The Markezich Family History as a Microcosm of American Immigration and Social Dynamism throughout the 20th Century

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This paper was for Dr. Christopher Post's Historical Geography of the United States and Canada. It examines the history of the author's family and how the spatial dynamics of this history has shaped their families and them as individuals.

The historical geography of the United States of America holds a distinctness rarely found for a place that has only existed for a few hundred years. In this time, millions upon millions of people have left their homes to try and stake out a new existence on this continent. In fact, it is not hyperbolic to say that the United States is a nation of immigrants. Barring those of Native American descent, everyone is somewhere not too distant from immigrants' genes.

To leave out the immigrant’s journey when discussing the historical geography of the United States and those who were a part of it is to miss the point entirely. Emma Lazarus’ famous sonnet located on the Statue of Liberty is the quintessential descriptor of the American ideal and dream. The latter half reads “‘Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp! ’ cries she with silent lips. ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!’”

This description of opportunity, so beautifully expressed, is what many immigrants sought. By no means a part of the huddled masses, my great-grandparents were seeking opportunity and the chance to start a family in America. The story of my family may be unique in its specifics, but it is not in the themes and patterns they were a part of. In this family history I attempt to sketch a view of the American immigrant and the changing of American society over the past century by relaying events, themes, and social and historical phenomena in chronological order since arriving in the United States. There is a reason that the things I discuss will sound familiar without even knowing my family. It is because this story is probably your own.

Bihac and Industry's Calling

George Markezich was born in a very small outer village of the city of Bihac (bee-hotch), on the Croatia side of the modern Bosnia-Croatia border, in 1888. The Markezich family lived on and most likely made a living farming their plot of land. Growing up, George received little education and started working at a young age. The family was devoutly Catholic and attended mass in Bihac (Markezich, Shirley).

It was through this avenue that the family knew the Ivancics, the family of George’s future wife, my great-grandmother, Helen. The Ivancic family was also a working family of modest means that lived in Bihac. The two families arranged for George and Helen to be married upon coming of age. However, this would not take place in Croatia but rather at a later date.
in Chicago, after immigrating to the United States.

Helen’s older brother, Stjepan, later Anglicized to Stephen, had moved to Chicago in 1909. A classic example of chain migration, this was her and George’s connection with America that would ultimately prompt them to emigrate there. The particular reasons for making the move are not known, but it can be reasonably presumed that rural living in a country occupied by foreign invaders—Austria-Hungarians—did not provide one with a rewarding or bountiful livelihood. Helen’s brother had been doing well in the U.S. and had arranged to give the two a place to stay until they acquired the means to strike out on their own (Markezich, Shirley).

Whatever the exact reasons were, the soon to be married Helen and George came to the consensus that America would provide more social mobility and a better environment for starting a family. George immigrated to the United States in 1911 through Ellis Island, where he immediately caught a train to Chicago. Despite Steve “doing well” in America, he and his wife were poor in absolute terms, as was the case with most newly emigrated eastern Europeans. The area in which Steve, and now George, had settled was a neighborhood known as South Deering. South Deering and the adjacent East Side neighborhoods were home to a large and growing Slav, Serb, and Croat population and was one of Chicago’s many ethnic enclaves (Pacyga). Most of the city at the time and up until the 1950’s could be separated very finely into these enclaves wherein immigrant families settled (Markezich, Shirley).

Chicago was booming. Massive amounts of in-migration accompanied with the continuing industrial revolution meant jobs, albeit filthy and backbreaking, were plentiful. It was a low-skilled workers ticket to a better livelihood, though. Most found jobs doing rough, manual labor, working long hours for little pay. This included Chicago’s infamous meat packing industry, and the numerous railroad lines that ran through Chicago. George found a job at one of the docks nearby, along the lake, where he worked for a short time in order to save money. After a number of months, and financial help from Stephen, he was able to buy passage for Helen to come to the U.S. Helen arrived in Baltimore in 1912 and took a train to Chicago. The two continued to live with Stephen and his wife for about a year. The two were married at Sacred Heart of Croatian Church on November 23, 1913 (Crowe; Markezich, Shirley).

The Mobile Masses

If there is one permeating characteristic of Americans throughout the country’s history, it is this: they are always moving. In a society in which mobility is cheap and easy, there is nothing stopping them from doing just that. The newly wedded Markeziches were not an exception and in early 1914, upon hearing that there was work in East St. Louis, they said goodbye to Stephen and his wife and left Chicago.

