CHAPTER 1

Variation in County Size

Once upon a time....

Fall quarter of 1968 at the University of Oregon, I was trying to settle on a topic for my doctoral dissertation in Sociology.

My advisor, Theodore Anderson, had seen me through a half-dozen promising starts, each of which I abandoned as the initial curiosity, more or less satisfied, gave way to the less interesting and therefore tedious work of writing up the results. My despair over ever settling on a suitable topic led me at one point to a half-hour's pacing the perimeter of my backyard in a cold rain, which I quit doing when I noticed that Zorba, Nancy, Vivian and Angus (my dog and three cats) were trailing along dutifully behind me. The research reported here began with what I thought would turn out to be another false start.

Ted Anderson
Minnesota, May 2001

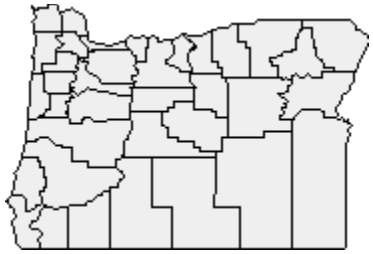
To fill in the time while the topic-selection process was going on — and perhaps to stimulate it — I was reviewing a number of classic works in Sociology, reading for a week or so, then discussing the readings with Professor Anderson. One of these works, Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society*,[1] argued that improved transportation and communication in the industrializing world would someday eradicate the territorial units which had formed the basis of traditional society, so that counties, departments and so on would someday

simply fade away.

We thought it might be useful to study *resistance* to the sort of change Durkheim envisioned. What factors tend to maintain or retain established territorial divisions in spite of the assumed erosive tendencies? We narrowed the topic: specifically, what factors were associated with Oregon voters' resistance to consolidation of *school districts?* The introduction of the school bus in the 1930s and '40s had clearly led toward consolidation of smaller rural districts, as Durkheim would have predicted. But resistance varied from district to district and could prove an interesting topic of study.

While we were looking at vote counts and general population characteristics of Oregon counties, displayed in maps produced by the office of the Secretary of State, Professor Anderson remarked how large the counties were in the southeastern part of the state (see Fig. 1-1). One of us wondered Why? and I was challenged to answer that question by our next meeting.

FIG. 1-1. OREGON



As I left Professor Anderson's office I thought about the only other state in which I had lived, California (Fig. 1-2). The large counties there lay at the extreme north and south ends of the state. To put it the other way around, the smaller counties lay in the old "gold rush country" between San Francisco and Reno.

FIG. 1-2. CALIFORNIA

What could northwestern Oregon and this part of California have in common? One similarity which occurred to me was that each contains the state capital, the location of the legislatures which created the counties in the first place. I formulated this "size-distance" relationship: *county SIZE varies directly with DISTANCE from the state capital.* The greater the distance, the larger the county.

As it happened, I had just been reading a Human Geography textbook assigned for an undergraduate course taught by Professor Anderson. It contained a possible explanation for the size-distance relation:

> we may regard *nearby* areas as *strongly differentiated* and remote areas as uniform, a view reinforced by the curvilinear relations of traveling costs to distance.[2]

We don't need to introduce the economic considerations: the fact is that we do make finer territorial distinctions in our "mental maps" the closer we are to home. When I lived in San Francisco I made fairly fine territorial distinctions with regard to neighborhoods: "the Haight", "Fillmore", "Castro". I might refer to a location in the surrounding Bay Area as "East Bay" or "up in Marin [county]" or "down the Peninsula". More distant entities might be "southern California", "the South", "Latin America".

