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MAKING DO AND DOING WITHOUT: EAST TENNESSEE FARM WOMEN COPE WITH ECONOMIC CRISIS, 1920-1941

MELISSA WALKER*

To rural East Tennesseans, the Great Depression began not in 1929, but with the collapse of farm prices after World War I. Farm women played a central role in the survival of the family and the farm during these crisis years. Perhaps more important, the years of economic hardship actually helped to create shifts in the gender division of labor on East Tennessee's farm, shifts that would have profound implications for women's role in commercial agriculture after the economic recovery.

Most of the burden of surviving the economic downturn fell on the region's farm women. By producing more of the family's needs at home and by "making do" with fewer consumer products that required cash outlays, farm women not only insured that their families had enough to eat but also that more cash resources were available to invest in the maintenance and improvement of the farm. Although all farm women shouldered the responsibility for seeing families through the economic crisis, not all women had the same range of resources on which to draw. Their options were shaped by class, and to a lesser degree, by race. Poor white women and black women always had the fewest alternatives. This essay examines the wide range of traditional and innovative coping strategies adopted by East Tennessee farm women in the interwar years. It offers new insight into the ways farm women adapted their roles in times of economic change in order to help assure the survival of the family and its way of life.

Historians have noted that as farmers began to make the transition from subsistence to commercial farming, the gender division of labor often shifted. In East Tennessee farmers began the protracted transition from subsistence to participation in the market economy in the late nineteenth century, and by 1920 most East Tennessee farm families were largely focused on market production. As men engaged in more market-oriented activities and reinvested most of the proceeds from these activities in the farm, farm women gradually took on more of the

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In short, as was the economic crisis struc

¹ Jane Adams, *The Tr 1990* (Chapel Hill, meaning of this com the ways in which su allowed farmers to re American agriculture "Cash is Good to Eat the United States," R of the transition to division of labor, see America," *William a "Households and M History," William a Osterud, "Gender Agricultural Histor women understood Grey Osterud, *Bo Nineteenth Century Between Memory a 1870-1970* (Madisc Farm: Women, Co Midwest, 1900-1946*

NG WITHOUT: WOMEN COPE C CRISIS,

pression began not in 1929, but during World War I. Farm women managed the family and the farm during the economic crisis. In fact, the years of economic crisis, the gender division of labor, and the economic downturn had profound implications for farm culture after the economic

economic downturn fell on the shoulders of the family's needs at a time when consumer products that required more labor were scarce. They feared that their families had no resources available to them on the farm. Although all farm families were struggling for seeing families through the same range of resources on the farm, and to a lesser extent, black women always had the same wide range of traditional resources available to them by East Tennessee farm women. This insight into the ways farm women made economic change in order to survive was a way of life.

Farm women began to make the transition from the gender division of labor to a more market economy in the late nineteenth century. In East Tennessee farm families, men engaged in more of the proceeds from the farm, and women gradually took on more of the

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burden of the family's maintenance. While men were responsible for field work and large-scale livestock production for the market, women managed most of the farm's subsistence activities. Men now spent most of their time producing crops and livestock for the market and less time growing food for the family, hunting to supplement the meat supply, or similar subsistence activities. For women, this shift was marked not by a radical change in responsibilities but rather by a shift in emphasis. Men may have plowed the gardens, but women usually tended them and harvested and preserved the family's annual food supply during the long summer season. Men and women may have shared the barnyard responsibilities, but women were most often responsible for the daily care and feeding of cows and chickens that provided the family's milk, meat, and eggs. Women were also almost exclusively responsible for the household tasks of cleaning, sewing and caring for the family's clothing, and tending children and the sick. In some cases, men assisted women with household tasks by chopping wood or carrying water, but in times of heavy field labor, these burdens invariably fell to farm women. Men rarely assisted with tasks more clearly labeled "women's work," such as laundry and cooking, but farm women often assisted their husbands with field work, reflecting the high priority assigned to commercial agricultural activities.¹

In short, as was the case with urban and suburban women, when economic crisis struck, it was up to farm women to stretch scarce

¹ Jane Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life: Southern Illinois, 1890-1990* (Chapel Hill, 1994). Adams provides the first real analysis of the meaning of this combination of subsistence and commercial agriculture and the ways in which subsistence production and cooperative labor arrangements allowed farmers to resist the adoption of new technologies. For an analysis of American agriculture's household mode of production, see Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review* 4 (1977): 42-71. For an analysis of the transition to rural capitalism and the resulting shift in the gender division of labor, see Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (1989): 120-44; Allan Kulikoff, "Households and Markets: Toward a New Synthesis of American Agrarian History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50 (1993): 342-55; and Nancy Grey Osterud, "Gender and the Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 67 (1993): 14-29. For more on the ways men and women understood the shift in the gender division of rural labor, see Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth Century New York*, (Cornell, 1991), 202-27; Jane M. Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (Madison, 1992), chapter 7; Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore, 1995), 24-27.



An East Tennessee farm woman, 1930s. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

resources so that their families could survive. An examination of farm women's Depression-era coping strategies reveals that even as most of the burden of family survival fell on women, men's commercial farming activities continued to be seen as the highest priority of the farm family because men and women believed commercial agriculture was the key to a more secure future on the land. Farm families recognized the important role women played in helping them remain on the land. Recognition of farm women's important role in surviving the Great Depression did not, however, prevent an eclipse of that role after the crisis ended and the march toward commercialized agriculture resumed.²

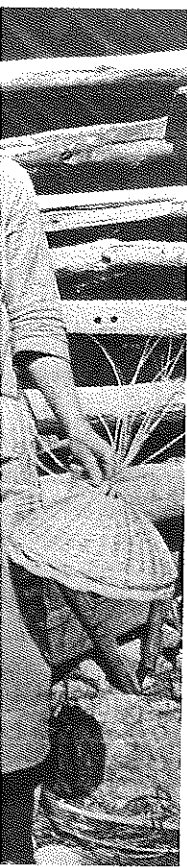
² Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, 202-27.

By the end of the 1920s, the complex mix of farm types in the region was not as diverse as in East Tennessee. In 1920, the average farm acreage in East Tennessee was considerably larger than the average of 59 acres in the rest of the state. In Tennessee, nearly 40 percent of the farms were owned and tenanted, compared to 25 percent elsewhere in the South. Nearly 40 percent of the farms were owned and tenanted, compared to 25 percent elsewhere in the South. Nearly 40 percent of the farms were owned and tenanted, compared to 25 percent elsewhere in the South.

Most of the farms were owned and tenanted, but like farmers elsewhere, they were producing some of the most popular corn and cotton in the South. In Tennessee, the average farm was 100 acres, and Knoxville was the largest city in the South.

World War I had a major impact on the economy of the South.