They and many fellow eastern Europeans moved to East St. Louis and began working at the Illinois Central Railroad. The Illinois Central Railroad was one of the biggest freight railroad companies of the time. It was founded in 1850 when President Fillmore signed a land grant for its construction, making it the first land grant railroad in the country. It was completed in 1856 and was the longest railroad in the world. At the time that George Markezich worked there its lines branched from Chicago to South Dakota, and south to
Mississippi and New Orleans. During the 1920s, the railroad was a major route for southern African Americans moving to the north during the great migration.

Working for Illinois Central, George did mainly outdoor maintenance at their yard in East St. Louis. During his first winter working for the railroad, George was stricken with severe frostbite and was unable to continue working at the company.

Following this, and again after hearing of work to be had nearby in Fairmont City very nearby to the north, George and Helen once again packed up and left. This move, unlike the others, would be permanent. Upon arriving in Fairmont, they found a large Polish and Croatian population and a strong Mexican minority. These three ethnicities still to this day define the city and provide an incredibly unique blend of cultures, traditions, and food. The city also provided a very tolerant atmosphere. Being comprised almost entirely of immigrants closely related in socioeconomic statuses, as well as Fairmont being a small town, meant segregation in living and working arrangements was limited.

Permanent Settlement

George and Helen by this time had saved a decent amount of money and moved into a new, two-story, house that they would be sharing with a family of three. They essentially had the entire downstairs, which is fortunate considering they would begin having what would become a very large family.

George found a job at the American Zinc Company’s factory less than a block from their new house. He would walk to and from the American Zinc plant till he retired some 30 years later (Markezich, Caroline).

Soon after this move, like I mentioned, George and Helen would start to raise a family, which would include eight children. John Markezich, born in 1916 is my grandfather and one of only two of the eight children that would go on to have their own children. John and the rest of his siblings attended the school at Holy Rosary parish, which opened in 1922 and remains an important part of the community to this day. He would also go on to work at American Zinc until its closure in 1967, which coincided with a lot of deindustrialization around the Midwest writ large (EPA; Markezich, Shirley).

It was around this time, when my father and uncles were in their teenage years or entering their twenties, when the family would start moving away from Fairmont City. With the closure of the American Zinc plant, there wasn’t much economic opportunity to be had other than the Garcia Trucking Company, where a few them actually did work for a short period. The timeframe of this history lines up very concisely with some of the broader geographic patterns that happened throughout the United States.

Suburbanization and Deindustrialization

Although the Markezich family has rich historical ties to Fairmont City and East St. Louis, today those ties have been stretched. Of the family, only two remain: Julie and Manda Markezich, my great aunts, who have lived in the family’s original house for the better part of the past century. Except for short stints in which they both held careers outside of the city, a Markezich has always lived in that house. Sadly, the days for which that statement continues to hold true dwindle, and when it passes, the city will be
Markezich-free for the first time since the 1910’s.

The elements pulling this metaphysical knot apart are more than just the obvious one: time. While it’s not unique to my family, or even the United States as a whole, it is one of which most people are more or less aware. Since the end of the Second World War, America and most Western countries have experienced a pattern of population growth and dispersion that is not altogether different from past eras, but the effects of which, in breadth and impact on the landscape, are indeed unprecedented in human history. It was the beginning of mass suburbization.

Let me clarify, though, the statement that it is not altogether different from past eras. The way humans have arranged their settlements has always depended heavily, though not exclusively, on the methods of transportation available at the time period. Whether it is by foot, by horse, by wheel, or by track, these different forms of technology have a massive impact on spatial distribution. So just like the horse brought wide streets and the train brought long, ceaselessly reaching tracks that helped define the connection and dispersion of people in the 19th century, the car helps redefine our settlement patterns in the 20th and 21st centuries. The issue of importance that all these share is that they allowed people—especially the more affluent—to live further from where they work.

The technological and human processes of these changes in transportation can be broken down into three phases:

First, technological breakthrough makes possible not only a new form of transportation, but also the processes by which that form of transportation can be produced and disseminated cheaply. This does not necessarily mean the technology is cheap for an individual to own. In cases of mass transit technologies, density is a crucially important factor; affordability can be achieved through adequate cost-distribution.

