

COUNTY and TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT

Compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Illinois for the Americanism Committee of the American Legion Auxiliary, Department of Illinois

Townships and counties in the Middle West are somewhat artificial political units. Shortly after the Revolutionary War the United States acquired that vast tract of land west of the Allegheny Mountains and north of the Ohio River known as the Northwest Territory. When this territory was subdivided counties and townships were created as well as states.

Division into states came more or less naturally, aided by such boundaries as rivers in some places, and by the associations of the early settlers. Counties, too, though their boundaries were often artificial, grew largely through groupings of settlers. But both counties and townships were created as convenient divisions of state government for local administration.

TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT IN ILLINOIS

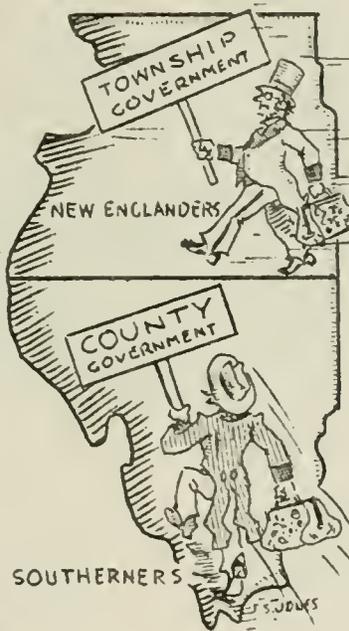
The term "township" has three meanings in Illinois. The first is the so-called Congressional township. In opening the public lands to settlement, Congress ordered them surveyed into townships, each six miles square, and each township further subdivided into sections one mile square. These townships and sections are purely for the purpose of describing land locations. They are not units of government.

A second form of township is the school township, usually the same in area and boundaries as the Congressional or land township. It is a unit of the government in that it provides for the schooling of minor children in

its area.

The third and most active type is the political township or town. Its boundaries do not necessarily correspond to the land townships, but may include parts of more than one land township.

New England Versus the South



The early history of Illinois is reflected in the citizens' attitude toward township government. The southernmost counties of the state were settled first, chiefly by people from southern states. These settlers followed their accustomed governmental pattern in which the county was the smallest sub-division of the state.

Most of those who came into the northern part of the state were from New England and the Middle Atlantic states, where they had become familiar with the town or township form of local government; consequently, these settlers favored the type of government they had known.

Although in its constitution of 1848 Illinois provided for the establishment of townships as governmental units, the requirements were optional. Seventeen counties in Illinois, therefore, still do not have township government. They are: Alexander, Calhoun, Cass, Edwards, Hardin, Johnson, Massac, Menard, Monroe, Morgan, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Scott, Union, and Wabash. Two others, Henderson and Williamson; adopted township government in 1907,

Williamson subsequently returning to the non-township form.

Township Officers

The most important officer in the township is the supervisor. He has charge of poor relief, and is custodian of the road and bridge fund, and of all other township funds not controlled by such special taxing agencies as the library board, and the school, mosquito abatement and other districts. He is ex officio a member of the county board (except in Cook County), and has charge of township elections and meetings. He may have as assistants other supervisors who are members of the county board but have no specific duties in the township. The number of assistant supervisors varies according to population.

Other officers of the township are the clerk, the assessor, and the highway commissioner. Each township elects at least two justices of the peace, but all such justices have county-wide jurisdiction. In addition, they serve, with the supervisors and town clerk, as the Town Board of Auditors.

Good and Bad Features in Township Government

The New England town meeting, often highly praised as an instrument of self-government, was the ideal of the pioneers who sought to give every man a voice in local affairs. Unfortunately, our Illinois townships have not achieved this ideal. Annual town meetings are held the first Tuesday in April. All legal voters are privileged to attend, transact business, and legislate for the township. Actually, however, most of those who turn up at the meetings come because they have selfish political interests, or "axes to grind."

