82		472

Number of Missing Observations = 304

TABLE 5

SUBJECTS' RELIGION AND LATER CAREER

	RELIGION								Row Total
	Catholic	Presbyterian	Congregational	Lutheran	Methodist & Baptist	Episcopal	Other	Not Stated	
Later Career	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	8.	10.	11.	
Farming	34	5	5	44	14	8	8	38	156
Manufacturing	27	6	5	9	8	7	2	46	110
Ag. Processing	9	0	1	7	5	2	3	8	35
Retail Trade	30	6	6	21	12	8	3	39	125
Wholesale Trade	13	0	4	6	2	2	2	18	47
Column Total	113	17	21	87	41	27	18	149	473

Number of Missing Observations = 303

TABLE 6

EARLY AND LATE CAREER AGGREGATES (COMPARE ROW AND COLUMN TOTALS IN EACH CATEGORY)

	LATER CAREER						Row Total
	Farming	Manu- facturing	Ag. Processing	Retail Trade	Wholesale Trade		
Early Career	1.	2.	3.	9.	10.		
Farming	1.	139	16	13	25	8	201
Manufacturing	2.	10	82	2	18	10	122
Ag. Processing	3.	1	3	17	5	2	28
Retail Trade	9.	0	7	1	56	11	75
Wholesale Trade	10.	1	4	0	1	11	17
Column Total		151	112	33	105	42	443

Number of Missing Observations = 333

TABLE 7

SUBJECTS' BIRTH YEAR AND EARLY CAREER, OF THOSE WHO CHANGED CAREERS

Early Career	YEAR OF BIRTH							Row Total
	1860	1865	1870	1875	1880	1885	1890	
Farming	10	23	24	24	14	9	6	110
Manufacturing	6	10	16	10	7	7	2	58
Ag. Processing	4	5	4	5	2	1	0	21
Retail Trade	5	7	3	4	4	1	4	28
Wholesale Trade	3	1	0	3	0	0	0	7
Column Total	28	46	47	46	27	18	12	224

Number of Missing Observations = 61

TABLE 8

BIRTH YEAR AND LATER CAREER, OF THOSE WHO CHANGED CAREERS

Later Career	YEAR OF BIRTH							Row Total
	1860	1865	1870	1875	1880	1885	1890	
Farming	4	7	4	4	2	0	0	21
Manufacturing	7	12	7	4	3	1	2	36
Ag. Processing	3	3	3	6	1	0	2	18
Retail Trade	6	19	17	16	8	5	1	72
Wholesale Trade	6	7	7	5	3	4	6	38
Column Total	26	48	38	35	17	10	11	185

Number of Missing Observations = 100

TABLE 9

OWNERSHIP AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL NUMBER IN OCCUPATION (BASE: EARLY CAREER)

	Owners	Total No.	Occupation	Percent Owners
Manufacturing	21	140		15
Agricultural	10	39		25.6
Retail	22	84		26
Wholesale	3	18		16.6

TABLE 10

OWNERSHIP AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL NUMBER IN OCCUPATION (BASE:
LATE CAREER)

	Owners	Total No.	Occupation	Percent Owners
Manufacturing	51	118		43
Ag. Processing	16	37		43
Retail	93	129		72
Wholesale	21	49		43

TABLE 11

EDUCATION AND EARLY CAREER

	EDUCATION								Row Total
	Att Gr School	Att High School	Some Coll	Grad Coll	Apprentice	Business School	Professional	None	
Early Career	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7	8.	
Farming	70	103	15	14	3	10	11	13	239
Manufacturing	31	52	13	23	5	11	1	1	137
Ag. Processing	7	12	2	6	2	1	2	3	35
Retail Trade	18	35	9	10	2	4	3	0	81
Wholesale Trade	2	7	1	4	0	1	1	0	16
Column Total	128	209	40	57	12	27	18	17	508

Number of Missing Observations = 268

TABLE 12

EDUCATION AND LATER CAREER

	EDUCATION								Row Total
	Att Gr School	Att High School	Some Coll	Grad Coll	Apprentice	Business School	Professional	None	
Later Career	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7	8.	
Farming	54	73	6	3	1	4	0	14	155
Manufacturing	28	49	9	15	5	7	2	1	116
Ag. Processing	7	16	4	5	0	0	0	3	35
Retail Trade	26	44	16	17	3	13	4	0	123
Wholesale Trade	9	16	7	6	1	5	2	0	46
Column Total	124	198	42	46	10	29	8	18	475

Number of Missing Observations = 301

TABLE 13

OWNERSHIP-EXECUTIVE RATIO (BASE: LATE CAREER)

	No. Execs.	No. Owners	Exec./Ownership Ratio
Manufacturing	42	51	.82
Ag. Processing	5	16	.31
Retail	26	93	.28
Wholesale	21	21	1.00

TABLE 14

EDUCATION AND EARLY ECONOMIC STATUS

	EDUCATION								Row Total
	Att Gr School	Att High School	Some Coll	Grad Coll	Apprentice	Business School	Professional	None	
Early Background	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	
Poor Working	1.	34	10	3	7	0	0	6	60
Working Class	2.	72	139	22	24	8	14	8	292
Middle Class	3.	14	45	13	13	3	8	7	107
Well-To-Do	4.	4	12	2	12	1	4	1	38
Column Totals	124	206	40	56	12	26	16	17	497

Number of Missing Observations = 39

TABLE 15

BIRTH YEAR AND EARLY CAREER

Early Career	BIRTH YEAR							Row Total
	1860	1865	1870	1875	1880	1885	1890	
Farming	31	68	51	43	28	17	7	245
Manufacturing	13	35	30	25	13	12	11	139
Ag. Processing	7	9	7	6	5	4	0	38
Retail Trade	14	25	15	13	9	4	4	84
Wholesale Trade	5	4	3	3	2	0	0	17
Column Total	70	141	106	90	57	37	22	523

Number of Missing Observations = 253