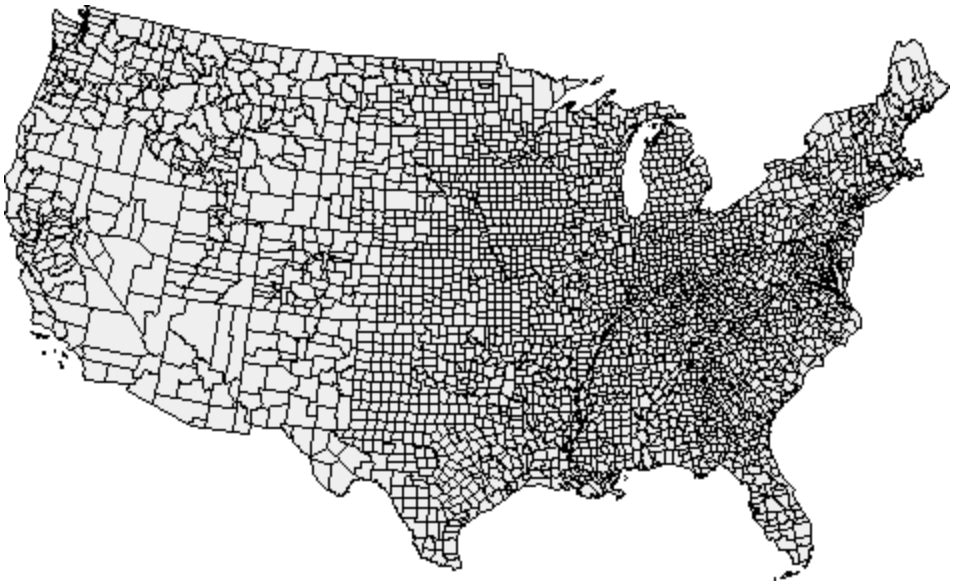
Prince Lucien Cambpell Hall, University of Oregon: my office was ground level center, behind the trees; Professor Anderson's was on the 8th floor, toward the right

If the legislative committees and staffs in Salem and Sacramento viewed their surroundings in this ordinary way when they were designing the local government systems for the state, they would have produced finer territorial distinctions (smaller counties) around the capital, and progressively more uniform, i.e. larger, ones with increasing distance.

The problem of county size hardly seemed to deserve serious attention. I had arrived at the size-distance generalization by the time the elevator had taken me from Anderson's office on the eighth floor down to mine in the basement. I got the quote and citation from Haggett's text as soon as I reached my desk. I immediately returned to the eighth floor to inform my mentor that another potential topic, if that was what he intended, was dead. It looked as though I would be making another stroll around the backyard.

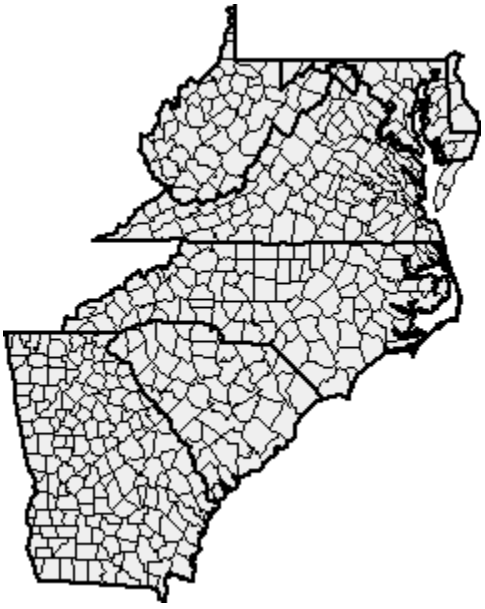
Professor Anderson grinned as I bragged about the ease and speed with which I had dispatched the county size problem — empirical generalization and theoretical explanation in the time it took to ride to the basement! While I was bragging, he was rolling out a large county outline map of the United States (see Fig. 1-3), suggesting that I carefully examine some states other than Oregon and California.

FIG. 1-3. COUNTIES IN THE UNITED STATES



In particular, he called attention to several Southern states (Fig. 1- 4). These showed counties with little variation in size, counties which were in fact uniformly small. Since the dependent "variable" **size** was approximately a constant, the independent variable **distance** was irrelevant. The size-distance relation was dead, not because I was bored with it but because it didn't exist.

FIG. 1-4. THE SOUTH



Well, there *was* a size-distance relation in Oregon and California. and apparently in such states as Maine (distance from Augusta), Florida (Tallahassee) and Utah (Salt Lake City). And there *wasn't* a size-distance

relation in the South (and also, it appeared, in much of the Midwest). Perhaps the variable to be investigated ought to be the degree to which the size-distance relation existed: Why was it present in some states and not in others? It had to be part of some larger picture of variation in county size.