³ Bureau of the Census, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 2056, 2057, 2058, 2059, 2060, 2061, 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 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By the end of World War I, East Tennessee's economy was a complex mix of small industry and agriculture. Although much of the region was not well suited to large-scale farming, by many measures East Tennessee's small farmers were somewhat more prosperous in 1920 than their counterparts in Middle and West Tennessee. The average farm acreage of 98 acres, one indicator of farm prosperity, was considerably larger than the state average of 84 acres. About two-thirds of East Tennessee's farmers owned their land as compared to a state average of 59 percent. The region's small population of black farm owners and tenants (4 percent of all farmers as compared to 15 percent in the rest of the state) was also more prosperous than black farmers elsewhere in Tennessee, but still significantly less well-off than white farmers. Nearly two-thirds of all East Tennessee blacks owned their farms compared to less than one-third elsewhere in the state. Black farmers generally worked approximately 59 acres in the eastern region, again higher than the state average of 40 acres but considerably less than the white average of 98 acres.³

Most of the region's farmers were general and subsistence farmers, but like farmers all over the country they were always market-oriented, producing some commodities for cash sale. East Tennessee farmers raised corn and wheat as cash crops. Burley tobacco also gained popularity during the first quarter of the twentieth century and was generally more profitable than the cotton grown in Middle and West Tennessee. In addition, some counties in the southern part of East Tennessee raised large quantities of truck crops for the Chattanooga and Knoxville markets.⁴

World War I had had a profound impact on the agricultural economy of the region and of the South generally. A number of

³ Bureau of the Census and U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture, 1930* (Washington, 1932), compiled from pp. 870-84, 894-902; Jessie Felknor, May 2, 1987, interview transcript in National Museum of American History; Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Bureau of Home Economics and Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Southern Appalachians* (Washington, 1935), 46, 73-76. More than half of the region's farm tenants were relatively prosperous cash renters rather than sharecroppers.

⁴ Historian Allan Kulikoff has pointed out that American farmers were always "market oriented," providing both the family's subsistence and some cash income from the farm. See Kulikoff, "Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," 120-44, and Kulikoff, "Households and Markets," 342-55. For more on crops grown in East Tennessee, see William Bruce Wheeler and Michael J. McDonald, "The Communities of East Tennessee, 1850-1940: An Interpretive Overview," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 58-59 (1986-87): 3-38.

government programs encouraged farmers to increase production dramatically in order to alleviate Europe's food shortages. Tempted by soaring farm prices, East Tennessee's farmers moved further into the market, devoting a greater percentage of their resources to cash crops than ever before. They also took on more debt in order to expand their operations to take advantage of higher prices.⁵

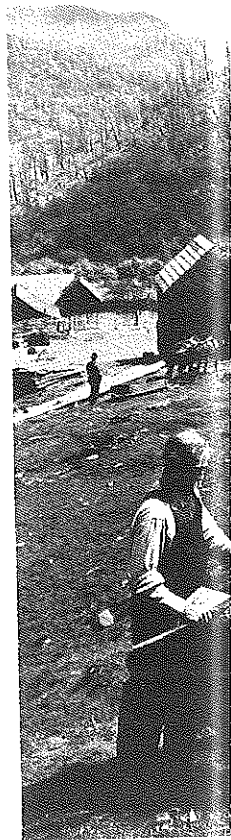
When the war ended, the demand for farm products plummeted, followed by farm prices. The drastic fall in farm prices ravaged East Tennessee's small farmers. The summer of 1920 saw the beginning of an agricultural depression that gripped U.S. farmers until the outbreak of World War II. In Tennessee, corn prices fell from \$1.51 per bushel in 1919 to 62 cents in 1920. Tobacco fell from 31.2 cents per pound to 17.3 cents in the same period. A slight recovery began in 1922, but prices never regained their wartime levels and fell yet again in 1930 in the wake of the stock market crash. A severe drought further exacerbated the Tennessee farm crisis in the early 1930s.⁶

A look at farms in individual East Tennessee counties tells the desperate story. For example, in mountainous Sevier County the value of crops sold or traded fell from \$1,700,830 in 1924 to only \$419,686 in 1929. Values climbed only slightly to \$438,519 by 1939. Perhaps more significant than the fall in prices was the shift in farmers' priorities in order to try to survive the depression. The number of Sevier County farmers actually selling crops on the market increased even as the total number of farmers fell, indicating that more subsistence farmers were attempting to enter the market economy in spite of or perhaps because of the economic crisis. Similar patterns prevailed elsewhere in East Tennessee.⁷

5 Wayne Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames, 1989), 70-76. See also Gladys L. Baker, *The County Agent* (Chicago, 1939); Wayne Rasmussen and Gladys L. Baker, *The Department of Agriculture* (New York, 1972), and Alfred C. True, *A History of Agricultural Extension Work in the United States, 1785-1923*, (1928; reprint, New York, 1967).

6 Compiled from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920* (Washington, 1923), 815; and U.S. Bureau of the Census and U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture, 1925: Part Two, the Southern States* (Washington, 1927), 736-45; *Census of Agriculture, 1930*, 870-82; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931* (Washington, 1932), 19. The total value of crops sold or traded in the state fell from \$318,285,307 in 1919 to \$171,878,708 in 1924. The decline continued into the next decade with the value of Tennessee's crops totaling \$90,414,617 in 1929 and \$57,284,587 in 1939.

7 Compiled from *Census of Agriculture, 1925*, 736-45; *Census of Agriculture, 1930*, 870-82; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Agriculture, 1940: Part Two, Statistics for Counties* (Washington, 1942), 472-82; *Yearbook of*



An East Tennessee farm, 19

The surprising increase in farm prices during the 1920s had been difficult for many farmers to handle. The market crash and the

Agriculture, 1931, p. 19. The value of Sevier County farm products fell 31 percent even as the number of farmers increased. This meant that the average value of crops sold per farmer was only \$183 in 1939. The same pattern prevailed in other Tennessee counties.

farmers to increase production to meet the demand for food shortages. Tempted by high prices, farmers moved further into the mountains, using their resources to cash crops and taking on debt in order to expand their operations.⁵

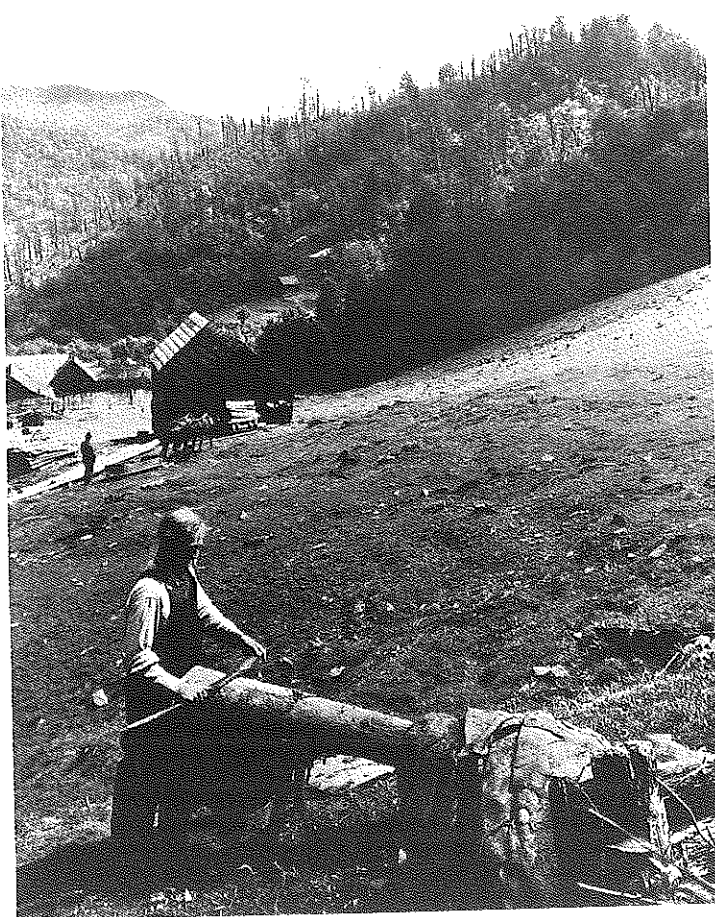
When farm products plummeted, and a sharp decline in farm prices ravaged East Tennessee, the year 1920 saw the beginning of a downturn for U.S. farmers until the outbreak of World War I. Prices fell from \$1.51 per bushel of wheat to 31.2 cents per pound of cotton, and recovery began in 1922, but prices fell yet again in 1930 in part due to a severe drought further exacerbating the early 1930s.⁶

Historical data for Tennessee counties tells the story of Sevier County the value of agricultural products fell from \$1,000,000 in 1924 to only \$419,686 in 1939. Perhaps more significant was the shift in farmers' priorities in the early 1930s. The number of Sevier County farms increased even as the total value of agricultural products sold by more subsistence farmers were declining. This was in spite of or perhaps because of the economic depression that prevailed elsewhere in East Tennessee.

