



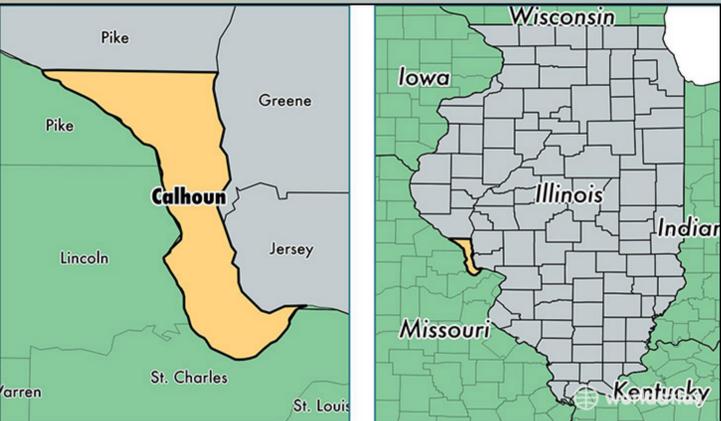
# Calhoun County Landscape, Infrastructure & Cultural Identity

John Jadrich (Illinois State University) and Morgan Tanner (University of Missouri – St. Louis)

## Introduction:

Calhoun County, Illinois, is a unique geographical landscape due to its position between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. This area, which forms a peninsula, is also characterized by the presence of large limestone bluffs in the center that separate the river valleys. Through ethnographic methods, we explore the effects of the landscape in forming a close-knit, family-oriented, and historically deep-rooted cultural identity of the agriculturalists and inhabitants of the county, and how human interaction with both the natural and built environment is evolving as they transition into the future.

## Calhoun County, IL



## Methods:

This exploratory ethnographic study focused on the inhabitants' perceptions of the county's natural landscape, and how human interaction with the landscape may have changed over time. Our data collection methods included various sessions of participant observation, four walking farm tours, eight unstructured interviews, and nine semi-structured interviews performed by ourselves and our fellow REU students to collect qualitative data about the perspectives on cultural identity, history, and agriculture of the region. We gathered this data from key informants who have been chosen within the community through non-probability purposive sampling techniques. We gained insider perspective on the lives of Calhoun County inhabitants through the above ethnographic methods as well as living within the county for 8 weeks ourselves. For analysis we used text analysis and inductive/deductive coding to identify some key themes.

## Analysis:

Through our use of inductive and deductive coding, we have identified four prominent themes that encompass the factors changing the traditional culture present in the county based on the trends in response from various individuals during our surveys. Those themes are:

- Economic Opportunity
- Migration
- Infrastructure
- Connectivity

The results of these codes were identified within the larger context of change through time and are illustrated below with exemplar quotes.

## Most Prominent Themes

### Economic Opportunity:

- **Shift from a goods producing economy to a service economy has caused a decline in profitability in agriculture**
- **Led to an overall economic slump for small scale farmers due to high operation cost**
- **Limestone bluffs have made it near impossible to utilize large amounts of land**

"In agriculture, what is the driving forces to become bigger and produce more and that has Calhoun - just due to its terrain and geographic features - limit that, so we're probably destined to remain a small farming community."

"I want to think jobs [would help the future of the county] but then that's going to change [our] way of life too - it's hard to let loose. We do need businesses back. There used to be a lot of businesses here that left - folded up when the Walmart and different big stores came and I would love to see more mom and pop shops to come back, businesses to come back, but the likelihood of that probably- probably won't happen."

### Connectivity:

- **Due to lack of infrastructure for high-speed internet connection, many have felt locked out of modern digital landscape**
- **More push now to get fiber optic cables for faster internet access - more opportunity to businesses and people who want to work from home**

"We are going to have to start being more technologically-advanced or we're going to be left behind."

"Right now they're trying to get fiber optics in our county so we can have greater access to the internet. Because a lot of people wanting to work from home, and then opportunity work from home, if they just have high speed internet, that's kind of what we're working toward right now and I'm hoping within the next couple years we can get that fixed. As of yet, another one of our goals is to have high speed internet."

"Probably in my lifetime is just communication. It's definitely slower than the outside world but it's still - like I still have landlines because you have to, because the cell phone towers - there's just too many hills. But they're supposed to try and get us fiber optic cables that would speed everything up."

### Migration:

- **Flood of 1993 caused transportation blockage for months**
- **Blockage caused people feel trapped - mass exodus began due to these feelings**
- **Displacement made jobs in Calhoun become scarce, and the commute to surrounding counties was too strenuous**

"So many folks have left and it's due to the floods mostly, and getting jobs in the city. A lot of the farmers left; we don't have near the amount of farmers we used to."