> The world always makes the assumption that the exposure of an error is identical with the discovery of truth -- that the error and truth are simply opposite. They are nothing of the sort. What the world turns to, when it is cured on one error, is usually simply another error, and maybe one worse than the first one.
>
> H. L. Mencken

I found a table of states[3] showing county size within each state (Table 1-1). From it I developed a rough typology of states with regard to county size. I wanted to see if this suggested any new approaches.

TABLE 1-1. DISTRIBUTION OF COUNTY SIZE (sq.mi.) BY STATE

	Under 200	200 -399	400 -599	600 -799	800 -999	1,000 -1,499	1,500 -1,999	2,000 -4,999	5,000 & over
AL	-	-	12	34	12	8	1	-	-
AZ	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2	10
AR	-	-	15	42	15	3	-	-	-
CA	1	-	4	7	4	12	6	17	7
CO	2	3	3	6	6	11	12	20	-
CT	-	1	2	4	1	-	-	-	-
DE	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	-	-
FL	-	5	19	19	8	11	3	2	-
GA	21	79	46	10	3	-	-	-	-
ID	-	-	8	3	2	12	7	10	2
IL	2	28	36	21	10	5	-	-	-
IN	5	37	48	2	-	-	-	-	-
IA	-	3	75	17	4	-	-	-	-
KS	1	2	19	37	31	15	-	-	-
KY	16	70	30	4	-	-	-	-	-
LA	1	8	14	19	12	10	-	-	-
ME	-	2	2	1	2	1	2	5	1
MD	1	10	10	3	-	-	-	-	-
MA	3	1	4	3	2	-	1	-	-
MI	-	3	44	15	11	8	2	-	-
MN	1	3	31	23	9	9	3	7	1
MS	-	-	50	26	6	-	-	-	-
MO	-	3	57	41	13	1	-	-	-
MT	-	-	-	2	2	7	12	27	6

NE	-	7	43	17	11	9	-	5	1
NV	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	5	9
NH	-	1	2	2	3	-	2	-	-
NJ	4	9	6	1	1	-	-	-	-
NM	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	19	8
NY	6	7	11	12	9	13	3	1	-
NC	2	35	38	15	10	-	-	-	-
ND	-	-	-	5	9	24	9	6	-
OH	-	5	74	9	-	-	-	-	-
OK	-	-	14	24	20	13	4	2	-
OR	-	-	2	5	2	4	6	12	5
PA	3	8	19	13	14	10	-	-	-
RI	3	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
SC	-	3	19	14	5	5	-	-	-
SD	-	-	17	8	14	15	9	6	-
TN	6	30	45	14	-	-	-	-	-
TX	3	7	13	31	123	58	8	10	1
UT	-	1	1	4	-	4	4	10	5
VT	1	-	2	9	2	-	-	-	-
VA	37	40	36	7	3	1	-	-	-
WA	1	2	1	4	3	4	11	12	1
WV	5	21	19	6	2	2	-	-	-
WI	-	8	16	15	16	15	1	-	-
WY	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	5
US	126	444	910	555	401	294	108	196	62