The People: Seventy-Five Years of Tennessee History, 76. See also Gladys L. Baker, *The Story of Sevier County*, and Gladys L. Baker, *The Story of Sevier County*, 2), and Alfred C. True, *A History of Tennessee*, 1785-1923, (1928; reprint, 1968).

Abstract of the Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, 815; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Agriculture, 1925* (Washington, 1927), 736-45; *Census of Agriculture, Yearbook of the Department of Agriculture*. The total value of crops sold on the market in 1919 to \$171,878,708 in 1924. This compares with the value of Tennessee's agricultural products of \$284,587 in 1939.

Census of Agriculture, 1925, 736-45; *Census of Agriculture, 1930* (Washington, 1942), 472-82; *Yearbook of*



An East Tennessee farm, 1930s. Courtesy UTK Special Collections.

The surprising increase in farmers' market activity in spite of worsening farm prices in the early 1930s was due in part to East Tennessee's mixed economy. While the agricultural downturn of the 1920s had been difficult for East Tennessee farm families, the stock market crash and the resulting industrial decline was a disaster.

Agriculture, 1931, p. 19. For example, between 1929 and 1939, the number of Sevier County farmers selling crops and livestock on the market increased 31 percent even as the total number of farmers decreased 14 percent. This meant that the average farmer selling farm products earned \$231 in 1929 but only \$183 in 1939. The same pattern held true even in more prosperous East Tennessee counties.

Historians of the Great Depression era have assumed that the Depression was hardest for farm families who were entirely dependent on commercial agriculture, but few have recognized that in a mixed economy, such as the one in East Tennessee, families faced a double burden. Although the falling prices of the 1920s had wiped out whatever profits East Tennessee's farmers had realized from their commercial farm products, they were initially able to cope because they turned to part-time employment in the region's manufacturing and extractive industries. Farm men and women supplemented the farm's subsistence with money earned in the coal fields, lumber camps, and textile mills of East Tennessee. Indeed, Works Progress Administration sociologists found that half of all families surveyed in the region reported having had some source of non-farm cash income *before* 1929. Even tenant farmers, particularly African-Americans, were likely to work off the farm part of the time. This income enabled them to continue their commercial farming operations, albeit sometimes at a loss. Some were even able to use this cash income to expand their farms or to mechanize.⁸

Unfortunately, after 1929 rural industrial employers gradually scaled back or closed down their operations, leaving farmers who were also industrial workers under- or unemployed. The cash incomes that had sustained families in spite of the crash in farm prices disappeared, leaving farm families desperate indeed. Many farmers who had formerly used the land only for subsistence operations tried to enter the market arena in order to replace the cash incomes formerly provided by wage labor. The situation was particularly devastating for farmers who were still heavily indebted after their World War I era expansion and for those who had been able to continue expanding farm operations in the 1920s because of their non-farm cash incomes.

⁸ Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington, 1994), 83-110. Salstrom maintains that the Depression pushed mountaineers further into dependency. As industry declined, federal relief became extensive. Transactions that might formerly have been bartered now became cash transactions because of the availability of cash, making Appalachian farm families even more dependent on cash incomes instead of encouraging greater self-sufficiency. I would argue that programs to encourage a return to subsistence farming would not have been successful in an increasingly industrial national economy. For better or worse, East Tennessee and the rest of Appalachia had entered the capitalist economy. For additional treatments of the Depression's impact on commercial farmers, see Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life since 1900* (New York, 1986).

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Indeed, the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA) found that East Tennessee farm families whose members had also held off-farm jobs in the 1920s were much more likely to apply for relief in the 1930s than were those families who had had no off-farm sources of income. The implication was that families engaged in subsistence farming may have fared somewhat better during the 1930s than families who had entered the wage economy part-time and had developed some dependence on a steady source of cash with which to buy goods and meet debts.⁹

Although the hardships faced by East Tennessee's farm women in the 1920s and 1930s varied depending on race, class, and their place in the life cycle, most farm women faced the same basic challenges: feeding and clothing a family with a sharply reduced cash income. An examination of the lives of four East Tennessee women illuminates the variety of strategies women used and the ways in which class and race shaped those strategies.

Deborah Johnson's family used the mixed economy to great advantage. She raised four children in the hills and lumber camps of Sevier and Blount counties, where her husband worked as a foreman building railroads for Little River Lumber Company. Except for periods when the family resided in lumber camps, they lived in a small, well-constructed cabin on their twenty-acre farm outside the village of Pigeon Forge. Although there were periodic layoffs, Johnson's husband

⁹ Federal Emergency Relief Agency, Division of Research, Statistics and Finance, "Rural Problem Areas Survey Report No. 32, Bledsoe County, Tennessee," November 1934, and "Rural Problem Areas Survey Report No. 3, Grainger County, Tennessee," October 1934, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville; P. G. Beck and M. C. Forster, *Six Rural Problem Areas, Relief, Resources, and Rehabilitation: An Analysis of the Human and Material Resources of Six Problem Areas with High Relief Rates* (Washington, 1935), 1, 5. A 1934 Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA) report found that fully 30 percent of relief recipients in rural Bledsoe County applied for assistance because a member of the household lost supplementary employment. Similarly, a 1935 WPA survey of rural areas with high relief rates found that, in the Appalachian-Ozark region that included the mountainous counties of northeast Tennessee, the main reason rural families gave for seeking relief was the loss of off-farm employment. In counties with little industrial development, families' lack of dependence on wage work translated into a lower rate of relief applications. For example, another 1934 FERA report found that only 12 percent of the families in Grainger County were on the relief rolls. In contrast to Bledsoe County, which had some industrial development, Grainger County contained no incorporated town and few opportunities for off-farm work. For more on the New Deal's agricultural policies, see Pete Daniel, "The New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic Change," in James C. Cobb and Michael Namorato, eds., *The New Deal and the South* (Jackson, 1984), 37-61; Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge, 1978).