"population changed most after the '93 Flood. It's starting to come back a little bit people are starting to come back and moving back but not at the rate they left."

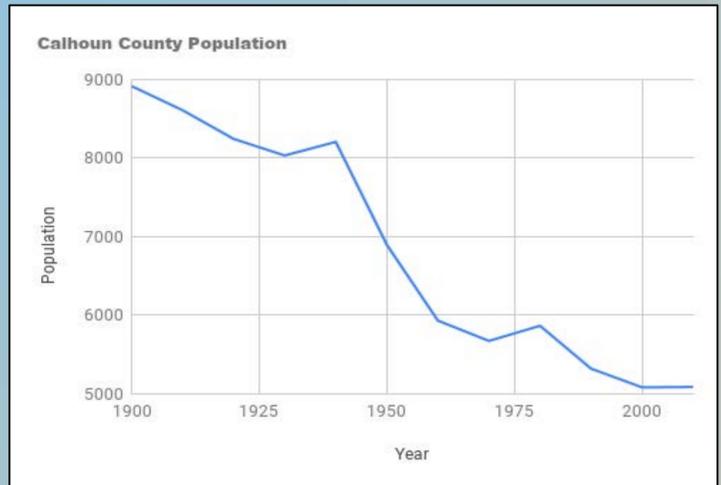
### Infrastructure:

- **The rivers were the main source of transportation for the county until after the turn of the century**
- **One bridge in entire county, heavy reliance on ferries**
- **Opposition to building new bridge in south of county due to fear of becoming suburb of St. Louis**

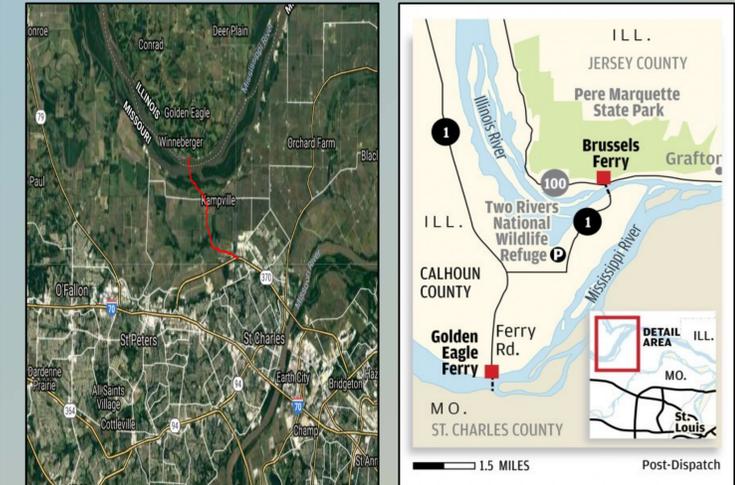
"Bridge construction, if it occurred at the southern end of the county, would turn Calhoun into a suburban area and greatly change the nature of the county."

"It's [Calhoun County] also semi-isolated from the rest of the world with the rivers - and that makes a big difference, you know. From my foreman in South Calhoun, I can be at Lambert Airport in St. Louis in an hour and it's an entirely different world due to the rivers - isolation. There's been various attempts to build bridges across the river, and the economics is terrible - it's a tremendous cost just because his size of the rivers, and also if you build a bridge across the river there's no roads to go anywhere. It's never happened and it probably never will."

"It [the building of the bridge in Hardin] was a blessing to us way back when. Yesterday marked the 25th anniversary of the Levee over here [breaking of the levee during the flood of '93], and we were without a bridge for possibly four, four and a half months and it changed, it - we thought we are slow paced before but boy it just stopped things. And people started scrambling, 'how am I going to get to work?' It separated families."



## Calhoun County Population Graph



## Possible bridge location Location of current ferries

### Conclusions and Future Directions:

Through our research, we interpreted that the geographic isolation of this area has led to a crossroads: to maintain their traditional cultural identity, the people of Calhoun must sacrifice elements of economic development, such as employment growth, that may be aided by infrastructure development. In turn, to benefit from economic and infrastructure development, they must give up a part of their cultural identity that they have held since the mid 1800's. The expression for want of business to upturn the economy is juxtaposed by the apprehension of making Calhoun more accessible, (i.e. a bridge at Golden Eagle connecting to St. Charles County and by extension St. Louis). While this is not a comprehensive study on the perspectives of economic factors affecting the county, we hope that this research can create a jumping point for further research on the topic, as well as help facilitate future community development and infrastructure projects that consider local residents' concerns in the region.

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