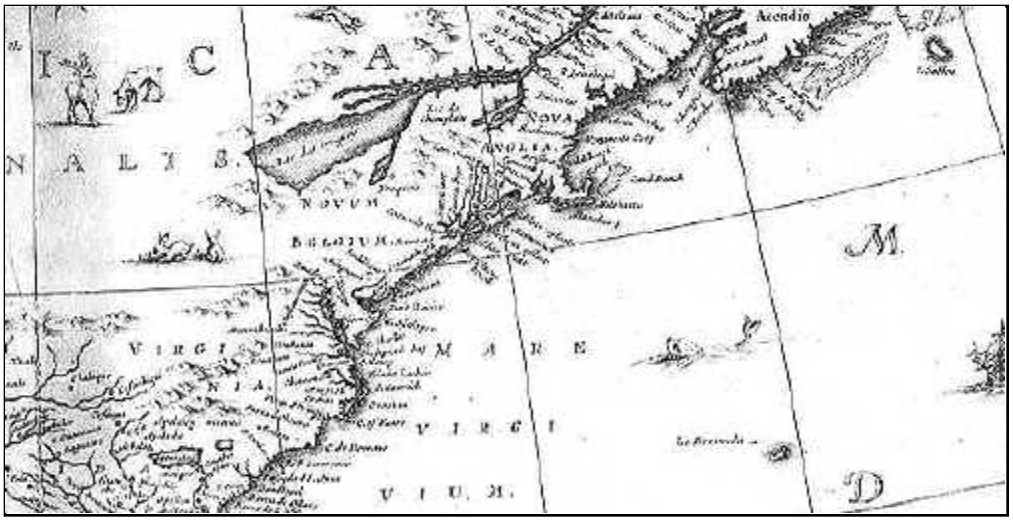
It became evident that, at least to some degree, there was both an historical and a geographic pattern to the typology. In general, the eastern and older states were in the small-county categories. Western and newer states were in the large-county ones. It occurred to me that county government might have functioned differently from one region or time period to another, so I next looked into the development of the county government system in the United States.

TABLE 1-2. STATES GROUPED BY PATTERNS OF COUNTY SIZE	
I. None larger than 1,000 sq.mi.	Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont
II. Few larger	Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Virginia West Virginia

III. Many larger, many smaller	Florida, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Wisconsin
IV. Many larger	California, Colorado, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Washington
V. All larger	Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming

GROWTH OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT

I was surprised to find how little had actually been written about the development of county government. The works I consulted[4], while hardly exhaustive, all tell pretty much the same story. They each begin with a distinction between two types of local government during colonial times, the one based on the town as the fundamental unit, the other based on the county. The former is referred to as the "New England" or "Massachusetts" type, the latter as the "Southern" or "Virginia" type. There are several intermediate types. What follows is a brief summary of the development of these types.



detail from *America septentrionalis* [Hondius 1640]

i.e., "North America" — notice "Nova Anglia" and "Virginia"
source: Rare Maps - University of Georgia

Southern Type

The first counties in North America were formed in Virginia in 1634. The settlers there, finding a mild climate and fertile soil, came rapidly to depend upon agriculture and tobacco exports for subsistence. Tobacco cultivation produced a plantation system of settlement in which towns generally failed to develop in spite of government efforts to stimulate their growth. Governmental power, originally concentrated in the Governor and Council of the Virginia Company at Jamestown, was gradually decentralized. In 1618 "monthly courts" were held in the outlying plantations. In 1619 "incorporations," special units of military organization, were formed in outlying areas. By 1631 the jurisdiction of the monthly courts generally coincided with those of the incorporations, thus fusing judicial and police functions. Parishes, which performed both religious and civil functions, served as subdivisions of these larger districts.

The Federalist, title page; source: New York Public Library

With the creation of counties the "monthly court" became the "county court," and its justices performed all the judicial and administrative functions not performed by the parishes. "Court day" had by this time become a major social event: the people of a county used the day not only to settle their differences, (even the smallest of which seem to have come before the court) but also to exchange news and to arrange trade agreements. With the creation of the county the centralized duties of the Provost-Marshall

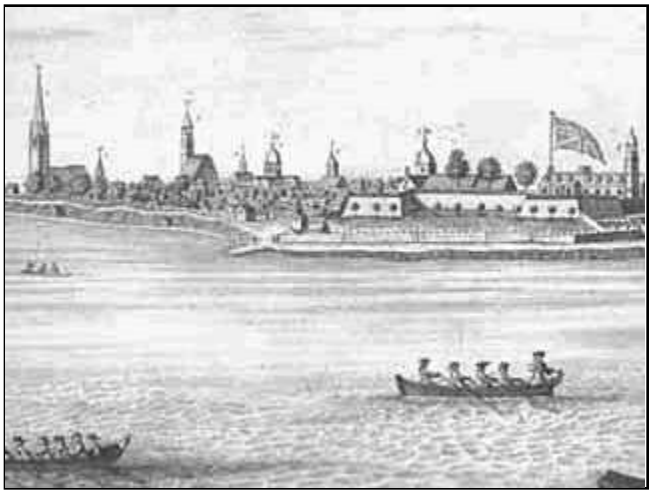
Generall (sic) at Jamestown were transferred to the newly created Sheriffs. Other county officers included a clerk of the court, surveyor, coroner, and several constables, most serving without pay. The county also served as the unit of representation in the colonial House of Burgesses and as a unit of military organization.