Men working at a Smoky Mountains lumber camp, 1927. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

worked fairly steadily through the 1920s, managing to pay off their farm mortgage. Like most other white women whose families eked out a living on farms and in lumber camps, Johnson learned to survive by growing or making most of the things her family needed. In this way she minimized cash expenditures, freeing up more of her husband's wages for investment in the farm. By the time of the stock market crash in 1929, Johnson's children were grown and she was helping to raise her grandchildren.¹⁰

The onset of the Great Depression did have some impact on the family. Deborah Johnson and her husband lost all of their savings in the bank failures of the early thirties. For some families, bank closures led to disastrous losses, but because the Johnsons had no debts the loss

¹⁰ Harriet Thompson, July 18, 1994, interview transcript in author's possession.

was not as tragic a profound psychological setback. Deborah Johnson stashed it under her bed, accumulated enough to pay the mortgage when the

In the meantime, Johnson sold everything in the same way as her husband. She was an avid gardener, she used the produce that she used in her garden for fruits and vegetables, and she used the yet available in the market for sausages and family with meat for "she could use even the wool of the family's clothing for sheep. At holiday time she gave small gifts. Some of her heirlooms that her husband used for creative endeavors were used to seal feed bags, bedspreads, and w

Johnson did not, however. Like many other families, her family's cash income also boarded lumber

Deborah Johnson and her husband survived the Great Depression by selling their property. Johnsons to save money, she minimized the need for food, clothing, and other necessities. Opportunities to buy at a discount or at an advantage over market prices took hold, her children were able to pay off the

¹¹ Thompson interview transcript (Knoxville, 1994).



1927. Courtesy UTK Special

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was not as tragic as it might have been. Nonetheless, the loss had a profound psychological impact. After that, the Johnsons never trusted banks again, but they didn't stop saving money. The couple used every opportunity to earn a little extra, and they quickly recovered from the setback. Deborah Johnson often kept four or five boarders who worked in the lumber camps. Whenever she could earn some extra cash, she stashed it under her straw ticks on the bed. By 1938, the couple had accumulated enough cash to pay off their granddaughter's farm mortgage when the younger woman's husband lost his job.

In the meantime, Deborah Johnson continued to care for her family in the same ways she always had: she grew and made nearly everything. She bartered eggs and butter for sugar, salt, and coffee. An avid gardener, she grew all of the family's vegetables as well as herbs that she used in her own home remedies. She preserved the year's fruits and vegetables by drying everything, because glass jars were not yet available in the mountains. At hog killing time, she smoked hams and sausages and preserved sausage in corn shucks to provide her family with meat for the rest of the year. Her granddaughter joked that "she could use everything about a hog except its squeal." She made all of the family's clothes, knitting their socks out of wool from her own sheep. At holiday time, she saw to it that her grandchildren received small gifts. Somehow she also found time to make needlecraft heirlooms that her family members still treasure today. Yet even in her creative endeavors, Deborah Johnson economized: she saved the twine used to seal feed bags to crochet elaborate and beautiful tablecloths, bedspreads, and window coverings.¹¹

Johnson did more than provide for her family's subsistence, however. Like most other farm women, she also supplemented the family's cash income by selling surplus eggs and dairy products. She also boarded lumber camp workers periodically.

Deborah Johnson was not unusual. She coped with the hardships of the Great Depression by using the same strategies that had allowed the Johnsons to save money and pay off debts during the twenties: she minimized the need for cash by producing as much of the family's food, clothing, and supplies at home as possible. She also seized opportunities to earn extra cash at home. Johnson had one distinct advantage over many of her counterparts: by the time the Depression took hold, her children were grown. She and her husband had been able to pay off their debts in the twenties so that they could subsist

¹¹ Thompson interview; Florence Cope Bush, *Dorie: Woman of the Mountains* (Knoxville, 1992).

with limited cash through the worst of the hard times. For young women just beginning their families, things were much harder.

Johnson's fellow Sevier countian Emma Lee was one such woman. Married in 1920 at the age of fifteen, she settled on a hardscrabble mountain farm with her twenty-one-year-old husband, a farmer and occasional road construction worker. Unlike the small, sound house occupied by the Johnsons, the house the Lees lived in was a ramshackle two-room dwelling without weather sealing. Lee recalled finding snow in the kitchen on the morning her oldest son was born in 1921. Like Deborah Johnson, Emma Lee also raised and preserved the family's food, made its clothing and household linens, and generally tried to get by without any cash. But things were much more difficult for a young family just starting out. For a couple with no children, the labor demands of a small farm often outstripped the energies of a husband and wife. Moreover, the Lees had no savings and no accumulation in the way of household or farm equipment. They needed more cash, which Homer Lee attempted to earn through moonshining, a common strategy for many mountaineers. When revenue agents arrested him, the young family lost its farm, and Lee spent a year living in the jail with her son and her husband, cooking for other prisoners in order to earn the little family's room and board.¹²

The loss of the farm left Homer Lee little choice but to seek an industrial job after his release from jail. In the mid-twenties, the young family moved to Blount County so that Homer Lee could work for the Aluminum Company of America. In town, the family enjoyed low but steady wages and better housing. Emma Lee continued to raise a garden and preserve food, but the presence of a cash income made her life somewhat easier. This stability was short-lived, however. Soon Homer Lee was exhibiting the first symptoms of tuberculosis, symptoms exacerbated by working conditions at the plant. So he moved his family several miles from the small town of Maryville to a rented farm in southern Blount County. Here he and his brother tried to scrape out a living on marginal land, growing corn and tobacco. Emma Lee again tried to provide all of her family's needs from the farm

¹² Jim Lee, August 10, 1993, interview transcript in author's possession. For more on moonshining in the East Tennessee mountains, see Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of Life among the Mountaineers* (1913; reprint, Knoxville, 1976), 126, 199-220; and Works Progress Administration, *WPA Guide to Tennessee* (1939; reprint, Knoxville, 1986), 337.



Knoxville's Cherokee women. Courtesy

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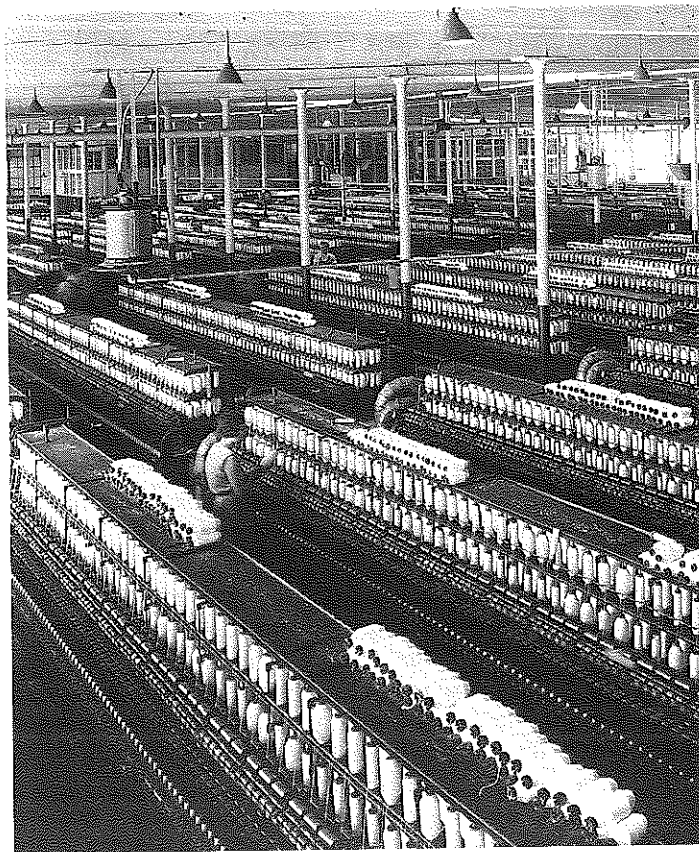
¹³ Lee interview processing pl The Early Year 84-103; and *Trall to Land*

