

DOWN ON THE FARM: CHANGES IN THE JACKSON PURCHASE AFTER WORLD WAR I

Kathryn H. Pasco

The Jackson Purchase Region of Kentucky is a land apart. Added to the Commonwealth more than twenty-five years after statehood, the region is insulated on three sides by rivers. Enclosed by the Ohio, Mississippi, and Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, contact with the world outside the Purchase was limited. Until recent years the area could be reached only by boat or train. The isolation of the Purchase dulled the sharp edge of change in the region, as evidenced in those transformations which characterized the decade after World War I.

Historically, World War I marks the beginning of modern American society. Rapid and dramatic economic, cultural, and political changes occurred throughout the nation. The needs of war resulted in increased expectations and privileges for new segments of the population. With man being drawn into national service, industry geared up for production of war materials and needed new sources of labor. Women and minorities were brought into the work force in large numbers for the first time. Closely regulated by government, business and agriculture were granted special incentives and subsidies to insure high levels of production.

After the war the nation was faced with the difficult task of converting a war-time economy into a peace-time economy. Guided by the hopes and dreams of the new consumer class, American business passed through the least painful of these conversions. Manpower skills and capital used to produce war materials were transferred to items such as automobiles, commercial planes, farm machines, and household appliances. These new consumer goods both fueled the economy and dramatically altered the American lifestyle.

In contrast, the farmer faced a harder transition. Supplied with federal subsidies and a ready market, farm production had expanded during the war. Peacetime brought a loss of these subsidies, an increase in the number of farmers as soldiers returned home, and a decrease in the world market for American agricultural goods. The result was a decline in the prices paid for farm commodities.

The push-pull effect of bad farm conditions in agricultural areas and prosperity in industrial cities led to a shift in population. Large urban/industrial areas absorbed these transplanted agrarians, ushering in a new competitiveness. White southerners and blacks, as well as immigrants, fought for a share of available jobs with women who had entered the workforce during the war and with veterans wanting to return to work after the war.

The effects of World War I not only altered the economic structure of society, but also brought a new awareness of the world outside. Eager for news about the war, people placed great demands on communication sys-

tems which expanded to meet this need. These communication systems continued to grow and become more sophisticated after the war.

Newspapers searched for innovations to hold the interest of wartime readers. Magazine supplements, comics, and family living sections were provided. Radio stations and telephone companies improved and expanded their services. Movies began to bring far away placed close to home.

In the years following World War I, the Purchase managed to escape many of the upheavals which befell the rest of the nation. Traumas resulting from altered family roles, immigration, and industrialization by-passed the region. The lack of roads across the surrounding rivers restricted the immigration of new people and new industries. The slow infiltration of modern farming techniques retarded economic growth. The result of all this is an area with a solid cultural identity, highlighted by strong family and religious ties.

It was not until twenty-five years later, after World War II, that many of these influences seriously affected the Jackson Purchase. Of the changes which did occur in the years between the wars, the most dramatic was in falling agricultural prices, and to a lesser degree, in the long distance influence of northern industrialization.

How were these changes felt by area residents? The Forrest C. Pogue Oral History Institute at Murray State University asked this question as part of a series of interviews for the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project.

For Purchase veterans, the return home "was awful happy." But, while many of the national changes were not observed in the Purchase, the drop in the agricultural industry was keenly felt. One returning veteran found it hard to sell his crop. "Everything was oh just as cheap as dirt. You couldn't get any prices for anything." Faced with a depressed market for his crops, the farmer was caught by rising prices for his seed corn.

Well for instance, [seed] corn was, oh, about 50¢ per bushel at that time [1917]...and when I come back from the service...everything had gone up. We had prices I remember very well. When I come back and was gonna make a crop that year [1919], I paid \$12.00 a barrel for [seed] corn, that's \$2.00 a bushel...

"Everything (was) much higher." Another resident agrees, "We didn't spend too much back then," he noted. "Money was scarce." Throughout the region cut-backs were made. People "had to do without so much" after the war.

During this same time, transportation facilities increased. For those who had been away from home, the effects of more roads and better transportation were apparent. Better roads and more cars allowed people to "get a little closer together." For the first time communities such as Paducah and

Fulton, Clinton and Murray were drawn into contact. One gentleman felt "the country got smaller so to speak. Of course transportation--automobiles...was increasing. I recall that in around 1900, there was only two cars in Paducah." By the 1920's, a Murray car dealer related, "I was just sellin' cars. I'd sell...six a week."

Even though it was an isolated area, changes were found in subtle shifts in lifestyle, such as a new family car, or a battery radio in the sitting room. For others, exposure to the outside world served to pull them away from their former lifestyle. Many men were no longer content to live and work on the farm. One gentleman, a Murray businessman for the past fifty years, recalled, "They all wanted to get to town as much as they could. They had the feeling that they could do better in town you know."

For some residents this attempt to "do better" meant merely a move into the nearest county seat. For others the move was more drastic. The booming automobile industry combined with bad farm conditions to create an out-migration of Purchase citizens. "There was a rush to Detroit from a lot of people to make a fortune." For those determined to leave the Purchase, "that was the only place they ever thought about going, to Detroit." However, in the Jackson Purchase the pioneer spirit is strong. Even in bad economic times, there were many who, "stayed [to] tough it out."

While most of the migrants left for economic reasons, there were those who, having seen the outside world, were too restless to return and stay at home. Many area servicemen spent time in France during the war. As one gentleman explained it, the French were known to have "loose morals," and thus corrupted by their experiences, these young Kentuckians grew restless and were unwilling as a popular song put it then, to stay "down on the farm."

In the years just after the war, the Purchase area avoided most of the upheavals which rocked the rest of the nation. Change was destined to come to the area, however. The region's geographic isolation could not stop the economic tailspin of the nation, nor could it block the attraction of products from the automobile industry. But it awaited the advent of the Tennessee Valley Authority, in the 1940's to complete the changes started by World War I. In the 1950's, the T.V.A. completed the construction of its largest dam on the eastern boundary of the Jackson Purchase. Bridges were built across lakes and the area was at last open to the outside world. Better transportation systems and mechanized farming spread throughout the region. As electricity was made available to the area, industry began to move in, providing more and different jobs. Tourism, resulting from the lake system, became a major industry in this western outpost of the Commonwealth.

Even in its day of isolation, the Purchase had its share of dreamers and innovators. Recognizing the advantages derived from orderly change, many Purchase residents worked to bring T.V.A. to the region. One Murray resident remembers: "I was right there fighting for it (T.V.A.), and I made

three trips to Washington, D.C. in my car with a load of people from here." Why did they succeed? "We just showed 'em we was it."

I. Oral history sources:

Oral History quotes were taken from tapes housed in the Collection of the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Forrest C. Pogue Oral History Institute, Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky. These tapes are available to the public on request to the Director of the Oral History Institute.

II. For more information on national trends, written sources for the article include:

Hicks, John D., "Normalcy and Reaction, 1921-1933, An Age of Disillusionment," *American Historical Association*, Washington 3, D.C., 1960.

Kennedy, David M., *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, New York: Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980.

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