A host of tasks was assigned to the county, from the construction and maintenance of roads to the regulation of taverns, and from workhouse construction to ridding the region of wolves. Several counties supported free schools. By 1700 the counties of Virginia, source of the "Southern type", were performing most of their present-day functions. What remained in their development was a further proliferation of offices, paid rather than honorary officials, and an increased complexity of organization.[5]

New England Type

The New England type, in contrast, emphasized the town over the county in matters of local government; the county performed few functions other than its minimum assignment, the administration of justice. The settlers in New England found a severe climate and rocky soil; they turned to fishing and shipping for sustenance. In contrast to the Anglican settlers in Virginia with their diocesan or regional form of church governance, the New Englanders had a congregational form of organization, and they settled in towns rather than on scattered plantations.

In parallel to Virginia, the central government at Boston established "quarter courts" in outlying towns, the first four in 1635. These were referred to as "county courts" by 1639, though no county governments had as yet been established. Local government affairs were already in the hands of "town meetings". Counties were established as judicial units in 1643; a board of representatives from the towns of


New York, 1690. source: Library of Congress

a county was established in 1650 for purposes of tax equalization; the office of county treasurer was added in 1654; and in 1691 sheriffs were assigned as keepers of the jails and chief officers of the courts. Except for these judicially related functions, local government was left to the towns. These were responsible, for example, for highways, poor relief, public health services, schools, tax collection and elections. As its name implies, this type came to prevail throughout New England.

Middle or Mixed Type

The "Middle" type refers to the kind of local government developed in New York and Pennsylvania. While there were some differences between the two states, in general it can be said that they represented a blend of the Southern and New England types. The county boards handled functions beyond the administration of justice, but the constituent towns also played important roles.

In **New York**, under the Dutch West India Company, large tracts of land could be secured by the patroons if a colony of fifty persons or more could be established; these landholders exercised decentralized governmental powers over their estates. After conquest by the English, towns were recognized in 1665 as the basic unit of local government, but judicial districts called "ridings" were established; These comprised several towns and were presided over by a sheriff. Actual counties, with justices exercising judicial and administrative functions, were established in 1683. A board of supervisors was

established (one elected from each town) in 1691 to levy taxes for local purposes. The administrative functions of the justices were gradually transferred to this body.

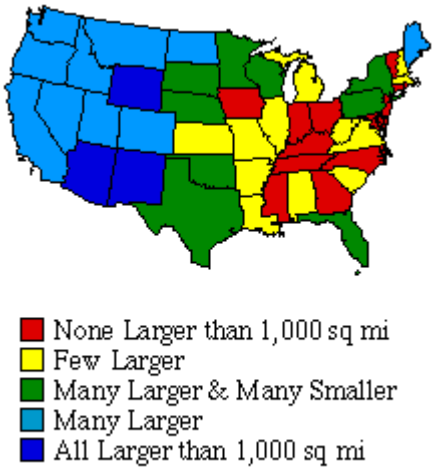
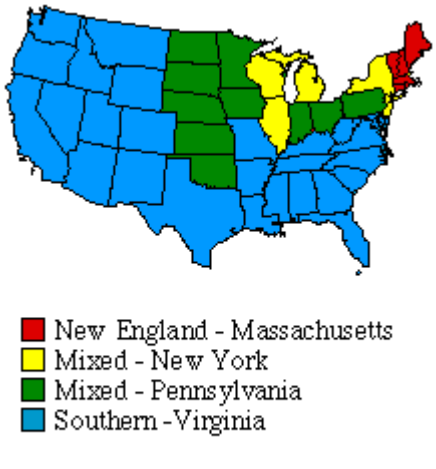
The result of these developments is that the towns in New York (which had their own elected supervisors, clerks, constables, assessors, surveyors and overseers of the poor) were more important than were those of Virginia; and the counties, with their boards of supervisors, exercised more administrative authority than did the county courts of the Massachusetts variety.