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Knoxville's Cherokee Textile Mill, 1920s—an alternative to farm labor for some women. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

products. In the end, with Homer Lee unable to work because of the disease, the family moved in with Emma's parents on the outskirts of Maryville. There Homer died in 1929.¹³

Now Emma herself was forced to enter the job market to try to provide for two small sons. First she worked in a hosiery mill in nearby Maryville; then the promise of better wages lured her to Standard Knitting Mills in Knoxville, fifteen miles away. She left the boys in the

¹³ Lee interview. For more on the Aluminum Company of America's aluminum processing plant in Blount County, see Russell D. Parker, "Alcoa, Tennessee: The Early Years," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 48 (1976): 84-103; and Inez Burns, *A History of Blount County, Tennessee: From War Trail to Landing Strip, 1795-1955* (Nashville, 1988).

care of her parents and lived with a relative in Knoxville during the week, coming home on weekends. The onset of the Depression ended her working days at Standard as the knitting mill cut its work force, leaving Emma little choice but to return home to her parents' subsistence farm. Remarriage to a construction worker in 1931 did not immediately ease Emma's hardships, however, because her new husband also suffered periodic unemployment. Not only did Emma join her mother in subsistence production to support the large extended family, but she was also forced to turn to the government for help. She signed up for government commodity food distribution at the county courthouse. For Lee and her family, as for many other families throughout the South, life did not really improve until World War II made new industrial opportunities available to them inside and outside the state.¹⁴

Emma Lee's life illustrates the difficulties the economic downturn caused for young women facing the heavy burdens of supporting a new family. To deal with the crisis, Lee also adopted several common coping strategies. One practice was that of young widows and other single mothers taking industrial jobs, leaving their children in the care of other family members. (This coping strategy, however, was not available to black women, who were excluded from industrial jobs.) As was the case in other areas of the South hit hard by industrial unemployment, families in East Tennessee who lost their town jobs often returned to family farms during the Depression. The farm offered a roof over one's head and some measure of subsistence. This practice resulted in overcrowding in farm homes and strains on already thinly stretched resources, particularly the overworking of worn-out soil, but for some families it was the only viable option.¹⁵

In contrast to Deborah Johnson and Emma Lee, who learned to live in a mixed economy of wage work and subsistence farming, Blount countian Letitia French enjoyed a comfortable life on a commercial farm. French's father was a prosperous white landowner who inherited several hundred acres in Blount County. He raised corn, tobacco, wheat, and truck crops for the market, earning a good living. Letitia was born in 1912 in the family's new eight-room farmhouse. She

¹⁴ Lee interview.

¹⁵ For more on the impact of Depression-era unemployment in the textile industry, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall, et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (New York, 1987). For more on families returning to home farms from towns, see Michael J. McDonald and John Muldowny, *TVA and the Dispossessed: The Resettlement of Population in the Norris Dam Area* (Knoxville, 1982), especially chapter 3.

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recalled growing up with amenities such as carbide lights, predecessors to electric lights. Her family was also one of the first in the area to have a telephone, a convenience they shared with the entire community by allowing neighbors to make emergency calls from their home on many occasions.

Like her poorer sisters, French's mother worked hard at sustaining her family. She raised a garden, preserved food, and processed milk and butter for the family's use and to barter with the peddler. She also made most of the clothing for herself, her husband, and her five children. But if her subsistence responsibilities were similar to those of Emma Lee, some of her burdens were lighter. She never had to take a job outside the home to support her family. She never had to leave her children in the care of others so that she could work elsewhere. Part of a close-knit Quaker community in Blount County, she and her husband valued education for all their children and had the resources to keep them in school and to send their daughters to college for at least a year each. Moreover, French had the assistance of an elderly black farmworker too old to work in the fields. He chopped wood, carried water, and performed the heaviest garden and barnyard chores, thus lightening her physical burdens. The security of great capital in the form of land and livestock allowed Mrs. French a level of comfort not enjoyed by many of her less fortunate peers. For women who did not live on large, successful commercial farming operations, there was little money for hired help, carbide lights, or college education for children.¹⁶

Material prosperity or the lack of it was not the only factor influencing how farm women experienced the hardships of the 1920s and 1930s. Black women faced many of the same economic hardships as poor white women, but their problems were sometimes exacerbated by racial prejudice. Edna Spencer's great-grandparents raised three generations of their family in a solid, four-room frame house on a small farm they owned near Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Spencer's great-grandfather was a subsistence farmer who had been injured when a white coworker on an electrical line crew grew angry at the black man's independence and deliberately dropped a wrench on his head. The wound left him unable to do most wage work for many years. Since heavy labor was practically the only work available to blacks at the time, his ability to earn cash was seriously impaired.

Like the white women in the Valley, Spencer's great-grandmother, known as "Mama" to the whole family, raised and preserved all of the

¹⁶ Letitia French, August 10, 1993, interview transcript in author's possession.

family's food and made their clothing. Spencer saw an old iron kettle that sat in "Mama's" yard as symbolic of her great-grandmother's contributions to the family's support. Spencer recalled that "Mama" did everything in that kettle. She made soap in it and later used that soap to boil the family's laundry in the kettle. She also cooked hominy, a popular food made of corn processed in lye and preserved for the winter. At butchering time in the fall, she cooked sausage and rendered lard in that same kettle.

Not only did "Mama" provide a bountiful diet for her extended family, but she also took on the central role of providing them with psychological support. Edna Spencer believed that this was her great-grandmother's most important contribution because it provided her children and grandchildren with the self-esteem to resist white domination. Spencer remembered her great-grandmother as someone who would "take a stand against anyone who bothered her children or grandchildren." She indoctrinated young family members with the importance of education and made sure that all of the children attended school.

As was the case with many white families, Spencer's family adopted collective coping strategies. After raising their children, the couple raised grandchildren and great-grandchildren whose parents had died or had moved North for better opportunities. Spencer herself spent her first six years in the care of her great-grandparents after her father's death forced her mother to live with relatives and enter domestic service in Worcester, Massachusetts.

"Mama" also functioned as the family money manager. The family did not put its savings in the bank, probably because they feared bank crashes or because there were no black-owned banks in East Tennessee. Instead, "Mama" secreted cash away in a corner of her trunk, cash earned when she took in laundry, sold eggs, picked strawberries for a local farmer, or when her husband or son worked occasional off-farm jobs. Spencer recalled that there was always money for shoes each fall when the children returned to school. Further, there was always cash for emergencies.¹⁷

Spencer recalled little racial harassment of her landowning great-grandparents. Overt action against black farm families was infrequent in the mountains as compared to the rest of the state. Except when they worked side by side with whites, as was the case of her great-

¹⁷ Edna P. Spencer, "What Color is the Wind?" (M.A. thesis, Clark University, 1985); Edna Spencer, January 26, 1995, interview transcript in author's possession.