Township organization is also cumbersome. In populous counties the largest number of township supervisors makes an unwieldy county board. Necessary co-operation between township and county governments often is difficult to obtain.

On the other hand, township organization brings government closer to the people in rural districts. There are less likely to be neglected districts in the county when the citizens can fix the responsibility directly on local officers, and can make their will known quickly and informally. In spite of additional expense and trouble, these gains may be worth the cost.

County Government in Illinois

A county not under township organization has a governing body of three commissioners elected by the entire county. This body also functions as a board of health and a board of review.

In both township and non-township county organization the county is the chief agency for the administration of state laws. Among its functions are administration

of finance, administration of justice and preservation of peace, tax collection, maintenance of schools, health regulation, distribution of property of deceased persons, construction and maintenance of roads and bridges.

In addition to the above-named duties, the county board (or commission) makes appropriations and levies taxes to meet them. It also builds and keeps up the necessary county buildings, and institutions, such as the courthouse, jail, hospital, poor farm or almshouse.

County Officers

Besides board members or commis-



sioners, county officers are: state's attorney, sheriff, coroner, clerk, treasurer, superintendent of schools, auditor, recorder, surveyor, public administrator, county superintendent of highways, and county superintendent of public welfare. The three last-named are selected upon concurrence of the county board and state officials; the others are chosen by popular vote.

Each county also has one county judge and one clerk of the county court. A county of more than 70,000 population may have in addition a probate judge and clerk of the probate court.

Other Units of Local Government

Because of the state constitution limits the taxing power of the counties, some desired local improvements can be had only by setting up special units of government to take care of the needs. This has resulted in the formation of a large number of "districts," with specific taxing and administrative powers. They are not parts of county governments, but usually have some connection with them.

Road districts are found in counties lacking township organizations. Each district elects a road commissioner and clerk, the former corresponding to the township road commissioner.

Land owners may request the formation of a drainage district which would construct drains, ditches, or levees for sanitary, agricultural, or mining purposes. Petitions must be signed by a majority of those holding at least one-third of the owners of more than half the land.

Forest preserve districts may be needed in counties having natural forests. Other special taxing agencies include park, mosquito abatement, fire protection and sanitary districts. The last-named are generally for the purpose of sewage disposal and protection of water supply.

All these districts have their commissioners or trustees, and add to the complexity of government in Illinois.

The Citizen's Place in County and Township Government

With local government split into a multitude of separate units, the citizen who tries to keep informed on what his public servants are doing is at times more than a little bewildered. Not only must he keep an eye on the elected and appointed officials of his municipality (city or village), but also upon a host of township and county officers and commissioners. The number of special boards and commissions tends to increase rather than decrease, adding to the citizen's confusion.

Suggestions for reform, have been made, but little can be done under the present state constitution. Efforts in recent years to revise the constitution have failed, and reform, if it is to come, is still a long way off.

The citizen must make the best of it by taking every opportunity to make his voice heard and his influence felt in his local governmental units: city, village, township, school district, and county. By familiarizing himself with the functions and duties of each unit, by vigilance at elections and town meetings, and by insisting upon good government, he will come to realize the old truth that we get the kind of government our actions deserve.

Cook County Government

Nearly half the people of the state live in Cook County. Here a combination of city ways and small-town life (as found in the suburbs) complicates the already knotty problem of government.

Seventeen counties have non-

township organization; eighty-four have township organization, but Cook County has a combination of both forms. Within the city of Chicago there are eight townships which have lost practically all governmental powers. The townships outside the city limits have the usual township organization, except that their supervisors are not members of the county board. County affairs are administered by a board of fifteen commissioners, ten of whom are elected by the city, and five by the territory outside the city.

Cook County voters elect, in addition to the commissioners, a long list of officials, including the county clerk, county treasurer, county recorder, sheriff, coroner, superintendent of schools, state's attorney, and all the judges and clerks of the circuit, superior, and probate courts.