The so-called "commissioner system" of **Pennsylvania** was similar to the "supervisor system" of New York. Counties were formed there in 1682; unlike New York, towns had not developed very fully. In 1726 the responsibility of the justices for taxation was taken by a board of three commissioners, elected at large. As in New York, this board gradually assumed all non-judicial administrative duties. Later, as towns became more significant in Pennsylvania, borough government were developed for them.

The Southern type of local government came into general use throughout the southern Colonies; the New England pattern prevailed in the region of that name; and the Middle pattern was found in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Fig. 1-6 shows the diffusion of these basic patterns through the rest of the United States. In general, diffusion reflects the patterns of westward migration, although the Southern type came to predominate through the Far West (independent of migration patterns). South Carolina technically had no counties until Reconstruction in 1868; it was governed by very large districts called "ridings". There were unique early forms of local government in such states as Florida, Louisiana, Texas and California, owing to Spanish, French and Mexican influences; but the patterns finally adopted were those indicated in Fig. 1-6 [6].

Conclusion?

After reviewing this development I was in a position to determine whether differences in function accounted for the distribution of the states shown in the typology developed earlier. The answer, as shown in comparing Fig. 1-5 with Fig. 1-6, was that differences in type of local government were *unrelated* to variation in county size.

Fig 1-5. SIZE group	Fig 1-6. government TYPE
	
None Larger than 1,000 sq mi Few Larger Many Larger & Many Smaller Many Larger All Larger than 1,000 sq mi	New England - Massachusetts Mixed - New York Mixed - Pennsylvania Southern - Virginia

The "Southern type" includes one of each of the five typology categories: Kentucky (none larger), Missouri (some larger), Oklahoma (many larger, smaller), California (many larger), and Arizona (all larger). The "New England type" includes Vermont (none larger), New Hampshire (some larger), and Maine (many larger, smaller). Clearly, ***type does not predict size***.

"Many larger" includes Maine (New England), North Dakota (Mixed) and Colorado (Southern). "None larger" includes Connecticut (New England), Ohio (Mixed), and Georgia (Southern). So the converse is also true: ***size does not predict type***.

The size-TYPE relation was no more tenable than the earlier supposed size-DISTANCE relation. Explaining county size remained a problem.

Next Chapter

Notes:

[1] Emile Durkheim. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by George Simpson. Glencoe: The Free Press. 1964(1893).

[2] Peter Haggett, *Locational Analysis in Human Geography*, 38, London: Edward Arnold. 1965 (emphasis added).

[3] William Anderson, *The Units of Government in the United States: an Enumeration and Analysis*, 24, Chicago: Public Administration Service. 1945.

[4] Some of the principal ones were: Herman G. James, *Local Government in the United States*. New York: Appleton. 1921. Kirk H. Porter, *County and Township Government in the United States*. New York: Macmillan. 1922. John A. Fairlie and Charles M. Kneier, *County Government and Administration*. New York: Century. 1930. Arthur W. Bromage, *American County Government*. New York: Sears. 1933. Lane W. Lancaster, *Government in Rural America*. New York: Van Nostrand. 1937. Paul W. Wager, *County Government Across the Nation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina. 1950.

[5] see Albert Ogden Porter, *County Government in Virginia: A Legislative History, 1607-1904*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1947:342 for a table showing the growth in organizational complexity.

[6] adapted from John A. Fairlie and Charles M. Kneier, *County Government and Administration*, 109, New York: Century. 1930. Note: several midwestern states show two types of local government in the same state; two counties in Washington State (Whatcom and Spokane) were of the Mixed (Pennsylvania) type.