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Spencer saw an old iron kettle of her great-grandmother's. Spencer recalled that "Mama" did it and later used that soap to wash. She also cooked hominy, a lye and preserved for the winter. She cooked sausage and rendered

the fat for her extended family. The role of providing them with food was her great-grandmother because it provided her with self-esteem to resist white oppression. Her great-grandmother as someone who bothered her children or other family members with the same that all of the children

loved. Spencer's family adopted the same for their children, the couple who whose parents had died. Spencer herself spent her time with her grandparents after her father's death and enter domestic

work as a money manager. The family was poor because they feared bank failures. Black-owned banks in East Tennessee were away in a corner of her farm. She sold laundry, sold eggs, picked up for her husband or son worked. She was sure that there was always money available to send to school. Further, there

was a sense of her landowning great-grandmother. Farm families was infrequent in the state. Except when the case of her great-

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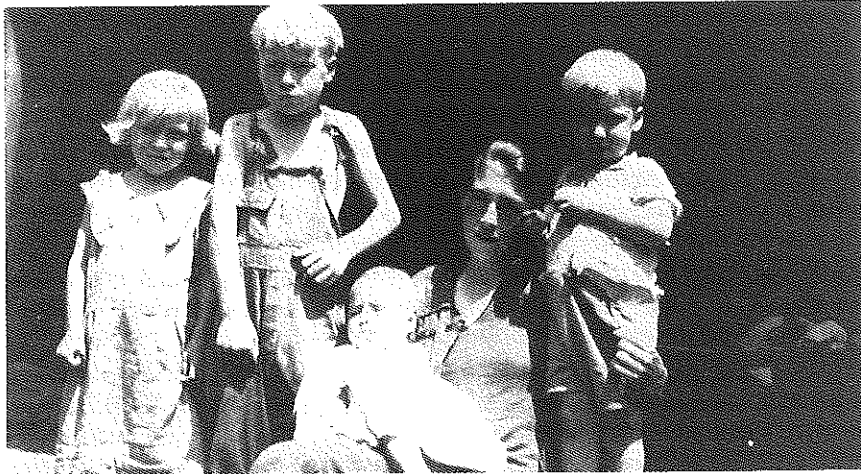
grandfather on the electrical crew, white violence against rural blacks was infrequent. This may have been due to the fact that there was less need for a class of dependent black farm laborers in East Tennessee, a region of subsistence farms best supported by maximizing "free" family labor. For Spencer's great-grandparents race was a factor in creating their Depression-era hardships. Because of the racially motivated attack on her great-grandfather, it was harder for the family to earn the cash necessary for survival. Moreover, unlike many white families, they were unable to supplement their farm income with industrial wage labor because few factory jobs were available to blacks in East Tennessee. In most ways, however, the family fared much the same as poor white families.¹⁸

U.S. Department of Agriculture studies corroborate the importance of women's subsistence activities in reducing the need for cash outlays on East Tennessee farms. For example, in a 1926 study of 861 white farm families in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Texas, USDA economists found that the average family provided over 60 percent of its own food, saving more than \$400 a year that would otherwise have been spent on groceries. Significantly, a family's ability to provide its own food increased in proportion to its economic resources. Owner families, who used goods valued at \$1,635 (household average), furnished 66 percent of their own food while sharecropper families, who used goods valued at only \$946, furnished a mere 47 percent of their own food. In other words, families with the resources to buy garden seed, livestock, and fertilizer were able to save more cash by producing more of their own needs on the farm. Moreover, prosperous families would have been able to buy a greater variety of products with what cash they did have available because they were producing more of their basic needs themselves.¹⁹

Not only was farm women's subsistence production a key to helping their families survive the Depression, but their reproductive activities were also important to the future of the farm. Family farms depended on the unpaid labor of family members in order to expand and prosper. As a result, new babies were not simply additional mouths to

¹⁸ Spencer interview; Lester C. Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791-1970* (Knoxville, 1981), 3-25.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, "The Relation between the Ability to Pay and the Standard of Living among Farmers," Bulletin No. 1832, January 1926, pp. 8-9. A 1939 study of farm family diets reached similar conclusions: see Hazel K. Stiebeling and Callie Mae Coons, "Present Day Diets in the United States," in U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1939* (Washington, 1940), 296-303.



An East Tennessee farm woman and her children, 1930s. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

feed but also important resources. As with Emma Lee and her husband, young families without children old enough to assist with farm work found it difficult to accumulate capital and land or even to survive. Although one study found that a few rural women, particularly more educated or younger women, attempted to limit their families, most gave birth frequently. TVA relocation workers often found families with eight or more living children. In 1925, the average Tennessee farm family contained 4.64 people. Middle-aged parents had more children left at home than young or elderly parents. African-Americans did not have significantly more children than whites: the average black family had 4.8 members while the average white family had 4.6 members. Farm owners, however, had significantly more children than tenants, averaging 5.5 and 4.5 family members respectively. This suggests that the extra labor provided by an additional child may have helped the family accumulate capital in the form of land.²⁰

All these children created an almost overwhelming burden of childcare on top of an endless round of hard physical labor. Following

²⁰ Gilbert W. Beebe, *Contraception and Fertility in the Southern Appalachians* (Baltimore, 1942). Beebe's studies in Tennessee and West Virginia found that about one-third of rural women made some attempt to limit their family size, usually for medical and economic reasons. Condoms and douching were the most common methods of birth control.

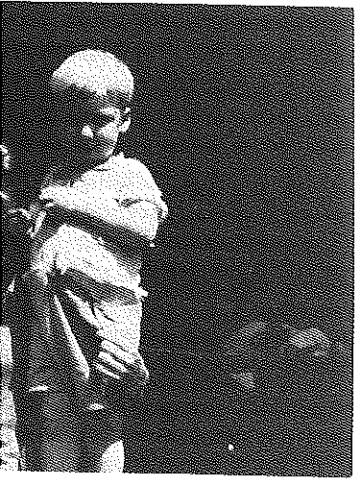
the example of previous Tennesseans coped with divisions of household labor early on. Eva Finchum, around the age of six, baked bread while her mother, age, Finchum took the place of her mother. Thelma Everett was the daughter of a prosperous Blount County farmer who lightened her workload. She cooked breakfast for the family, and she got the younger children to school. Why she took on so much was "always having a mother who was recalled that her grandmother was having a hard time helping to care for the

Grown female children helped with the family. Letitia French, her younger sister to help out at home. Instead of working in the fields and during vacations, she went to summer school at an institution that one of them would

An innovative division of labor in households where the threat of creating oral histories often in the household and the children. Goddard's parents and her own cows and sold. Elizabeth's parents lived with her grandmother and did the housework and her grandmother would be done without creating

²¹ A.D. and Eva Finchum, *Memories of a Childhood*, Museum of American History transcript in author's possession.