An enumeration of all the governmental units in Cook County is almost incredible. There are 88 cities, villages and towns; 210 school districts, 30 townships, 34 park districts, 3 sanitary districts, 40 drainage districts, 2 mosquito abatement districts, 1 public health district, and 1 driveway maintenance district.* The total is well over 400. Since each unit has at least three officers, administrators of the county's governmental affairs make up a small army. Fortunately, no one citizen of the county is subject to all the units, although, if he lives in Chicago, he is ruled by a large number. The multiplicity of jurisdictions, many of them overlapping, makes for waste and inefficiency.

* Source, Illinois Voters' Handbook, 1939.

Ardent reformers have urged various plans for cutting down this army of officials and "streamlining" the whole county. However, the suburban areas are skeptical of anything that would draw them into closer union with city politics, and many thoughtful citizens have doubts as to the value of such a combination of powers.

Public Institutions in Cook County

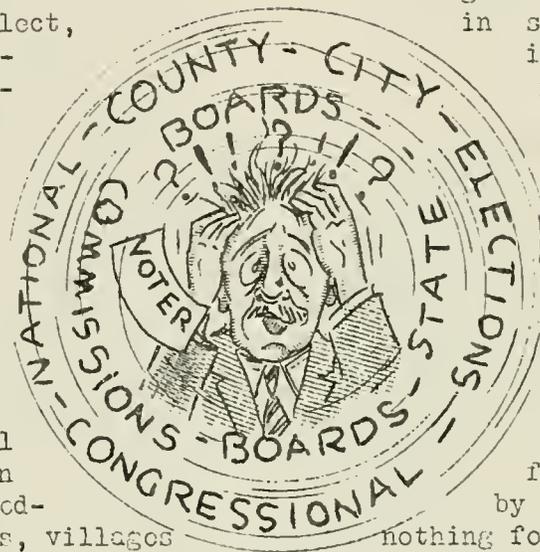
Because of its huge population, Cook County must maintain more and larger institutions than are found in some states. Largest, yet inadequate to the demands made upon it, is the Cook County Hospital. This institution includes a general hospital, a tuberculosis unit, and a separate department for the temporary care of the insane. A staff of 155 physicians serves the hospital without pay. There are 102 internes, chosen from graduates of first-class medical schools by examination, who receive nothing for their services but board and lodging. The Illinois Training School for Nurses, run in conjunction with the hospital, supplies 200 nurses in training. Bed patients average 3,100, and an even larger number passes through the out-patient department, (clinic and dispensary service).

The Oak Forest institutions include the hospital for needy tubercular patients and the home for old people.

In another group of institutions at Dunning, ten miles northwest of the heart of Chicago, are an infirmary, a hospital for the insane, and a county farm.

The Juvenile Detention Home has custody of dependent, truant, and delinquent children awaiting action of the Juvenile Court.

The county jail, where adults



are confined while waiting trial or serving sentence for certain types of offenses, contains more inmates than any state prison.

The Bureau of Public Welfare consolidates the social service functions of the county through six divisions: the Family Service Division, including blind relief, old age assistance, home service of county physicians and a summer camp; the Institutions Service Division which determines admissions to Oak Forest and Cook County Hospital; the Court Service Division, which provides social services required by the courts; the Rural Public Health Nursing Service, and the Behavior Clinic of the Criminal Court, which gives psychiatric examinations when required by the court.

Where the Money Comes From

In all counties of the state

large sums of money are needed to carry on the public services administered by the county government. Generally speaking, the counties have but one main source of revenue, the tax levy on real property. Taxes also are levied on personal property, but are not highly productive, because of exemptions and concealments. A few governmental agencies derive funds from licenses and fees for privileges and services. In Cook County and other populous counties these fees amount to substantial sums.

The tax rate is figured on each one hundred dollars of assessed valuation. Assessed valuation is a percentage of the actual valuation of the property, and is not uniform throughout the state. While one-third is considered the average base, one county may have a 25 per cent valuation in contrast to another county's 75 per cent.



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