Secondly, new infrastructure is built in order to allow for the new form of transportation to be used widely. For example, take the wide avenues of New York City and many cities which developed around the same time. These world renowned streets, planned in 1811, are the result of taking into consideration horse-drawn vehicles, the dominant form of transport at the time.

Thirdly, and lastly, the geographic distribution of people changes commensurate with the advantages that the new technology confers (Glaeser). As I mentioned earlier, each of these junctures in time when a new form of transportation was developed, the main beneficiaries were the affluent. And each technological improvement furthered their ability to sprawl. Edward Glaeser, an economist at Harvard who has focused recently on urban geography observed, “A half-hour commute on foot can bring an average walker only about 1.5 miles; the omnibus easily doubled that range, which enabled the growth of uptown [New York] neighborhoods that catered to the well-off. An omnibus ride may have cost only five to seven cents, but ordinary laborers earned only a dollar a day, so they kept walking. Like the car, buses started off as transportation for the prosperous.”

By selectively speeding the rich, buses began the exodus of the wealthy from the urban core. When everyone walked in New York, the rich lived in Bowling Green, a
central location with easy access to the wharves. After the omnibus, the prosperous were able to commute in from less dense quarters uptown, and the suburban pattern started.” (Glaeser 168)

It is possible to plug the car into this description, and it is quite easy in fact. In 1914, Henry Ford invented perhaps the most important technological aspect of the automobile with regards to its geographic implications: ultra-efficient production, allowing for many to partake in the new technology. Since it was a small, privately owned means of transport, the car had to be affordable for a person to buy, and eventually it was.

As for the medium on which it traveled, the car did not need new infrastructure to immediately make a large impact: it was able to run on the roads produced earlier for horse-drawn carriages and omnibuses. However, although infrastructure investments could be initially deferred because of this, the popularity of the car, along with public policy and social attitudes that encouraged less dense development, did militate toward massive infrastructure spending. This phase can be said to have culminated with President Eisenhower signing the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 into law on June 29, 1956, which called for the construction of some 41,000 miles of interstate highway across the United States (Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating the Interstate System).

The third phase is evidenced in the human distribution patterns of contemporary America. Since the 1950s, city populations have grown slower than national averages, or fell. This has been the trend: those on solid economic footing, as well as those receiving benefits from government policy, e.g. the GI bill, moved away from cities to less dense areas. My family was not an exception.

One by one, the Markezich family, all of whom had grown up in Fairmont City and East St. Louis, moved away to the burgeoning suburbs and exurbs of the area—Collinsville, Maryville, Fairview Heights, Belleville, Glen Carbon, Troy, O’Fallon, Columbia, just to name a few. Again, per the standard effects of suburbanization and deindustrialization, Fairmont City and East St. Louis were not spared from the indignities of urban dereliction and blight.

The two cities still have not recovered from this. Although the greater area is quite racially and economically segregated, the levels reached in East St. Louis are staggering. African Americans make up 96.4% of the population, as reported by the American Community Survey (East St. Louis City, Illinois ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates). 38.6% of all people in the city are under the federal poverty line, including over 50% of all people under the age of eighteen. The median household income is $21,000. Unemployment is 9.8%, and almost 50% of the population is not in the labor force—ten percent below the national participation rate (East St. Louis City, Illinois Selected Economic Characteristics).

As for Fairmont City, most of the Polish and Croatian families, and others varying European descent, have moved away. The population is now comprised primarily of people of Hispanic descent—55%. The economic statistics of Fairmont are better than those of East St. Louis but only marginally. The median household income of Fairmont is just over $34,000 (Fairmont City Village, Illinois Selected Economic Characteristics).
As is common with cities not capable of reorienting to a post-industrial economy, East St. Louis and Fairmont City’s tax revenue has plummeted. With that has come infrastructure in disrepair and services that don’t properly provide for their people. Most of the schools in these two cities have been shut down and the rest have been annexed by statute to the surrounding districts.

Now, no one moves away from their city of birth wanting any of these things to happen. But they do move away, and not only does doing so send areas such as these into decline but it reshapes the human geography of America. The story of my family and its history are congruent with this theme, and so are many.

**Conclusion**

The history of the Markezich family in the United States encompasses years of major change and many aggregate themes. Whether it is the story of a rural people seeking opportunity in the bourgeoning economic centers of the world, the upward social mobility realized by millions of Americans, or the decline of once great cities that people still bear witness to, the Markeziches have been there and played a part in it all. While the story’s specifics are unique to my family, the underlying patterns of it are not.

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