²² French interview.



n, 1930s. Courtesy UTK Special

Emma Lee and her husband, though to assist with farm work and land or even to survive. Poor women, particularly more to limit their families, most men often found families with the average Tennessee farm parents had more children than white. African-Americans did not: the average black family had 4.6 members. Poor women had more children than tenants, respectively. This suggests that a child may have helped the land.²⁰

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in the Southern Appalachians Tennessee and West Virginia found that tempt to limit their family size, abortions and douching were the

the example of previous generations of Tennessee farm women, East Tennesseans coped with the tremendous workloads by devising various divisions of household labor. Mothers put their older children to work early on. Eva Finchum of Sevier County recalled standing in a chair around the age of six in order to reach the counter so that she could bake bread while her mother worked in the fields. Even at this young age, Finchum took the loaves in and out of the wood stove herself. Thelma Everett was the oldest daughter among ten children in a very prosperous Blount County farm family. Prosperity did not, however, lighten her workload. From the time she was twelve years old, she cooked breakfast for the entire family, including farmhands, and then she got the younger children and herself off to school. When asked why she took on so much responsibility, she replied that her mother was "always having another baby." Similarly, Harriet Thompson recalled that her grandmother had provided most of her care while her mother was having babies and that Harriet herself was involved in helping to care for the younger siblings.²¹

Grown female children also continued to provide essential help for the family. Letitia French recalled that her parents did not ask her or her younger sister to contribute their schoolteaching salaries to help out at home. Instead, "we used our legs and arms [to help]." They worked in the fields as well as in the house after school, on weekends, and during vacations. She and her sister earned their college degrees in summer school at an East Tennessee university, alternating summers so that one of them would always be home to help out.²²

An innovative division of labor seemed to be especially helpful in households where the presence of more than one adult woman threatened to create tensions over territory. TVA relocation records and oral histories often note the presence of several grown women in a household and the resulting division of responsibilities. Elizabeth Goddard's parents and grandparents ran a commercial dairy operation in Townsend, Tennessee. They processed milk and butter from their own cows and sold it in Townsend and Maryville. For many years, Elizabeth's parents lived in her grandparents' house. Elizabeth's mother did the housework and cooking for the family and the hired help while her grandmother worked in milk processing. In this way, the work got done without creating any competition between mother-in-law and

²¹ A.D. and Eva Finchum, April 30, 1987, interview transcript in National Museum of American History; Thelma Everett, August 17, 1993, interview transcript in author's possession; Thompson interview.

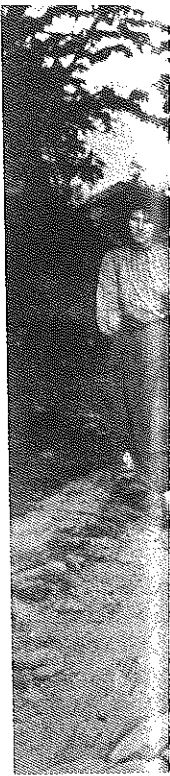
²² French interview.

daughter-in-law. A similar situation existed in Jessie Felknor's household because her husband's sister lived with them. The two women worked out a division of labor in which the sister-in-law cooked breakfast while Jessie and her husband milked each morning. The two women took weekly turns at cooking the family's other meals. The Walker sisters of Little Greenbrier Cove in Sevier County used a similar strategy to divide the work in their household. The five unmarried sisters lived alone in their cabin after their father's death in 1921. Margaret, the oldest sister, served as the "final decision maker." Each sister was responsible for specific chores. Nancy, who was asthmatic, did most of the housework, while the others spent most of their time in the fields and gardens. Martha did domestic work for nearby families and sometimes stayed with families for short periods to care for sick people. In this way, she brought some cash income to the sisters. This division of labor took advantage of each sister's special needs and skills in order to prevent conflict within the household.²³

As the lives of these women indicate, many farm women were actively involved in farm work as well as housework. The gender division of labor was negotiated differently on each farm, depending on the dispositions of male and female family members, the power dynamics of the household, and demands for labor. For example, Helen Brown was forced to take over field work and care of the livestock on their upland farm whenever her husband was employed off the farm in "public" jobs, such as stints he did with the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps. Arthur Tipton's parents were struggling sharecroppers in Loudon County. He noted that his mother helped his father with field work and tobacco. Wanda Brummitt recalled that her grandmother would take a team of mules into the woods, where she would cut down a tree and saw it up for firewood. She also did field work, even heavy plowing, while Brummitt's grandfather worked in the coal mines of upper East Tennessee.²⁴

²³ Tennessee Valley Authority, Reservoir Property Management Division, Population Removal Records, Watts Bar Case Files, Rooker, Box 126, RG 142, National Archives; Elizabeth Goddard, August 9, 1993, interview transcript in author's possession; Robert R. Madden, *Walker Sisters Home: Historic Structures Report, Great Smoky Mountains National Park*, Department of the Interior, 1969, in the McClung Historical Collection, Lawson McGhee Library, Knoxville; Felknor interview.

²⁴ Helen Brown, August 16, 1993, interview transcript in author's possession; Gladys Trentham Russell, *Call Me Hillbilly: A Personal Account of Growing Up in the Smokies near Gatlinburg* (Alcoa, 1974), 9-10; Arthur Tipton, July



Berry-pickers, Cades Cove

Not all women preferred field work of labor being promoted. Extension agents advised farmers should tend to their own concerns of household. Some women ignored this advice. Some women did not do that the farm women did. Similarly, Della did milking and working on the farm. Some women did not have food on to cook for

19, 1994, interview with Melissa Walker, Ma

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Berry-pickers, Cades Cove, 1927. *Courtesy UTK Special Collections.*

Not all women did field work out of necessity. Some women preferred field work to housework, contrary to the gendered division of labor being promoted by USDA officials and farm magazines at the time. Extension agents and agricultural editors believed that modern farmers should tend to the business of farming while their wives should ape the middle-class model, confining themselves to the concerns of housekeeping and childrearing. Yet farm women often ignored this advice. TVA relocation workers sometimes commented that the farm women they interviewed stated a preference for outdoor work. Similarly, Della Sarten told an interviewer that she had enjoyed milking and working in tobacco. She would often get up early and put food on to cook for the day before going to the fields. Eva Finchum

Property Management Division,
 e Files, Rooker, Box 126, RG 142,
 st 9, 1993, interview transcript in
Walker Sisters Home: Historic
as National Park, Department of
 ical Collection, Lawson McGhee

transcript in author's possession;
A Personal Account of Growing
 1974), 9-10; Arthur Tipton, July

19, 1994, interview transcript in author's possession; Wanda Brummitt to
 Melissa Walker, March 1994, letter in author's possession.

recalled that her mother was delighted when her children became old enough to look after themselves and do the housework because "she enjoyed outside work more."²⁵

Belying our mental picture of farm wives as willing helpers to their farmer husbands, some farm women carried the major part of the farm work load because their husbands were unwilling or unable to farm. Mary Lee recalled that her "Aunt Babe did the farming while Uncle Moss watched." Lee characterized her uncle as a man who disliked manual labor. Similarly, Lizzie Broyles recalled that her husband "John didn't know nothin' about farming. . . . I had to do it all." She raised tobacco and wheat crops on their Limestone farm. For these women the fact that the family owned farmland made farming a logical choice, but their husbands' inability or unwillingness to perform farm labor left them responsible for the farm operation.²⁶

Not only did East Tennessee farm women engage in tasks traditionally considered men's work, but they were also often asked to take on tasks that were part of their husbands' paid jobs, indicating that earning cash was considered to be a priority for the entire family. Effie Temple kept the books for the milling company her husband managed in Sevier County. He would often leave her in charge at the mill while he worked on the family farm. Arthur Tipton's father was the head dairyman on the farm of a state senator in Loudon County during the early 1930s. In return for his sixty-dollar salary each month, Tipton and his sons were expected to work on the farm, and his wife and daughters were expected to assist the senator's wife with housework. Jessie Felknor's mother cooked lunch daily for patrons of her husband's grist mill. Edwin Best's mother worked at his father's rural general store during the busy Christmas shopping season.²⁷

²⁵ Della Sarten, May 1, 1987, interview transcript in National Museum of American History; Finchum interview. For more on the USDA's vision of the appropriate gender division of labor for farm families, see Kathleen C. Hilton, "Both in the Field, Each with a Plow": Race and Gender in USDA Policy, 1907-1929," and Lynne Rieff, "'Go Ahead and Do All You Can': Southern Progressives and Alabama Home Demonstration Clubs, 1914-1940," both in Virginia Bernhard, et al., eds., *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South* (Columbia, 1994); Stock, *Main Street in Crisis*; Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People*; and Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*.

²⁶ Mary Lee, August 10, 1993, interview transcript in author's possession; Lizzie Broyles to Lon Broyles, November 16, 1975, CG-3A, Charles Gunter Collection, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

²⁷ Effie Temple, May 8, 1987, interview transcript in National Museum of American History; Tipton interview; Felknor interview; Melissa Dunlap, August 1994, interview transcript in author's possession; Mabel Love, July 19, 1994, interview transcript in author's possession; Edwin Jones Best, Sr., A

For many rural women, farm tasks and redoubled efforts for other women, poverty, inability to find work beyond tolerance. For one was only a baby. His father another farmer and by toil and poverty, she until they finished high school which she handed down.

Nor was widowhood mates. In 1939, Mrs. Fisher to Eleanor Roosevelt. Her husband deserted her. She recalled that her mother had a particularly difficult time periodically abandoned hobo and gambled in his wife to get by as a young family. At one point he died from a tubal pneumonia hospital and paid for children to work on his farm forty miles away in 1939 cents an hour. Boarding ride home on the mail groceries with her. The was left in charge of the daughter took the before Fisher's grand home and, in Fisher's

As these examples illustrate, Tennessee's farms suffered depression. These shrank economy. Men and

Place Called Green Century, 1870-1917

²⁸ Everett Hobbs, July 19

²⁹ Mrs. Bonnie Faulkner Tennessee, 661.1 to to Melissa Walker, A

When her children became old
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operator's wife with housework.
for patrons of her husband's
his father's rural general store
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transcript in National Museum of
more on the USDA's vision of the
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transcript in author's possession; Lizzie
1975, CG-3A, Charles Gunter
Tennessee State University.

transcript in National Museum of
author interview; Melissa Dunlap,
possession; Mabel Love, July 19,
possession; Edwin Jones Best, Sr., A

For many rural women, flexibility in the gendered assignment of tasks and redoubled coping efforts were enough to insure that their families survived the economic downturns of the 1920s and 1930s. But for other women, poverty, the loss of a farm or a mate, or a husband's inability to find work multiplied the economic hardships almost beyond tolerance. For example, Everett Hobbs's father died when he was only a baby. His mother survived by renting most of the farm to another farmer and by raising the family's own food. Through years of toil and poverty, she managed to keep her three children in school until they finished high school. Her goal was to retain the family land, which she handed down to her son after he graduated.²⁸

Nor was widowhood the only way in which farm women lost their mates. In 1939, Mrs. Bonnie Faulkner of Washington County appealed to Eleanor Roosevelt for assistance in obtaining a WPA job after her husband deserted her and their three children. Similarly, Wilma Fisher recalled that her maternal grandmother, a resident of Meigs County, had a particularly difficult time. The mother of four children, she was periodically abandoned by Fisher's grandfather, who rode the rails as a hobo and gambled in despair over his inability to find a job, leaving his wife to get by as well as she could. It was a very hard life for the young family. At one point in the 1930s Fisher's grandmother nearly died from a tubal pregnancy, but a kind neighbor took her to the hospital and paid for her surgery. The neighbor allowed her and her children to work on his farm in order to repay him. Later she got a job forty miles away in Sweetwater at a laundry, where she earned five cents an hour. Boarding with her sister during the week, she caught a ride home on the mail truck each weekend, carrying a week's supply of groceries with her. The oldest daughter, who was not yet a teenager, was left in charge of the children while their mother was away. Often the daughter took the baby to school with her. It was the mid-1930s before Fisher's grandfather finally got a WPA job and began to stay home and, in Fisher's words, "help out."²⁹

As these examples indicate, the gender division of labor on East Tennessee's farms was shifting during the years of agricultural depression. These shifts grew out of the changes in the agricultural economy. Men and women recognized and appreciated the fact that

Place Called Greenback: An East Tennessee Town at the Turn of the Century, 1870-1917 (Maryville, 1994).

²⁸ Everett Hobbs, July 19, 1994, interview transcript in author's possession.

²⁹ Mrs. Bonnie Faulkner to Eleanor Roosevelt, WPA Central Files, States, Tennessee, 661.1 to 663, Box 2594, RG 69, National Archives; Wilma Fisher to Melissa Walker, March 22, 1994, letter in author's possession.

farm women's subsistence labor was essential to the family's economy even as rising taxes and increasing indebtedness forced members of both sexes to seek new ways to earn cash. Women adopted myriad traditional strategies to survive the economic crisis, strategies shaped by class and race, but they also made shifts in their own labor and production patterns in order to maximize the family's ability to earn and accumulate cash.

Without consciously devaluing women's traditional housekeeping and reproductive work, men and women alike believed that men should focus more on market activities. Rural people saw the transformation to commercial agriculture looming on the horizon and recognized that capital was the key to participating in the new rural economic order. For this reason, women shouldered much of the burden of subsistence deliberately, in order to free men to engage in market activities. While for the poorest farm women taking on field work was often a matter of necessity, many more prosperous women used the shifts in the economy to carve out new roles for themselves, roles that appealed to their own preferences.

Because their driving commitment was to the future of their families and because they believed that a successful transition to commercial agriculture would help assure that future, East Tennessee's farm women took on the responsibility for family subsistence so that men could devote more attention to earning cash. In the process, by adopting the values of the marketplace instead of those of communal subsistence, they ultimately started down a path that marginalized women's non-cash-earning activities. After World War II, East Tennessee's farmers were increasingly commercial farmers, and East Tennessee's farm wives were increasingly homemakers with limited roles in farm decision-making and even less public recognition for those roles.³⁰

³⁰ For a more thorough analysis of farm women's marginalization in commercial farming operations, see Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*; Adams, *Transformation of Rural Life*; and Melissa Walker, " 'All We Knew Was to Farm': Gender, Class, Race and Change in the Lives of East Tennessee Farm Women, 1920-1941" (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1996).

CAMP C

The United States opened World War II, and Tennessee's Nathan Bedford Forrest military installation, located on the Kentucky/Tennessee line near the Memphis Army Forces Depot, and on the Cumberland River.

The Memphis camp housed mostly enlisted men. These men were not merely a site for military training but a containment facility for prisoners of war around the military base. There were as many as twenty thousand prisoners at Camp Campbell was reserved for such persons was more than doubled and expanded to include all prisoners of war.

Camp Crossville was not associated with, nor was it located on the Plateau nine miles west of the plateau because of the lack of water. TVA provided power and water. Highway 70S provided transportation.

Camp Crossville was the site of the first prisoner of war camp in Tennessee in 1942; as late as April 1945.

* The author is professor of history.

¹ Arnold Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War*. Each state except North Carolina. Three-fifths of the country's population. Tennessee is typical of the South.

² Hazel Wages, "Memphis Camp Crossville, 1944-1946," *Tennessee* newspaper incorrectly reported that it housed both Italian and German prisoners. Kramer, *Nazi Prisoners of War*.

³ A 1943 Army Service File for a prisoner of war was an area of about 100 acres of about five thousand acres. Army Forces, "Prisoners of War Administration and Control," United States during World War II.